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“IN THIS BATTER’D CARAVANSERAI”

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: *In the Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám, based upon verses composed by an eleventh-century Persian mathematician and astronomer, the English Victorian poet Edward FitzGerald eloquently portrays human life in an indifferent, deterministic universe that lacks any evident purpose and is bereft of divine Providence. The poem’s suggested response to such a universe is an unambitious life of hedonism, distraction, and gentle despair. It is curiously modern, and those considering the adoption of anything like its worldview might want to read it, and to think about its implications, very carefully.*

This too-long essay tries to set forth one perspective on a life lived without a religious faith broadly approximating the Restored Gospel. In order to do this, I’ll be quoting extensively from a once widely read and still somewhat famous poem called the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*. It was written, depending on your point of view, in either early twelfth-century Persia or late nineteenth-century England. (More on that question later.)

Let me first introduce the two men involved in its production, Omar Khayyám and Edward FitzGerald. The first of them, Ghiyāth al-Dīn Abū al-Faṭḥ ‘Umar ibn Ibrāhīm Nīsābūrī, was a Persian mathematician, astronomer, and philosopher — an at least nominal Muslim — who also wrote poetry. As his name indicates, he was born in Nishapur, Khorasan (which is to say, in modern-day northeastern Iran), on 18 May 1048, thereafter spending at least part of his childhood in Balkh (which is located in modern Afghanistan). In the English-speaking world, he is most commonly known as *Omar Khayyám*.

The second element of that nickname, *Khayyám*, means something like “tentmaker.” It wasn’t really a surname in his time, though. Rather, it was a byname from his father’s craft or from that of some family

ancestor. (Many of our modern Western surnames — e.g., *Farmer*, *Carpenter*, *Smith*, *Forrester*, *Cooper*, *Bridger*, *Sawyer*, *Weaver*, *Carrier*, *Porter*, *Bauer*, and *Zimmerman* — have similar origins.)

Khayyám, as I often call him, was educated in Samarkand and then moved to Bukhara, both of which are located within the borders of modern Uzbekistan. It is said that he was extremely hardworking: By day, he taught algebra and geometry. In the evening, he attended the Seljuq court as an advisor to Sultan Malik-Shah I. At night, he studied astronomy and worked on a revised calendar that had been commissioned by the sultan. After a very productive life of 83 years, he died on 4 December 1131 in his home city of Nishapur. His younger compatriot Farid al-Din Attar (ca. 1145–1220), one of the greatest of Persian mystical poets, is buried in the same cemetery as Khayyám.

Khayyám is known for his *Treatise on Demonstration of Problems of Algebra* (1070), as well as for treatises on mechanics, geography, mineralogy, and music. (The sciences were less specialized in those days; there were fewer scientists and much less scientific literature to master before one could launch one's own career.) In his astronomy work, Khayyám argued, among other things, that the stars are stationary and that the universe doesn't revolve around the Earth. He is particularly famous for his work on calendrical reform, which I've already mentioned. The resulting "Jalali calendar," as it is often known, has been in use since the eleventh century. It was reformed in the twentieth century, but it is still used in Iran and Afghanistan. One of the reasons for this is that it is more accurate than the Gregorian calendar, the dominant western calendar since it was created five centuries after Khayyám's. The Gregorian year is 365.24 days, whereas Omar Khayyám measured the length of a terrestrial year out to 365.24219858156 days.

Along the way, perhaps in spare moments, Khayyám also wrote brief verses on scraps of paper. These are, in modern transliteration, his *ruba'iyat* or "quatrains" (four-line stanzas). Some of them seem to form a sequence; most are free-standing. (And their fragmentary character raises other questions, perhaps unanswerable ones: Are they all his? How can we know? Should they be published in any particular order? If so, *what* order?)

It is these poems, largely as transmitted to the world by Edward FitzGerald, that have created Omar Khayyám's modern image as an agnostic freethinker and a hedonist. Accordingly, numerous bars and nightclubs are named after him around the globe. I still remember an excited young man who approached me some years ago after a lecture on

Islam that I had delivered at a university in Vancouver, British Columbia. The young man was, as I had guessed, of Iranian origin, but he had spent most of his life in Canada. He was also, he proudly affirmed, an atheist — and, he said, Omar Khayyám was an atheist, too, and his hero.

I pushed back. It's far from clear to me that Omar Khayyám was an agnostic, let alone an atheist. For example, he wrote a treatise on the praise of God entitled *Al-khutba al-gharra* ("The Splendid Sermon") that seems to be Islamically orthodox, and he appears to have agreed with the great philosopher Ibn Sina (Avicenna) on the nature of God's unity — a rather strange thing for an atheist to profess. According to Khayyám's philosophy of mathematics, moreover, God is the ultimate source of order in the universe and, in fact, in mathematics itself.

Now, though, to Khayyám's great translator: Edward FitzGerald (1809–1883) was an English gentleman of literary inclinations and independent fortune who developed a strong interest in what the British of the time called "the Orient" — meaning the Near East or the Middle East.¹ By far his most famous work is the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, which made its first muted appearance in Victorian England, in a private publication in 1859. Gradually, though, it gained followers, popularity, and fame. I have even heard it said that it was Edward FitzGerald who introduced the poetry of Omar Khayyám to the people of modern Persia or Iran. Khayyám had been known to his countrymen as a mathematician and a master of calendrics, but not particularly as a poet. (Persian poetry is one of the greatest bodies of literature in any language, but — overshadowed by such luminaries as Firdawsi, Sa'di, Hafez, Attar, Nizami, and Rumi — Omar Khayyám was not regarded as an especially significant practitioner of the art.)

Eventually, Edward FitzGerald authorized four editions of his continually changing English translation during his lifetime (1859, 1868, 1872, and 1879), and a significant posthumous edition was published in 1889. When I refer to the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, I'm referring to

1. Such usage still appears in such places as the title of the University of London's illustrious "School of Oriental and African Studies" or SOAS, which includes studies of the Near East or the Middle East (themselves problematic terms!), the famous Orient Express (a railroad line that ran from Paris to Istanbul) and, until April 2023, in the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago, which is now to be known as the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures, West Asia and North Africa (ISAC).

FitzGerald's translation of Khayyám's *rubá'iyat*, and I'll specifically be using the posthumous fifth edition.²

Edward FitzGerald was an almost exact contemporary of Charles Darwin (1809–1882), who had published his pivotally important book *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, the same year in which the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* appeared.³ Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, which expressly applied his theory to the evolution of humankind, appeared in 1871.

For many Victorians, Darwin's theory dealt a body blow to their traditional religious beliefs. It seemed to many to suggest that God is unnecessary in creation, and that the world, including the lives of the humans who dwell upon it, is governed not by divine Providence but, instead, by random, purposeless, pitiless chance.⁴ Edward FitzGerald seems to have been a religious skeptic himself; he was certainly a deliberate non-church-goer in an age of fashionable church attendance. I'll illustrate that religious skepticism by extensive quotations from his *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, but another really fine example of the spiritual mood among many eminent Victorian intellectuals is to be found in the famous poem "Dover Beach," by Matthew Arnold (1822–1888), a slightly younger contemporary of both FitzGerald and Darwin. I quote it here in its entirety:

The sea is calm tonight.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,

2. Both the first and fifth editions are conveniently available online at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/246/246-h/246-h.htm>.

3. Darwin's memoir that is now known as *The Voyage of the "Beagle"* first appeared in 1839, making him moderately famous.

4. Matters might have been rather different had Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913), the unjustly lesser-known co-discoverer of evolution, been more widely recognized among the late-Victorian intelligentsia. He seems to have broken with Darwin over precisely this issue, insisting that certain features of the natural world could be explained only by invoking what he called an "Overruling Intelligence."

At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.⁵

It is not, perhaps, the most upbeat or optimistic piece of writing in English literature.

Back, though, to the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*. I begin by relating a personal experience from graduate school, many decades ago, that I continue to find instructive.

One morning, I was attending a small seminar on early Arabic poetry at the University of California at Los Angeles. Suddenly, the teacher, Professor Seeger Bonebakker, launched into an aside on the *Rubáiyát of*

5. See, for example, Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach," *Poetry Foundation* (website), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43588/dover-beach>.

Omar Khayyám, which he pronounced to be arguably the single worst and most dishonest translation that he had ever encountered from any language of the Islamic Near East.⁶ And he definitely had a point: A student of Persian — the language that Omar Khayyám used in writing his poetry — who tried to match any particular passage of Edward FitzGerald's translation with any single passage of Khayyám's original would find the task difficult, if not altogether impossible. FitzGerald's English rendition is, to put it mildly, a free and loose approximation of Khayyám's Persian.

I was enrolled during that same quarter in a seminar on classical Persian literature that was taught by Professor Amin Banani.⁷ That evening, and I suppose by sheer coincidence — I was the only person who was enrolled in both classes — Professor Banani launched suddenly into an aside on the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, which he pronounced perhaps the single finest translation that he had ever encountered from any language of the Islamic Near East. What Edward FitzGerald had accomplished, he rhapsodized, was to write a poem in English that, although it wasn't a literal rendition of Khayyám's medieval verses, reflected both the quality and at least some of the spirit and feel of the Persian original. Inspired by the work of a medieval Iranian polymath and poet, FitzGerald had created a work of art that powerfully spoke to his own era and that has remained an important landmark in the history of nineteenth-century English literature.

I've thought about that day and about those curiously juxtaposed professorial opinions ever since. They represent, for me, important lessons on the question of what constitutes translation. Is there such a thing, for instance, as a "perfect" translation? I think not. But even the question of whether a translation is a "good" one is complicated. Answering it depends partially on what one is *seeking* in a translation. I've seen overly literal (published!) translations from Greek and Arabic poetry that are largely gibberish — what my former Brigham Young

6. On Professor Bonebakker, whom I recall with particular fondness, see "In Memoriam," University of California Academic Senate (website), https://senate.universityofcalifornia.edu/_files/inmemoriam/html/seegeradrianusbonebakker.htm.

7. On Professor Banani, who was a genial member of my doctoral committee and whose name is pronounced roughly ben-ah-NEE, see "Professor Amin Banani, 1926–2013: A Prominent Scholar of Iranian Studies," *Iranian Studies* 47, no. 2 (March 2014): 347–51, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/iranian-studies/article/professor-amin-banani-19262013-a-prominent-scholar-of-iranian-studies/7CD7DBB72E86D4735315ED7A9334F36A>.

University colleague Dilworth B. Parkinson calls "word salad."⁸ I've seen fairly literal translations of Omar Khayyám's verses. They possess little or no literary quality, but they might be helpful to an English-speaking student of Greek or Arabic or Persian who was trying to understand the poems in their original language — a purpose for which Edward FitzGerald's rendering would be essentially useless.

I once spent some time with a German translation of William Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet*. It very accurately transmitted the meaning of Shakespeare's verses, and it certainly would have enabled a reader of German to follow and understand the plot of the play, its storyline. But the translation's lucid and workmanlike German suggested virtually nothing of Shakespeare's peerless mastery of the richness of Elizabethan English — which is surely one of the great glories of his plays and his sonnets. Such an experience illustrates, for me, the truth of a witty definition that I once encountered somewhere: "Poetry (n.): that which cannot be translated."

Poetry composed in another language must, in my view, be recreated in order to be fully "translated." Which is to say that the translator should probably be at least as talented, literarily speaking, as the author whose work he or she is attempting to reproduce in a second language — a miracle that rarely if ever actually occurs. For many non-literary works (e.g., technical manuals, instructions for assembling children's toys, or even prosaic mystery novels), that doesn't represent an insuperable hurdle. For translating Shakespeare, though, it's a very high bar. And I flatly think it impossible, simply given the differences in the languages, for a translator to represent the Qur'an's pervasive rhyming or the *terza rima* of Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* in any English that wouldn't be excruciatingly painful to read or to hear for more than a minute or two. But Edward Fitzgerald may well have cleared the bar for Omar Khayyám.

From this point on, though, I will be working from FitzGerald's fifth-edition translation of Khayyám's *rubā'iyat* as my primary text, treating it as if it were the original (which, for my purposes, it actually is,

8. For a send-up of such translations, see A.E. Housman, "Fragment of a Greek Tragedy," *The Bromsgrovian* 2, no. 5 (June 8, 1883): 107–109, http://www.bromsgrove-schoolarchive.co.uk/Filename.ashx?tableName=ta_publications&columnName=filename&recordId=395. A more modern transcription can be found at A.E. Housman and D.S. Raven, "Fragment of a Greek Tragedy, in English and Greek," *Antigone* (website), <https://antigonejournal.com/2021/10/fragment-of-a-greek-tragedy/>.

since this isn't really an essay on Persian literature or Omar Khayyám and I'll refer to it in the singular, as a single poem (which isn't strictly true). Along the way, I'll offer brief commentary and, where necessary, explanatory notes.

I begin by sharing selected verses from the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* that express skepticism about religious claims and about religion itself. In the very first passage, FitzGerald refers to "the Two Worlds." He is on solid Islamic grounds in doing so. Already in the opening chapter of the Qur'an, God is described as "the Lord of the Worlds" (Qur'an 1:2). Typically, two such worlds are distinguished — *al-dunya* ("this world" or "this life," literally "the nearer") and *al-akhira* ("the next world" or "the next life," literally "the further").

XXVI

Why, all the Saints and Sages who discuss'd
Of the Two Worlds so wisely — they are thrust
Like foolish Prophets forth; their Words to Scorn
Are scatter'd, and their Mouths are stopt with Dust.

XXVII

Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and Saint, and heard great argument
About it and about: but evermore
Came out by the same door where in I went.

XXVIII

With them the seed of Wisdom did I sow,
And with mine own hand wrought to make it grow;
And this was all the Harvest that I reap'd —
"I came like Water, and like Wind I go."

XXIX

Into this Universe, and Why not knowing
Nor Whence, like Water willy-nilly flowing;
And out of it, as Wind along the Waste,
I know not Whither, willy-nilly blowing.

The point, of course, is that nobody really knows anything, not even those who confidently profess the most wisdom and learning. Not even purported prophets. The film *Man's Search for Happiness*, produced for the Mormon Pavilion at the 1964 World's Fair in New York City, posed — and purported to answer — such questions as "Who am I?", "Where did I come from?", and "Where am I going?." The *Rubáiyát of*

Omar Khayyám declares that nobody can answer those questions. All that we can know is that life passes quickly. We are transient, soon to be forgotten, and, other than the grave, we have no idea where we're headed:

XXXII

There was the Door to which I found no Key;
There was the Veil through which I might not see;
Some little talk awhile of Me and Thee
There was — and then no more of Thee and Me.

LXIII

Of threats of Hell and Hopes of Paradise!
One thing at least is certain — This Life flies;
One thing is certain and the rest is Lies;
The Flower that once has blown for ever dies.

LXIV

Strange, is it not? that of the myriads who
Before us pass'd the door of Darkness through,
Not one returns to tell us of the Road,
Which to discover we must travel too.

LXV

The Revelations of Devout and Learn'd
Who rose before us, and as Prophets burn'd,
Are all but Stories, which, awoke from Sleep,
They told their comrades, and to Sleep return'd.

This last is a familiar and very old literary motif, and it reflects our overwhelmingly sad usual experience. Even the prophet Lehi uses it, speaking of "the cold and silent grave, from whence no traveler can return" (2 Nephi 1:14). To a believing Latter-day Saint, however, the claim is ultimately untrue: The resurrected angel Moroni appeared at the very inauguration of the Restoration, as did John the Baptist, Peter, James, and John, and others. And, of course, the supreme counterexample is Jesus himself, who rose from the dead on the third day. Moreover, from outside of scripture one might also mention accounts of near-death experiences, which, by now, are documented in the tens of thousands.

In the next selections — which emphasize the message that, well, we're doomed — the poem refers to the prominent Persian city in which Khayyám was born and died as well as to famous legendary or quasi-legendary figures from Persian (and, in one case, pre-Islamic Arabian) history. According to the great eleventh-century Persian national epic

of Firdawsi that is known as the *Shahnameh*, Jamshid and Kay Qobad (or Kay Kawad) and Kay Khosrow were important early kings of “Iran.”⁹ So was Zal, but the *Shahnameh* seems to admire him even more as a great warrior. He was, in fact, the father of Rostam, who is perhaps the greatest of all Iranian warriors, with some intriguing parallels to the Greek Herakles or Hercules.¹⁰ And, finally, Hatim al-Tai was a Bedouin Arab prince and poet of the period immediately preceding the rise of Islam. (In fact, if his traditional death-date of AD 579 is accurate, his life actually overlapped with that of the Prophet Muhammad, who was born circa AD 570.) Hatim is proverbial still today for his extravagantly generous hospitality.

VIII

Whether at Naishapur or Babylon,
Whether the Cup with sweet or bitter run,
The Wine of Life keeps oozing drop by drop,
The Leaves of Life keep falling one by one.

IX

Each Morn a thousand Roses brings, you say;
Yes, but where leaves the Rose of Yesterday?
And this first Summer month that brings the Rose
Shall take Jamshyd and Kaikobad away.

X

Well, let it take them! What have we to do
With Kaikobad the Great, or Kaikhosru?
Let Zal and Rustum bluster as they will,
Or Hatim call to Supper — heed not you.

Even fame, wealth, and greatness, says the poem, are ephemeral; they perish with us. In his famous 1903 essay “A Free Man’s Worship,” the great British logician, philosopher, and mathematician Bertrand Russell — by far the most vocal atheist of his day in the English-speaking world — put a similar attitude this way:

That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his

9. There is still no universally accepted system of transliteration from Persian and Arabic, which, of course, do not use the Roman alphabet. Hence the sometimes wildly different ways of spelling personal and geographical names.

10. Matthew Arnold’s epic narrative poem “Sohrab and Rustum” recounts the tragic story of Rostam’s inadvertent killing of his own son in single combat.

hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins--all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built. ...

Brief and powerless is Man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for Man, condemned to-day to lose his dearest, to-morrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day.¹¹

Life, says the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, is scarcely even fully real. Rather, it resembles the images cast upon a wall by a "magic lantern," an early forerunner of the film projector that was known to Edward FitzGerald's Victorian audience — though, significantly, perhaps not to the historical Omar Khayyám's ancient Persian contemporaries. As a child, I was lulled to sleep by the ever-moving image of a steam locomotive and a freight train projected onto my bedroom wall by a small revolving lamp.

LXVIII

We are no other than a moving row
Of Magic Shadow-shapes that come and go
Round with the Sun-illumined Lantern held
In Midnight by the Master of the Show;

Next, in order to symbolize our fate as short-lived pawns manipulated by "a greater power than we can contradict," he uses the image of a chess

11. Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship" (1903), <https://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/courses/264/fmw.htm>.

board.¹² (Chess, of course, is an ancient Indo-Iranian war game.¹³) Its alternating light and dark squares represent the days and nights of our mortal lives. We are

LXIX

But helpless Pieces of the Game He plays
Upon this Chequer-board of Nights and Days;
Hither and thither moves, and checks, and slays,
And one by one back in the Closet lays.

There is more than a hint of predestination as a theme here. I'll return to that. First, though, comes a suggestion of the very modern and popular notion — often associated with Sigmund Freud — that our concepts of heaven are simply fantasy, mere wish-projection:

LXVII

Heav'n but the Vision of fulfill'd Desire,
And Hell the Shadow from a Soul on fire,
Cast on the Darkness into which Ourselves,
So late emerged from, shall so soon expire.

In any event, nothing will matter in the long run. Whether or not we discipline ourselves, work hard, and restrain our appetites, in the end we'll all die and it will have made no real difference. To put it bluntly — and the poem *does* put it bluntly — we will all turn into compost. So we might as well live it up while we can. “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die; and it shall be well with us” (2 Nephi 28:7).

XV

And those who husbanded the Golden grain,
And those who flung it to the winds like Rain,
Alike to no such aureate Earth are turn'd
As, buried once, Men want dug up again.

XVI

The Worldly Hope men set their Hearts upon
Turns Ashes — or it prospers; and anon,

12. For the phrase, see William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 5.3.153. (Reference is to act, scene, and line.)

13. Interestingly, the German equivalent of the word *chess* is *Schach*, which seems to reflect the Persian word for *king*, *shāh* (شاه). Compare, too, our term *checkmate* to the functionally equivalent Arabo-Persian phrase *shāh māt* (شاه مات), meaning “the king died.” The Russian word for *chess* is шахматы (*shakhmaty*).

Like Snow upon the Desert's dusty Face,
Lighting a little hour or two — is gone.

In order to illustrate its point about the transitory nature of fame, greatness, beauty, and achievement, the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* again cites the legendary Persian king Jamshid and the historical fifth-century Persian king Bahram Gur, who was famous for his exploits as a great hunter. Both of them also figure prominently in the *Shahnameh*.

XVII

Think, in this batter'd Caravanserai
Whose Portals are alternate Night and Day,
How Sultan after Sultan with his Pomp
Abode his destined Hour, and went his way.

XVIII

They say the Lion and the Lizard keep
The Courts where Jamshyd gloried and drank deep:
And Bahram, that great Hunter — the Wild Ass
Stamps o'er his Head, but cannot break his Sleep.

XIX

I sometimes think that never blows so red
The Rose as where some buried Caesar bled;
That every Hyacinth the Garden wears
Dropt in her Lap from some once lovely Head.

XX

And this reviving Herb whose tender Green
Fledges the River-Lip on which we lean —
Ah, lean upon it lightly! for who knows
From what once lovely Lip it springs unseen!

XXII

For some we loved, the loveliest and the best
That from his Vintage rolling Time hath prest,
Have drunk their Cup a Round or two before,
And one by one crept silently to rest.

XXIII

And we, that now make merry in the Room
They left, and Summer dresses in new bloom

Ourselves must we beneath the Couch of Earth
Descend — ourselves to make a Couch — for whom?

The poem uses images of the palace servants of a sultan to make its point that none of us, no matter how exalted our rank, is irreplaceable. A *ferash* or *ferrash* was a menial member of the waitstaff, scurrying silently about to do the bidding of his master. And a *saqi* was a cupbearer, refilling the master's empty wine glass and the glasses of his guests. Here, though, the master is no mortal but rather God, Fate, or Destiny, and even sultans — the term *sultan* comes from an Arabic word for “power” — are merely Destiny's passing “guests”:

XLV

‘Tis but a Tent where takes his one day's rest
A Sultan to the realm of Death address;
The Sultan rises, and the dark Ferrash
Strikes, and prepares it for another Guest.

XLVI

And fear not lest Existence closing your
Account, and mine, should know the like no more;
The Eternal Saki from that Bowl has pour'd
Millions of Bubbles like us, and will pour.

XLVII

When You and I behind the Veil are past,
Oh, but the long, long while the World shall last,
Which of our Coming and Departure heeds
As the Sea's self should heed a pebble-cast.

XLVIII

A Moment's Halt — a momentary taste
Of Being from the Well amid the Waste —
And Lo! — the phantom Caravan has reach'd
The NOTHING it set out from — Oh, make haste!

So how should we respond to this seemingly pointless world? The poem has already given us its answer — that we should respond by simply seeking pleasure where we can get it, while we can get it. But it restates that point many times over, in memorable stanzas:

VII

Come, fill the Cup, and in the fire of Spring
Your Winter Garment of Repentance fling:

The Bird of Time has but a little way
To flutter — and the Bird is on the Wing.

XII

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread — and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness —
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow [enough]!

XIII

Some for the Glories of This World; and some
Sigh for the Prophet's Paradise to come;
Ah, take the Cash, and let the Credit go,
Nor heed the rumble of a distant Drum!

XXI

Ah, my Beloved, fill the Cup that clears
TO-DAY of past Regrets and future Fears:
To-morrow — Why, To-morrow I may be
Myself with Yesterday's Sev'n thousand Years.

LVIII

And lately, by the Tavern Door agape,
Came shining through the Dusk an Angel Shape
Bearing a Vessel on his Shoulder; and
He bid me taste of it; and 'twas — the Grape!

LIX

The Grape that can with Logic absolute
The Two-and-Seventy jarring Sects confute:
The sovereign Alchemist that in a trice
Life's leaden metal into Gold transmute:

XXIV

Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend,
Before we too into the Dust descend;
Dust into Dust, and under Dust to lie
Sans Wine, sans Song, sans Singer, and — sans End!

XXXV

Then to the Lip of this poor earthen Urn
I lean'd, the Secret of my Life to learn:

And Lip to Lip it murmur'd — "While you live
 Drink! — for, once dead, you never shall return."

Rather morbidly, the poem imagines that the clay goblet containing the wine from which the speaker is drinking may actually be made from the clay of a cemetery, from a grave whose occupant once lived and loved as we ourselves now briefly do. After all, was not Adam made originally from the dust of the earth? In the words of the funeral service as given in the Church of England's *Book of Common Prayer*, "we . . . commit this body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

XXXVI

I think the Vessel, that with fugitive
 Articulation answer'd, once did live,
 And drink; and Ah! the passive Lip I kiss'd,
 How many Kisses might it take — and give!

XXXVIII

And has not such a Story from of Old
 Down Man's successive generations roll'd
 Of such a clod of saturated Earth
 Cast by the Maker into Human mould?

Accordingly, supposedly sharing the thoughts of the eleventh-century polymath Omar Khayyám, the poem advises us to

LIV

Waste not your Hour, nor in the vain pursuit
 Of This and That endeavour and dispute;
 Better be jocund with the fruitful Grape
 Than sadden after none, or bitter, Fruit.

LV

You know, my Friends, with what a brave Carouse
 I made a Second Marriage in my house;
 Divorced old barren Reason from my Bed
 And took the Daughter of the Vine to Spouse.

LXXIV

YESTERDAY This Day's Madness did prepare;
 TO-MORROW's Silence, Triumph, or Despair:
 Drink! for you not know whence you came, nor why:
 Drink! for you know not why you go, nor where.

XCI

Ah, with the Grape my fading Life provide,
And wash the Body whence the Life has died,
And lay me, shrouded in the living Leaf,
By some not unfrequented Garden-side.

XCII

That ev'n my buried Ashes such a snare
Of Vintage shall fling up into the Air
As not a True-believer passing by
But shall be overtaken unaware.

But this pose — for such it seems to be — is very difficult to reconcile with what we know of the real, historical Khayyám. A man who used the daylight hours to teach and write treatises about algebra, geometry, various other sciences, and theology; a man who spent his evenings at the royal court, advising the sultan; a man who stayed up late at night to observe the motions of the stars and the planets while brilliantly revising the astronomical calendar, Omar scarcely appears to have abandoned “endeavors” and to have divorced himself from reason.

LVII

Ah, by my Computations, People say,
Reduce the Year to better reckoning? — Nay
'Twas only striking from the Calendar
Unborn To-morrow and dead Yesterday.

It seems that the narrator is striking a pose, an attitude. He is pretending to be a wastrel and a libertine quite unlike the historical Omar Khayyám, quite entirely unlike anything that the productive polymath 'Umar Nisābūrī could conceivably have been.

XCIII

Indeed the Idols I have loved so long
Have done my credit in this World much wrong:
Have drown'd my Glory in a shallow Cup
And sold my Reputation for a Song.

XCIV

Indeed, indeed, Repentance oft before
I swore — but was I sober when I swore?
And then and then came Spring, and Rose-in-hand
My thread-bare Penitence apieces tore.

XCV

And much as Wine has play'd the Infidel,
 And robb'd me of my Robe of Honor — Well,
 I wonder often what the Vintners buy
 One half so precious as the stuff they sell.

The narrator of the poem appears to have assumed a fictional persona. Edward Fitzgerald seems to have been quite a private person who, because he was independently wealthy, didn't need to work at a day job. But the publicly much-involved Omar Khayyám seems very unlike the libertine depicted in these verses.

We come now to another major theme of the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* — its emphasis on Fate. This is also a theme among not a few modern materialistic naturalists who often deny genuine human agency. And, indeed, a world made up only of purposeless material objects and governed entirely by impersonal laws is likely to be a deterministic one. Consequently, the poem asserts a strongly deterministic worldview:

LXXI

The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
 Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit
 Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
 Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.

LXXII

And that inverted Bowl they call the Sky,
 Whereunder crawling coop'd we live and die,
 Lift not your hands to It for help — for It
 As impotently moves as you or I.

LXXIII

With Earth's first Clay They did the Last Man knead,
 And there of the Last Harvest sow'd the Seed:
 And the first Morning of Creation wrote
 What the Last Dawn of Reckoning shall read.

Sir Francis Crick shared the 1962 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine with James Watson and Maurice Wilkins for their discovery (with Rosalind Franklin) of the helical structure of the DNA molecule. In his later years, especially, Sir Francis was a very outspoken atheist who did not hesitate even slightly to draw the implications of his thoroughgoing materialism:

The Astonishing Hypothesis is that "You," your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. As Lewis Carroll's Alice might have phrased it: "You're nothing but a pack of neurons."¹⁴

I like the response to such notions of the American essayist Curtis White:

The thing that I find most inscrutable about all of the recent books and essays that have sought to give mechanistic explanations for consciousness, personality, emotions, creativity, the whole human sensorium, is how happy the authors seem about it. They're nearly giddy with the excitement, and so, for some reason, are many of their readers. But for me, as Dylan sang, they're just 'selling postcards of the hanging.'¹⁵

One of the most powerful scenes in the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, and its longest sustained sequence, is set on an evening during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, during which devout practitioners of the faith abstain from all food and drink and other kinds of sensory pleasure from sunrise in the morning until the setting of the sun at evening. The narrator of the poem enters into a potter's studio, where all manner of pots (plainly representing different types of people) sit on the floor, on tables, and on shelves.

Some of them are malformed, presumably in the various ways — not just physical, but mental, emotional, and psychological — that we humans actually are.

One of them is a Sufi. Sufism is the mystical tradition in Islam, important strands of which have focused on trying to achieve oneness with God — or, perhaps better, on striving to *recognize* the oneness of all things, including the divine, that (according to Sufism) already *exists*.

All of them are speculating rather self-importantly about the Potter (God, Fate, Destiny, or the Universe) that made them, and about the Potter's attitude toward them. And they speculate, suggests the poem, without real knowledge about what they can't really comprehend.

14. Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for Soul* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), 3.

15. Curtis White, *The Science Delusion: Asking the Big Questions in a Culture of Easy Answers* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2014), 131.

LXXXII

As under cover of departing Day
Slunk hunger-stricken Ramazan away,
Once more within the Potter's house alone
I stood, surrounded by the Shapes of Clay.

LXXXIII

Shapes of all Sorts and Sizes, great and small,
That stood along the floor and by the wall;
And some loquacious Vessels were; and some
Listen'd perhaps, but never talk'd at all.

LXXXIV

Said one among them — "Surely not in vain
My substance of the common Earth was ta'en
And to this Figure moulded, to be broke,
Or trampled back to shapeless Earth again."

LXXXVI

After a momentary silence spake
Some Vessel of a more ungainly Make;
"They sneer at me for leaning all awry:
What! did the Hand then of the Potter shake?"

LXXXVII

Whereat some one of the loquacious Lot —
I think a Sufi pipkin — waxing hot —
"All this of Pot and Potter — Tell me then,
Who is the Potter, pray, and who the Pot?"

LXXXVIII

"Why," said another, "Some there are who tell
Of one who threatens he will toss to Hell
The luckless Pots he marr'd in making — Pish!
He's a Good Fellow, and 'twill all be well."

LXXXIX

"Well," murmur'd one, "Let whoso make or buy,
My Clay with long Oblivion is gone dry:
But fill me with the old familiar Juice,
Methinks I might recover by and by."

In the end, the narrator of the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* blames God, or Fate, or the Cosmos, not only for wine but for all the temptations with which this world confronts us:

LXI

Why, be this Juice the growth of God, who dare
 Blaspheme the twisted tendril as a Snare?
 A Blessing, we should use it, should we not?
 And if a Curse — why, then, Who set it there?

LXXX

Oh, Thou, who didst with pitfall and with gin
 Beset the Road I was to wander in,
 Thou wilt not with Predestined Evil round
 Enmesh, and then impute my Fall to Sin!

LXXXI

Oh Thou, who Man of baser Earth didst make,
 And ev'n with Paradise devise the Snake:
 For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man
 Is blacken'd — Man's forgiveness give — and take!

XCIX

Ah Love! could you and I with Him conspire
 To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
 Would not we shatter it to bits — and then
 Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's Desire!

This depictive translation is how at least one poet, Edward FitzGerald, responded to the disenchanted world seemingly offered up by Darwinism when it first rocked Victorian England.

We are obviously no longer in the Victorian era and one need not succumb to any such bleak worldview. It should be evident that the authors, reviewers, designers, source checkers, copy editors, donors, and other volunteers who make the work of The Interpreter Foundation possible do not share the worldview of the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*.

They have chosen to “husband the Golden grain” rather than, either literally or metaphorically, to “be jocund with the fruitful Grape” and to “divorce” Reason. Indeed, more like the remarkably productive historical Omar Khayyám, the overwhelming majority of our writers and editors and other volunteers contribute their time and effort on top of their full-time employment and other obligations elsewhere. This for the simple reason that they do not find themselves in a meaningless universe without

hope but, instead, recognize themselves as citizens of the Kingdom of God and look forward to still greater things yet to come. Serving in the Kingdom and, yes, striving to commend and defend the Kingdom via The Interpreter Foundation is (mostly!) a pleasure, because — as I also do — they believe. With regard to this particular volume, I thank the authors and others who have contributed their work and the managing or production editors — Allen Wyatt, Jeff Lindsay, and Godfrey Ellis — who have overseen and directed it. I'm deeply appreciative.

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THE GOODNESS OF THE CROSS AND GOOD FRIDAY: LESSONS FROM BAVARIA

John W. Welch

Abstract: *It is natural to wonder how the day on which Jesus was crucified could come to be known as Good Friday. In this exploration of the topic, John Welch examines the many events which occurred on that fateful day and the meaning they have for us today.*

[Editor's Note: This article is based on a talk delivered on Good Friday, April 2, 2021, to the German Missions Reunion in Salt Lake City. It has been lightly edited for publication.]

Today happens to be an auspicious day, Good Friday, the Friday before Easter Sunday. It is a suitable time to reflect on the trial, the cross, and the death of Jesus.

Karfreitag is the German name for Good Friday. The word *kar* means *klage* (mourning), *kummer* (worry), and *trauer* (sorrow). For Catholics it is a solemn day of fasting, which traditionally means that people eat fish on that day, but it also means they avoid alcohol, even beer. In Germany, this day is also known as *Stiller Freitag* (quiet Friday). Some German states restrict it as a day of silence, when certain types of noisy activities, such as concerts or dances, are legally banned. This name echoes the “Stille Nacht” (Silent Night) of Jesus’s birth 33 years earlier, but now that word draws our attention to Jesus’s voluntarily stilling his mortal body, even as he once stilled the storm on the Sea of Galilee.

Consider for a few moments all that happened during those particular 24 hours of that day. On the Jewish calendar, as one should note, the day began when the sun went down the evening before. So Good Friday actually began with the Last Supper, with the Lord’s beautiful

words in John 13–17, and continued with the Lord’s cosmic conflict in Gethsemane and then with Judas’s betrayal and Jesus’s arrest. All that then led to Golgotha, to the cross, to his yielding up of his spirit, to the earthquakes, to placing Jesus’s body in the tomb, and to his breaking down the gates of Hell. All of that was accomplished within those 24 fateful and fruitful hours. It was indeed a terribly Good Friday!

Although many things happened that day, and all of them were crucially important, in most Christian minds, attention focuses primarily on the Cross. As you will remember, in Germany depictions of the crucifixion were almost everywhere — on monuments, on shrines beside most country roads, and on the tops of alpine peaks. Sometimes, as in the Catholic style, the depiction was of the dead, crucified body of Christ on the cross. Other times it was in the plain Protestant mode of showing the empty cross, which emphasizes that his body is no longer here, for he is risen.

Seeing all these kinds of crosses in Germany made a deep impression on me as a young missionary in the 1960s in Bayern, in Bamberg and Berchtesgaden. I learned there to revere the unpleasantnesses of the cross as a part of my Latter-day Saint faith.

I have come to appreciate that, as Latter-day Saints, we, of all people, don’t need to choose theologically between Gethsemane or Golgotha. We don’t need to opt between Jesus’s bleeding from every pore, or his bleeding from the wounds in his hands, feet, and side. I like to think of it this way: Jesus overcame spiritual death in the darkness of Gethsemane, while he vanquished physical death in broad daylight on the cross. Both, working together, were necessary.

People sometimes wonder why Latter-day Saints don’t usually wear crosses, as many Christians do. Might a good answer be that, while we don’t outwardly wear crosses, we do bear holy marks of the crucifixion in the tokens of our temple covenants? By keeping those covenants, we inwardly reverence the cross and strive to always remember Christ crucified.

While teaching, in law-school courses at Brigham Young University in Provo, for 40 years various topics on Jewish, Greek, and Roman laws in the New Testament, many things have impressed me about the trials and execution of Jesus. Above all, I have found a pervasive need for humility and caution. As Elder Bruce R. McConkie stated, “No revelation tells us all that happened there” — all of which is very difficult to understand from a legal perspective. Discussing this topic with Jewish and Christian scholars, I have learned to be aware that law in that day was very different

from ours today. For example, it was common for multiple charges to be thrown simultaneously at a defendant. There was no “code pleading.” No indictment was given with specific allegations. Defendants were not always sure exactly what they were being accused of. Indeed, Jesus was accused of many things. Yet there was no general right to confront one’s accusers — unless you were a Roman citizen. And remaining silent could be held against you.

In addition to problems in knowing what the law required, I have also found that many of the facts in Jesus’s case are difficult to tie down. One must live with many uncertainties and contradictory details even in the accounts of the four Gospels. Did the disciples escape from the Garden? Or did Jesus negotiate for their release? Were there two meetings of the Sanhedrin? Or just one?¹ What was the relationship between the Sanhedrin and the Romans in Jesus’s day? In many such cases, we just don’t have enough historical information to know as much as we would like to know.

Moreover, I have found it helpful for readers to realize that each of the four Gospels, for its own purposes, takes its own approach and emphasizes different elements of these complicated events. Matthew highlights Israelite and Jewish features. Luke is more Greek and populist. John takes an eternal perspective.² But, most importantly, all four accounts are good; regarding the ultimate outcome — that Jesus really died and really rose from the dead — all four Gospels are in perfect agreement.

Most recently, I have become especially intrigued with the rarely mentioned legal problems that must have grown out of the raising of Lazarus (Figure 1) and the full trial found already at the end of John 11. Jesus performed that miracle a month or so before Good Friday.

1. For a more comprehensive list of unresolved differences in accounts of the last day of Jesus’s life, see John W. Welch and John F. Hall, “Unresolved Differences,” in *Charting the New Testament* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Studies, 2002), Chart 10-10, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/further-study-chart/10-10-unresolved-differences/>.

2. A comparison of features in the four gospel approaches can be found in Welch and Hall, “Features in the Four Approaches,” in *Charting the New Testament*, Chart 10-1, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/further-study-chart/10-1-features-in-the-four-approaches/>.



Figure 1. A third-century glass plate in the Vatican Museum shows Jesus miraculously raising Lazarus and bringing him forth out of the tomb.
(Photograph by John W. Welch.)

By knowing that Jesus had already been convicted by Caiaphas in John 11, one can make much better sense of what happens in John 18. In pronouncing the verdict in that trial in John 11, Caiaphas invoked the ancient biblical legal principle that it was “better that one should die” than a whole village or city should be destroyed — the ancient Israelite legal maxim of “the one for the many.” Notice also that an official warrant for Jesus’s capture and execution was then already sent out at the end of John 11, and thus, except for his popularity among the crowd, Jesus could and would have been legally apprehended even during his triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

I find it even more fascinating that another arrest warrant was also sought at the beginning of John 12 for the arrest of Lazarus! Presumably, they saw him as an accomplice in some kind of trick or deception, or maybe they were using Lazarus as bait to see who might come to his defense. In any event, I wonder if Jesus then returned to Jerusalem precisely in order to save the life of his now-threatened friend Lazarus.

All of this legal action in John 11–12 explains what otherwise appears to be a great disregard of legal formalities after Jesus's arrest in Gethsemane. But if Jesus had already been convicted in connection with the Lazarus incident, legally all that needed to be done in John 18 was to capture Jesus and determine the way he was to be put to death and who should carry out his execution.

Of course, we all recognize that only John's record includes the material about Lazarus, but many historians and legal scholars have recently come to regard the Gospel of John much more highly than has been the case in previous generations. After all, John was an eyewitness. He was the only disciple present at both the final sentencing before Caiaphas, as well as at the cross. I like John and his accounts for many reasons. After all, as Latter-day Saints like to see things, he was a member of the original First Presidency, with Peter and James.

Next, amid all of this, I have come to realize how everything in Jerusalem had become a theater of fear.³ The scriptures tell us that Caiaphas, Herod Antipas, and even the righteous Joseph of Arimathea were all scared. Why? They all had their reasons. Caiaphas and his chief priests feared Roman reprisals, they also feared Jesus, as well as rioting by the people. Likewise, Pilate and his soldiers feared Tiberias, who was a known hypochondriac about disloyalty of his officials.

In addition, most of the Apostles had to run for cover. The early apocryphal Gospel of Peter reads, "We hid ourselves, for we were sought for by them as malefactors."⁴ That is the word used to describe the other two men crucified alongside Jesus, so this source tells us that Peter and the Apostles might have been the next targets and victims.

The women, too, and just about everyone were all terrified, as the earliest copies of the Gospel of Mark famously and abruptly end, "And they went out quickly, and fled from the sepulchre; for they trembled and were amazed: neither said they any thing to any man; for they were afraid" (*ephobounto*, Mark 16:8).

In that world, as I have come to understand and we can understand as we have come to fear the invisible anthrax or COVID, what people feared most were forces beyond their control, like the weather — what

3. Key scriptures related to this theater of fear can be found in Welch and Hall, "The Prevalent Factor of Fear," in *Charting the New Testament*, Chart 10-12, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/further-study-chart/10-12-the-prevalent-factor-of-fear/>.

4. Anthony J. Maas, "The Lately Recovered Apocryphal Gospel According to Peter," *American Catholic Quarterly Review* (1893): 324, <https://books.google.com/books?id=SJcNAQAIAAJ&pg=PA324&lpg=PA324>.

caused it to rain or not to rain, fearfully causing famines? Most of all, they all feared the supernatural. Angels who came even needed to say, “Fear not! Don’t be scared!”

The common reaction by people to Jesus’s miracles was fear — if Jesus could still the storm and raise the dead, what else could he do? How about cause an earthquake to destroy the temple? If Jesus was almost killed in Galilee for driving out evil spirits, supposedly by the power of Beelzebub, how much more problematic must have been his raising of Lazarus just over the hill from the temple in Jerusalem?

When people are afraid, they act desperately and even irrationally. Being irrational, it is no wonder it is hard to make rational sense of much of what happened on Good Friday.

Above all, what makes the most sense of all of this is a crucial law found in Deuteronomy 13. That law made it a capital offense to give occult “signs” or to work wondrous “miracles” in order to lead people to follow some other god or to observe some other religious practices. This famous text in Deuteronomy was the basis of the main legal cause of action against Jesus in John 11, and it carried the death penalty.

Seeing all these events in this light, I think we can understand why Caiaphas and the chief priests moved very expeditiously and deliberately in this case. They decided to arrest Jesus in his garden retreat, outside the city, and at night when sorcerers or wonder-workers usually worked their black arts. To any outsider, Jesus would have appeared to be a wonder-worker or, in other words, some kind of a sorcerer.

Making matters more precarious, attempting the arrest at night would have made Jesus very hard for the soldiers to identify. Most of them would have never seen Jesus up close. Hence the need for Judas to positively identify him.

He was probably taken up the stairs to Caiaphas’s palace, which can still be visited today. None of this could have been done without the Romans being aware, since the Garden of Gethsemane is in plain sight, right below the watchtowers of the Roman Antonia Fortress.

Indeed, I think that Caiaphas must have already made an appointment with Pilate to bring Jesus to him first thing after daybreak. No one would have brought such an important case to a Roman ruler — the Prefect of the Roman province of Judea — without putting him on notice and being granted such an early morning audience.

At this point, when Pilate asks the chief priests, “What *legal* cause of *action* do you have against this man,” they answer, “We would not have brought him here, except that he was doing *kakon*,” or, as other ancient

manuscripts read, “except that he is a *kakopoios*.” This word in John 18:30 is especially interesting. It does not just mean a *bad* guy (*kakon*) in general, but quite specifically an *evil worker* or, in other words, a *magician* (literally, a *kakopoios*).⁵

This was a brilliant move by Caiaphas, for the Romans couldn’t have cared less if Jesus had committed *blasphemy* under Jewish law. But being a wonder-worker who led people into apostasy was not only a capital offense, as in Deuteronomy 13 and thus under Jewish law, but it was also a capital offense under Roman law. Practicing “maleficium” (in Latin) or being a *kakopoios* (in Greek) was also a serious capital offense under Roman law. Roman law states, “Those who know about the magic art shall be punished with the highest penalty; they shall be thrown to the beasts or be crucified.”⁶ So, here’s the clincher — under *both* Jewish law and Roman law, the main punishment for witchcraft, or anything like it, was crucifixion.⁷

Evidence that Jesus, in fact, was seen as a miracle worker is found in the writings of the historian Josephus. He states that Jesus performed “mighty, wondrous miracles” through some invisible power, merely by his word and his command.⁸

The Babylonian Talmud contains this fascinating passage:

On the even of the Passover Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, “He is going forth to be stoned because has *practised sorcery and enticed Israel to apostacy* [remember Deuteronomy 13]. Any one who can say anything in his favour, let him come forward and plead on his behalf.”⁹ But since nothing was

5. John W. Welch, “The Legal Cause of Action Against Jesus in John 18:29-30,” in *Celebrating Easter*, eds. Thomas A. Wayment and Keith J. Wilson (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2007), 157–76, <https://rsc.byu.edu/celebrating-easter/legal-cause-action-against-jesus-john-1829-30>.

6. F.H. Cramer, *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics* (1954; reprint, Chicago: Ares, 1996), 276.

7. See John W. Welch, “Miracles, *Maleficium*, and *Maestas* in the Trial of Jesus,” in *Jesus and Archaeology*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 349–83.

8. Josephus, *War* IV–VII, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928), 648–50.

9. This 40-day notice would have occurred right about the same time as the trial arose in John 11, resulting from the raising of Lazarus.

brought forward in his favour he was hanged [on the cross; crucified] on the even of the Passover!¹⁰

This must have been done with Roman approval, if not complicity. Fortunately, we know how the Good Friday story ends. We call it the Victory of the Cross.

When there was no question that Jesus was dead, His body was placed in a tomb. During the night the stone that the guards had placed there rolled aside. In the morning, the tomb was empty. Jeannie and I have stood in this empty tomb on several occasions over the years, as have many people. They, as we, can solemnly and surely testify that he did not die in vain, but rose and truly lives.

Meanwhile, according to Matthew, the chief priests bribed the guards to say that Jesus's body had been stolen by the disciples, and the chief priests promised the guards judicial immunity if they would say just that (Matthew 28:12–15). Money deals were apparently of special interest to Matthew, a Levite and an erstwhile tax collector.

The analysis does not, and must not, end at that point. Many more people must be seen as being responsible for Jesus's death in one way or another: Caiaphas, Pilate, Judas Iscariot, the chief priests, Herod Antipas, the Elders, a few noisy Jewish opponents, and various scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees. Even Peter was left having to deny knowing Jesus. In effect, everyone — or, as Nephi prophesied in 1 Nephi 19:9, the whole “world” — would kill their God. Indeed, it took everyone. And if *everyone* was and is responsible, then, in an important sense, *no one in particular* is blameworthy. What a great act of mercy it then is that no one has to go through eternity blaming themselves for having been the one who “done it.”¹¹

For this reason, Peter told the Jews gathered on Pentecost, “I [know] that through *ignorance* ye did it, as did also your rulers” (Acts 3:17). They all acted in ignorance; they did not know the essential truth about Jesus. Thus, Jesus himself had said from the cross, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

And, as the earliest Christians in Jerusalem chanted “with one accord,” even Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles, and those Jews were merely

10. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 43a (Babylonian Talmud), Hebrew Streams, <https://www.hebrew-streams.org/works/judaism/sanhedrin43a-eng.html>, emphasis added.

11. John W. Welch, “Latter-day Saint Reflections on the Trial and Death of Jesus,” *Clark Memorandum* (Fall 2000), <https://jreubenclark.co/law-and-morality/latter-day-saint-reflections-on-the-trial-and-death-of-jesus-by-john-w-welch>.

acting as agents doing, as had been “determined before” in God’s premortal counsel, what “had to be done” (Acts 4:24, 27–28; see also Acts 2:23).

Indeed, the series of events on Good Friday was no mistake. God was not surprised. In fact, it was foreseen by Isaiah, who saw the planting of an eternal tree, a tree of life, that would spring from the stem of Jesse (Isaiah 11). This great tree of life was the Lord Jesus Christ, as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Depiction of the stem of Jesse as the tree of life in the Monreale Cathedral, Sicily. (Photograph by John W. Welch.)

The crucifixion scene on Good Friday was also foreseen by David in Psalm 22. Indeed, as David foresaw the crucifixion scene, Jesus cried out, “My God, my god, why hast thou forsaken me?” This is the opening line of Psalm 22, but there’s more. It goes on: “They pierced my hands and my feet.” “They part my garments.”¹² And, when Jesus cried, God “heard.” In the end, as this Psalm foretells, it turns out well, for “the kingdom is the Lord’s and he is the governor.” So Psalm 22 ends victoriously. In the end, Jesus was not abandoned or completely forsaken by God, but only for a time, as was necessary.

All of this took on special meaning to me, as you can now appreciate, when I was refocusing, for other purposes, on the words in King Benjamin’s speech, where he was told by the angel in 124 BC about the Lord God Omnipotent, how “He shall go forth amongst men, working mighty miracles, ... raising the dead [such as Lazarus], causing the lame to walk ... and even after all this they shall consider him a man, and say that he hath a devil [that’s how they will explain how he is doing his miracles], and [because they will see this as using signs and wonders to lead people astray they] shall scourge him, and shall crucify him” (Mosiah 3:5, 9).

What better prediction and more precise legal explanation of Good Friday could we in this world ever hope for?

Probably the most dramatic exception to the dominance of crucifixion scenes in European cathedrals is Thorvaldsen’s Christ, which dominates the Copenhagen Cathedral in Denmark. Emerging here out of the pillared temple (Figure 3) and the heavenly golden presence of God is not the dying Jesus, but the resurrected, glorified, and living Jesus Christ.

Having suffered, he still bears in his hands and feet the prints of the nails and of the sword in his side. His outstretched arms personally invite us into his love, as shown in Figure 4. He is both the victor over the agony in Gethsemane and the submissive crucified son of the Eternal Father, having descended below all things, so that he could rise above and be in and through all things.

In conclusion, I am very grateful that my experiences in Germany taught me and can teach all of us to stop and honor Good Friday. For centuries, its mystery has been celebrated passionately in Oberammergau.

12. See Shon D. Hopkin, “My God, My God, Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me?: Psalm 22 and the Mission of Christ,” *BYU Studies* 54, no. 2, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/article/my-god-my-god-why-hast-thou-forsaken-me-psalm-22-and-the-mission-of-christ/>.



Figure 3. Bertel Thorvaldsen's Christ, in the Church of Our Lady, Copenhagen.
(Photograph by John W. Welch.)



Figure 4. Detail of Thorvaldsen's Christ showing outstretched arms.
(Photograph by John W. Welch.)

One Friday (our Diversion Day, or D-Day, as we called it), on an outing to the town of Altötting, some of us carried heavy wooden crosses around that pilgrimage destination or *wallfahrtsort*. While I'm afraid it was too heavy a matter for our young minds to take seriously then, that experience made me reflect and ponder. I love what Bavaria then taught me, that Good Friday was not all bad. Good Friday was supposed to happen; it had to happen. Jesus was not victim; he was in full control. His highly unlikely but explicit prophecies that someone would actually crucify him (Matthew 20:19; 26:2) actually came to pass.

Just as he returned to die for his dear friend Lazarus, he himself died, the one for the many (Matthew 20:28; John 11:50; Hebrews 9:28), for his friends, for his people, for each of us, and for all of mankind. As John again articulated it so memorably, "For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved" (John 3:17).

And so, let us see the cross as a tree of life, not a tree of death. It reaches down to the depths to defeat death and to open the tombs of the dead. And as it raised Jesus up, it thereby also lifts us up unto eternal life.

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THE TEACHINGS OF SILVANUS: A LITTLE- KNOWN GEM FROM NAG HAMMADI

Dennis Newton

Abstract: *Scholars have recently suggested that The Teachings of Silvanus, a text from Nag Hammadi Codex VII, is the product of several authors with the earliest portion dating to the late first or early second century and the latest portion to the third or early fourth century. Silvanus' provenance, therefore, allows this single document to serve as a potential microcosm evidencing the change and alteration of early Christian thought and doctrine. Latter-day Saints have long contended that the Restored Gospel is more closely aligned with the earliest strains of Christianity vis-à-vis the creedal form. Through the lens of Silvanus, Latter-day Saint and Calvinist positions are evaluated relative to the early and late Silvanus authors and are found to be most compatible with the early and late portions of the text, respectively.*

As a teenager my first exposure to the Nag Hammadi texts came via a series of Einar Erickson audio tapes that my mother purchased. I still remember his vivacious voice reading tantalizing snippets from ancient texts and favorably comparing them to aspects of the restored gospel of Christ. He would always conclude his presentation with the question, "Where did Joseph Smith get this?" After hearing about all of these remarkable discoveries, I eagerly anticipated the impending wave of confirmatory evidences from ancient hidden texts that would definitively prove the miracle of the restoration. It is forty years later, and Erickson's prediction of a tidal wave of faith affirming scholarship has yet to emerge; at least it has not emerged from the sands near Nag Hammadi. While these texts have had an intensely dramatic effect on New Testament scholarship, they have had relatively little impact upon members of the Restored Church of Christ, especially its lay members. Why is this?

One reason is that many of the Nag Hammadi texts were produced and cherished by Gnostics — groups whose writings and beliefs were directly attacked by early Church Fathers. For example, Irenaeus famously designated Gnostic writings as “an abyss of madness and blasphemy against Christ.”¹ While the Nag Hammadi corpus has proven a treasure trove for secular scholars, traditional Christians have generally dismissed the documents as Gnostic heresy and doctrinally trivial.² This line of argument was the essence of the evangelical response to Erickson’s audio series. Melanie Layton shares the argument that the early Christian/Latter-day Saint similarities highlighted by Erickson “do not confirm, they condemn if one considers the source of the parallels.”³

For similar reasons, Latter-day Saint scholars have also preached caution when reading the Nag Hammadi texts.

[I]n a particular document we may see ideas standing side by side which, on the one hand, are very similar to Latter-day

1. Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Jackson, MI: Ex Fontibus, 2017), 26.

2. See Kings Church Eastbourne, “Why do Christians deny the Nag Hammadi texts?” YouTube video, 2:00, June 13, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxJiuDWrSM>, for a representative example of the traditional Christian response to the Nag Hammadi library. The final statement from this talk is “they’re Gnostic corruptions or distortions of the Jesus story that come from 200 years afterwards and as such they are probably not historically reliable and that is why Christians don’t take them very seriously.” On the other hand, secular biblical scholars are quicker than Christian apologists to understand the historical dogma associated with labelling beliefs as heretical. For example, Sheila E. McGinn acknowledges ancient political realities when she states “this notion that there are socio-political dynamics involved in ‘heresy-making’ has by now become commonplace in early Christian studies.” Earlier in her essay she postulates “what if Paulinism is no longer the hallmark of the ‘insider’ but rather a version of Christianity that may have been ‘outside’ the mainstream?” Sheila E. McGinn, “Internal Renew and Dissent in the Early Christian World,” *The Early Christian World*, ed. Philip F. Esler (New York: Routledge, 2017), 842–44.

3. Melanie Layton, *The Truth About the Dead Sea Scrolls and Nag Hammadi Writings in Reference to Mormonism* (Wheeling, IL: np, 1979), 54, quoted in Eugene Seach, *Mormonism, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Nag Hammadi Texts* (Murray, UT: Sounds of Zion, 1980), 16. Seach aptly summarizes the traditional Latter-day Saint approach to the Dead Sea Scrolls and Nag Hammadi texts around the time Erickson was making his audio tapes. “All scholars today recognize that the new discoveries were connected in very intimate ways with Primitive Christianity. They were in fact much closer to the central core of original belief than the 3rd and 4th century amalgam of Greek metaphysics and Canon which came to be known as ‘orthodoxy.’” Ibid., 58.

Saint notions and, on the other hand, diverge strikingly. Because of this situation, attempts to establish authenticity on the basis of LDS parallels in such apocryphal literature should be tempered and evidence carefully weighed.⁴

The Nag Hammadi texts were hidden by Christians near the ancient Egyptian settlement of Chenoboskian. No one is exactly sure who hid these texts, although some scholars have assumed that a small faction of nearby Christian monks desired to preserve these texts as groups considered heretical were actively persecuted by the church establishment in the fourth century.⁵ Included in the thirteen papyrus codices are 46 different texts of which 31 were previously unknown to scholars.⁶ The wide-ranging corpus has “source material on early Christian, Neoplatonic, Hermetic, Sethian, and Valentinian thought.”⁷ All of the texts are believed to have been originally composed in Greek and translated into Coptic.⁸

In contrast to the time when Erickson was recording his audio tapes, today’s scholars are hesitant to apply the label of “Gnostic” to any one particular historical group or set of beliefs. In fact “the term ‘Gnostic’ itself is an embattled term.”⁹ According to Marvin Meyer, the four groups of texts from the Nag Hammadi scriptures are those of “(1) Thomas Christianity, (2) the Sethian school of Gnostic thought, (3) the Valentinian school of Gnostic thought, and (4) Hermetic religion.”¹⁰ Often there is little commonality among texts that fall within these groupings, thus supporting further possible divisions. Meyer

4. S. Kent Brown, “The Nag Hammadi Library: A Mormon Perspective,” in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-Day Saints*, ed. C. Wilfred Griggs (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 258.

5. Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (Toronto: Random House, 2004), 97. “But in 367 C.E., Athanasius, the zealous bishop of Alexandria — an admirer of Irenaeus — issued an Easter letter in which he demanded that Egyptian monks destroy all such writings, except for those he specifically listed as ‘acceptable,’ even ‘canonical’ — a list that constitutes virtually all of our present ‘New Testament.’”

6. Portions of 52 total texts are included in the corpus but several are repetitious.

7. James M. Robinson, “Preface,” *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The Revised and Updated Translation of Sacred Gnostic Texts*, ed. Marvin Meyer (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), xi.

8. Ibid. Scholars argue that several of the texts might have Syrian origins as well.

9. Marvin Meyer, “Epilogue,” *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 777.

10. Ibid., 778.

concludes that “scholars today more often analyze each one separately or in relationship with contemporaneous Jewish, Christian, and pagan sources.”¹¹ This is the approach that I will take in this paper.

While most of the documents discovered at Nag Hammadi espouse either some variation of a Gnostic or Hermetic worldview, there are some very interesting exceptions. Birger A. Pearson argues that nine of the texts are either from very early sources (e.g., portions of Plato’s *Republic*) or are clearly non-Gnostic because their content argues against Gnostic positions.¹² Most of the texts from the Thomas school fall into this category as does the text of interest for this paper, *The Teachings of Silvanus* (hereafter referred to as *Silvanus*), a text that is sourced independent of Meyer’s major four schools and that is demonstrably non-Gnostic.¹³ The fourth of five texts in Codex VII, *Silvanus* is extant only in this Nag Hammadi Codex, although there is a short Coptic fragment preserved in the British museum (originally attributed to St. Antony), which scholars now believe is either a quotation from *Silvanus* or from an earlier unknown text that both sourced.

The Teachings of Silvanus

Compared with other writings from the Nag Hammadi library such as *The Gospel of Thomas* or *The Apocryphon of John*, *Silvanus* has received scant attention from biblical scholars and lay readers alike. So I will provide a short introduction to *Silvanus* here followed by a brief source analysis.

11. Marvin Meyer and Elaine H. Pagels, “Introduction,” *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 9.

12. The nine texts are *Gospel of Thomas*, *Book of Thomas the Contender*, *Dialogue of the Savior*, *Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles*, *Authoritative Teaching*, *Plato’s Republic*, *Act of Peter*, *Sentences of Sextus*, and *Teachings of Silvanus*. Birger A. Pearson, *Gnosticism and Christianity in Roman and Coptic Egypt* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 76–79. This list does not include three texts, which Pearson argues are reflective of Hermetic beliefs. Later Pearson argues that early Christianity in Alexandria was likely not Gnostic. “While it is possible that Christian (and Jewish) Gnostics could be found in first-century Alexandria, it is more likely, *prima facie*, to suppose that other, more dominant, varieties of Christianity existed there, more reflective of the Jerusalem origins of the Christian mission and of the dominant varieties of Judaism in Alexandria at the time.” *Ibid.*, 89.

13. Only one scholar contends that *Silvanus* is Gnostic. See Jerry L. Sumney, “The *Teachings of Silvanus* as a Gnostic work,” *Studies in Religion* 21, no. 2 (1992): 191–206.

The Writings of “Second-Rate Theologians”

Why spend time with a text written by “second-rate theologians,” as scholar Roelof Van Den Broek labelled them?¹⁴ Because *Silvanus* is a document unique to the entire Christian corpus. First, it is one of the few non-Gnostic texts included in the Nag Hammadi library. Second, it is reflective of Jewish wisdom traditions, which makes it a “most important witness to the Gentile Wisdom literature of Early Christianity.”¹⁵ Third, the text is the product of at least two (and possibly more) authors who are likely time-distanced by at least a century and possibly more.¹⁶ Fourth, while it is generally agreed that *Silvanus* was compiled in the fourth century, portions of the text “may be as early as the first century,” which would make these portions contemporary with several books in the New Testament canon, the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, and the *Didache*.¹⁷

Although its Greek original could be as late as the early fourth century, it clearly incorporates much older traditions and can therefore shed light on the development of Alexandrian Christian theology from the second, or even the first, century.¹⁸

Finally, and most surprisingly, there seems to be some tension between the authors of the early and late portions of *Silvanus*. As Van Den Broek states, “it must be doubted whether the man who wrote the theological and christological passages was also the original author of

14. Roelof Van Den Broek, “The Theology of the Teachings of Silvanus,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 40, no. 1 (March 1986): 18.

15. Malcolm L. Peel and Jan Zandee, “The Teachings of Silvanus” from “The Library of Nag Hammadi,” *Novum Testamentum* 14, fasc. 4 (October 1972): 294. “In fact, it does not possess a form which is readily identifiable with any of the other major types into which New Testament apocryphal writings have been divided, viz. the epistle, book of acts, or apocalypse. Rather, its closest correspondence is with what Johannes Kroll has called ‘Spruchweisheit’ literature (his example of which is ‘The Sentences of Sextus’), as well as with OT and Apocryphal Wisdom literature, such as Proverbs, *Wisdom of Solomon*, and *Sirach*.” Ibid., 297, emphasis added.

16. Van Den Broek states “I can only conclude that the materials contained in the *Teachings of Silvanus* come from different times and represent different stages of early Alexandrian theology.” Van Den Broek, “The Theology of the Teachings of Silvanus,” 17.

17. Birger A. Pearson, “The Teachings of Silvanus,” *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 500.

18. Pearson, *Gnosticism and Christianity in Roman and Coptic Egypt*, 78–79.

the rest of the work. The ethical parts in particular contain ideas which are difficult to reconcile with those of the theological portions.”¹⁹

All five of these characteristics should make *Silvanus* of interest to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Faithful Latter-day Saint scholars have long argued that Latter-day Saint teachings are restored from the original teachings of Christ and that creedal Christianity is a manifestation of fundamental alterations to some of the foundational doctrines of early Christianity (examples include the Godhead, creation *ex materia*, divine embodiment, deification, etc.).²⁰ A common argument involves comparing the earliest sourced canonical and non-canonical Jewish and Christian texts and highlighting similarities between Latter-day Saint doctrine and these early texts. By way of contrast, Latter-day Saint scholars argue that creedal Christianity is better aligned with later Christian texts and writings. Therefore, the dichotomous nature of *Silvanus* provides an interesting microcosm to test this approach. Within this one document are at least two voices — one early and one late — which can be juxtaposed to illustrate the dramatic change in Christian thought across just a few centuries.

Silvanus was most likely a product of the Alexandrian Christian community. After the crucifixion, Christianity slowly grew among the Jews of the diaspora.²¹ Many of these communities were influenced by a

19. Van Den Broek, “The Theology of the Teachings of Silvanus,” 17.

20. A small sampling of the wide range of examples of such Latter-day Saint scholarship include: Daniel C. Peterson and Stephen D. Ricks, “Comparing LDS Beliefs with First-Century Christianity,” *Ensign* (March 1988); David L. Paulsen, “Early Christian Belief in a Corporeal Deity: Origin and Augustine as Reluctant Witnesses,” *Harvard Theological Review*, 83 (1990): 105–16; Barry Robert Bickmore, *Restoring the Ancient Church: Joseph Smith and Early Christianity* (Phoenix: Cornerstone Publishing, 1999); Truman G. Madsen, *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980); Seaich, *Mormonism, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Nag Hammadi Texts*; Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Early Christians in Disarray: Contemporary LDS Perspectives on the Christian Apostasy* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2005); David L. Paulsen, “Are Mormons Christians? Reassessing Joseph Smith’s Theology in His Bicentennial,” *BYU Studies* 45, no. 1, (2006): 35–128; Richard R. Hopkins, *How Greek Philosophy Corrupted the Christian Concept of God* (Bountiful, UT: Horizon Publishers, 1998); and Donald W. Musser and David L. Paulsen, *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007).

21. Rodney Starks argues that “contrary to the received wisdom, Jewish Christianity played a central role until much later in the rise of Christianity — that not only was it Jews of the diaspora who provided the initial basis for church growth during the first and early second centuries, but that Jews continued as a

specific apostle or teacher — the most prominent being Peter, James, John, Thomas, and Paul. An influential community of Jewish Christians took hold in Alexandria with traditions crediting the founding to either Mark or James.²² Pearson argued that “the earliest Christianity in Egypt (i.e., Alexandria) was Jewish, and that the earliest Christians in Egypt would have been an integral part of the Jewish community in Alexandria. That community, as is well known, came to a brutal end with the catastrophic revolt of the Jews against Rome 115–117” CE.²³ Although Walter Bauer has argued that “the original and most dominant form of Christianity in Alexandria ... was ‘heretical’ and, specifically, Gnostic,”²⁴ more recent scholars have demonstrated that what Bauer calls “Gnostic” Christianity developed after the second century²⁵ and that it was only one of six distinct forms of Christianity to be found in Alexandria.²⁶ In addition to the Nag Hammadi texts, this vibrant community of theological thought produced many well-known Jewish and Christian thinkers and writers including Philo, Apollos, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Arius, and Athanasius.

So who was the named author *Silvanus*? Although it is possible that the title refers to a teacher active in Alexandria during the fourth century, it is most likely that *Silvanus* is meant to recall one of Paul’s companions (2 Corinthians 1:19, 1 Thessalonians 1:1–2, 2 Thessalonians 1:1). While

significant source of Christian converts until at least as late as the fourth century and that Jewish Christianity was significant in the fifth century.” Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 49.

22. Birger A. Pearson, “Cracking a Conundrum: Christian Origins in Egypt,” *Studia Theologica* 57 (2003): 61. One of the best known examples of Christian literature produced by early Alexandrian Christians is the *Epistle of Barnabas*; Barnabas tradition holds that he is Mark’s cousin. James makes appearances in other Alexandrian documents such as the *Gospel of the Hebrews*. Pearson recounts these traditions but cautions that neither “can hardly be credited with historical veracity.”

23. Ibid., 62.

24. Birger A. Pearson, “Christians and Jews in First-Century Alexandria,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 79, nos. 1/3 (January–July 1986): 211.

25. Pearson, “Cracking a Conundrum,” 62. “Much more plausible is the view put forward by papyrologist Colin Roberts based on his study of the earliest Christian literary papyri, dating from the second century. These earliest papyri provide absolutely no support for Bauer’s view that Gnosticism was the earliest and, for a long time, most dominant form of Christianity in Egypt.”

26. Roelof Van Den Broek, “Studies in Gnosticism and Alexandrian Christianity” (New York: E. J. Brill, 1996), 181–96.

the *Silvanus* text has proven difficult to date, the scholarly consensus is best represented by Pearson who argues that “the tractate consists of two main parts.”²⁷ The first part “may be as early as the first century” and the second part may be as “late as the early fourth century.”²⁸ The final document was likely compiled in the first few decades of the fourth century from the two aforementioned sources.²⁹

A Brief Source Analysis

Because a multi-author *Silvanus* text is critical to this analysis, it is worth taking a brief moment to discuss why scholars have concluded that *Silvanus* comes from at least two sources. Since Codex VII was first published, there has been relatively little scholarly interest in *Silvanus* with only a handful of available English translations and few publications focused solely upon the text.³⁰ When *Silvanus* was first translated with Codex VII, scholars assumed a single author “unified whole” with a late (third or fourth century) date of composition.³¹ As scholars paid more attention to the text they noticed a dichotomy between the first and second halves of the book. As early as 1970, the most active *Silvanus*

27. Pearson, “The Teachings of Silvanus,” 500. Pearson’s point of demarcation between the two is part one (84, 16–98, 20: approximately 40% of the text) and part two (98, 20–118, 7: approximately 60% of the text). Although Pearson and others are wont to group the text into two distinct categories (e.g., old-new, ethical-theological, etc.), it is possible that multiple authors or editors are also silently at work in the final redacted text.

28. Ibid., 500. It has taken several years for scholars to recognize the distinction between the authors and thus the different dates. *Silvanus* scholarship has been hampered by attempts to assign a date that would accommodate this assumption of single authorship.

29. Van Den Broek states “I want to argue that The Teachings of Silvanus were composed in the first decades of the fourth century, though partly based on much older materials.” Van Den Broek, “The Theology of the Teachings of Silvanus,” 2. Later Van den Broek says “Whoever Silvanus may have been, he was more a compiler than an original author.” Ibid., 17.

30. For the easiest available translation see Peel and Zandee, “The Teachings of Silvanus,” 294–311, <http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/silvanus.html>. For more detailed study I recommend either Pearson, “The Teachings of Silvanus” (more easily accessed), or Malcolm Peel and Jan Zandee, “The Teachings of Silvanus,” in *Nag Hammadi Codex VII*, ed. Birger Pearson (New York: E. J. Brill, 1996), although this is somewhat difficult to find and expensive.

31. Pearson attributes this phrase to Zandee in “The Teachings of Silvanus,” 499.

scholar, Jan Zandee, had divided the text into two parts³² but remained a supporter of single authorship until his death in 1991. Malcolm Peel, the author of the influential 1996 Brill translation of *Silvanus*, still assumed a single author at the time of this publication but addressed the issue of the text's duality by speculating that it was caused by "a compilation over time of notes by the author."³³

The pioneering work of two other early scholars questioned this "unified whole" assumption and suggested multi-authors or sources. Wolf-Peter Funk demonstrated that the portion of *Silvanus* (97, 3–98, 22) attested by the St. Antony fragment found in the British Museum was from an older independent wisdom text.³⁴ This opened the possibility of multiple text sources in *Silvanus* vis-à-vis the "unified whole" theory. Thus, William R. Schoedel, who wrote the *Silvanus* summary for the Anchor Bible Dictionary, notes in 1992 that the text "leaves the impression of being a collection of diverse materials and probably represents the end product of a long literary development."³⁵

Nevertheless, as scholars continued to attempt to date *Silvanus* they began to realize the two parts of the work seemed to best fit in two different time frames. Roelof Van Den Broek was the first to try and resolve this conundrum and as early as 1986 argued "the *Teachings of Silvanus* were composed in the first decades of the fourth century, though partly based on much older material."³⁶ He identified that the ethical portion of the narrative fit a second-century date and argued that

32. Jan Zandee, *God and Man* in "The Teachings of Silvanus," (Proceedings of the XIIth International Congress for the International Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, Stockholm, Sweden, August 16–22, 1970), 209.

33. See Peel's introduction to *Silvanus* in the definitive translation of Codex VII, *Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies: Nag Hammadi Codex VII*, ed. J. M. Robinson and H. J. Klimkeit (New York: E. J. Brill, 1996), 255. Peel's introduction was heavily influenced by Zandee who he lists as co-author even though he had passed away five years prior to the final publication.

34. Wolf-Peter Funk, "Ein Doppelt Überliefertes Stuck Spatagyptischer Weisheit," *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 103 (1976): 18–19. Since my German is spotty, I am reliant upon Schoedel who summarizes Funk as "a common source may lie behind *Teach. Silv.* And *Ps-Antony*." William R. Schoedel, "Teachings of Silvanus," *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, ed. David Noel Freedman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 342.

35. *Ibid.*, 342.

36. Van Den Broek, "The Theology of the Teachings of Silvanus," 2. Van Den Broek and Zandee are the two scholars who have written most prolifically on *Silvanus*.

the theological portion had some dependency upon Athanasius, which would date it as late as the fourth century.³⁷ This led him to conclude multiple authorship of *Silvanus*.

All this points to the second and third decades of the fourth century as the most probable date of composition or, perhaps better, compilation of the *Teachings of Silvanus*. For it must be doubted whether the man who wrote the theological and Christological passages was also the original author of the rest of the work. The ethical parts in particular contain ideas which are difficult to reconcile with those of the theological portions. ... I can only conclude that the materials contained in *The Teachings of Silvanus* come from different times and represent different stages of early Alexandrian theology. ... Whoever *Silvanus* may have been, he was more a compiler than an original author.³⁸

By 2007, when Pearson authored the *Silvanus* introduction for a new translation of the Nag Hammadi corpus, he references the history of *Silvanus* scholarship and gives the most up-to-date conclusion regarding authorship:

Although attempts have been made to understand the tractate as a “unified whole,” it is clearly an agglutinative text that has grown over a considerable period of time. The basic and oldest stratum of material stems from Hellenistic Jewish wisdom and philosophy such as was characteristic of first-century Alexandrian Judaism. The most important exemplars of this variety of Judaism are the *Wisdom of Solomon* and the writings of Philo Judaeus. Of course, the *Teachings of Silvanus* as we know it is clearly a Christian writing, parts of which may be as early as the first century and other parts as late as the early fourth century.³⁹

Because so little scholarly attention has been paid to *Silvanus*, there has been little critical debate about the Schoedel, Van Den Broek, and

37. Ibid., 2.

38. Ibid., 17.

39. Pearson, “The Teachings of Silvanus,” 499–500. With regards to a “unified whole” Pearson specifically indicates that he is referencing the earlier work by scholar Jan Zandee.

Pearson position concerning multiple *Silvanus* sources.⁴⁰ There are a number of compelling reasons for multiple authorship. The sharp contrast in style between the ethical wisdom teachings of the first portion and the philosophical and theological ones of the second is self-evident. The two parts also reflect the writings and teachings of those from different Alexandrian time periods. The first part echoes Philo of Alexandria, Jewish wisdom texts, and Stoicism while the second seems to convey Neoplatonism, Origen, Clement, and possibly even Athanasius.

The tractate consists of two main parts. The first part (84, 16–98, 20) is devoted largely to moral philosophy and can be regarded as a Jewish compendium of moral teaching influenced by Stoicism and Platonism, to which Christian features have been added. The Christian additions consist largely of crediting Jesus Christ as the source of the teacher's wisdom. The second part (98, 20–118, 7) is more explicitly theological and reflects the theological and Christological teachings of the Alexandrian teachers Clement and Origen.⁴¹

Zandee's pioneering work on *Silvanus* demonstrated significant dependencies between the text and Alexandrian Christian fathers Clement and Origen. Examples include a) only through Christ "the *Logos*" can the true likeness and image of God be known,⁴² b) Christ as personified Wisdom,⁴³ c) presenting an allegorized version of the temple cleaning,⁴⁴ d) Christ as the True Vine that yields the True

40. Ellen Muehlberger's one-page introduction to a recent *Silvanus* translation does not raise the issues of multiple sources and simply states "the text has no firm dating" other than the codex dating. Ellen Muehlberger, "The Teachings of *Silvanus* Nag Hammadi Codex VII, Work 4" in *The Cambridge Edition of Early Christian Writings*, vol. 2: *Practice*, ed. E. Muehlberger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 13. Two other recent articles referencing *Silvanus* seem dependent on Zandee's early scholarship and, likewise, do not address the issue. (See Piotr Ashwin-Siejkowski, "The Teachings of *Silvanus* [NHC VII, 4] and the Education of the Christian Mind" in *Gnosis: The Journal of Gnostic Studies* 3 (2018): 177–201; and Blossom Stefaniw, "Masculinity as Flight: Vulnerability, Devotion, Submission and Sovereignty in the Teachings of *Silvanus*," *Journal of Early Christian History* 11, no. 1 (2021): 66–87.

41. Pearson, "The Teachings of *Silvanus*," 500.

42. Compare *Silvanus*, 100, 23–29 and Clement's *Stromata*, 5.94.4–5.

43. Compare *Silvanus*, 112, 37–113, 7 and Clement's *Stromata*, 7.7.4 or Origen's *Principiis*, 1.2.5, 9–13.

44. Compare *Silvanus*, 109, 15–17 and Origen's *Commentary on John*, 10.16.

Wine,⁴⁵ and e) the contention that God is not locatable in space.⁴⁶ By my count, Peel, summarizing Zandee's work, presents fifteen examples of textual affinities with Clement or Origen, and each and every one of these examples relates to something in the second part of *Silvanus*.⁴⁷ No scholar, to my knowledge, has identified a directly dependent relationship between a passage in the first part of *Silvanus* and Clement, Origen, or any of the later Alexandrian fathers.

The two parts of *Silvanus* also exhibit noticeably different awareness and usage patterns of scriptural texts, particularly the New Testament (see Figure 1).⁴⁸ With such an early proposed composition time frame, it is unclear how aware the author of the first portion of *Silvanus* was of the entire New Testament library. The Hebrew Bible and Jewish wisdom texts⁴⁹ are as likely to be referenced in this part of *Silvanus* as the New Testament and, importantly, there are no direct New Testament citations and only a small number (12) of "possible or general echoes."⁵⁰ For example, there is some commonality between *Silvanus* 88, 15–16, which reads "live in Christ and you will obtain treasure in heaven," and New Testament passages that also reference "treasure in heaven" (Mark 10:21, Luke 18:22). But it is difficult to definitively determine which, if any, of the books of the New Testament the first author might or might not have had access to.⁵¹ This is to be expected if, as the multiple source

45. Compare *Silvanus*, 107, 26–108, 2 and Origen's *Commentary on John*, 1.205–208.

46. Compare *Silvanus*, 99, 29–100, 12 and Clement's *Stromata*, 1.51.1 and Origen's *Against Celsus*, 7.34.

47. Peel, *Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies*, 265–67.

48. Peel acknowledges this — "it may be observed that the first part of the tractate is more philosophical, the latter more explicitly Christian and biblical." *Ibid.*, 254. Importantly both reference the Old Testament equally; the only real difference is the familiarity and use of the New Testament.

49. Specifically *Book of Wisdom* and *Wisdom of Sirach*.

50. Terms suggested by Peel, *Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies*, 259.

51. There are some intriguing parallels between the first author's writings and the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians. Both address the topics of wisdom ("even the hidden wisdom," 1 Corinthians 2:7) and acknowledge the Spirit's role in facilitating it, reference humanity's animalist nature, and are giving advice to "beloved sons" (1 Corinthians 4:14). While these thematic parallels are not sufficient to argue for textual interdependency, Pearson has argued that the similarities could be explained by Apollos who is referenced repeatedly by Paul in 1 Corinthians and who likely found his way to Corinth from Alexandria. "I have commented elsewhere on the relationship between *Silvanus* and 1 Corinthians 1–4, and suggested that *Silvanus* retains, as part of its Alexandrian Christian tradition,

argument suggests, the first portion of *Silvanus* was written prior to the canonization of the New Testament texts.

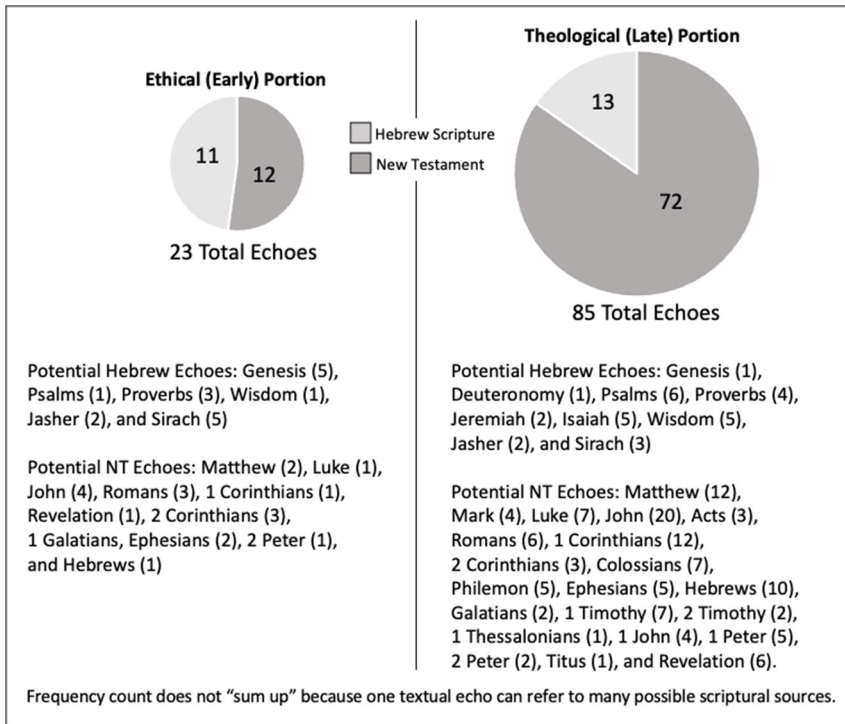


Figure 1. Reliance upon scriptural sources: How frequently the text echos a scriptural source.

In an introduction to non-canonical Christian texts dating to the second century, William Schneemelcher provides a useful summary of the historical context that is applicable to the early portion of *Silvanus*.

It must be observed that the canon of the NT only developed in the course of the 2nd century and that for a long time its limits were still uncertain. Also we can scarcely assume that all communities immediately possessed a complete exemplar of the NT; probably only separate writings, which were regarded as authoritative, were available. ... For our literature we may

a good deal of the 'speculative wisdom' already encountered by Paul in first-century Corinth, presumably mediated by the Alexandrian Jewish teacher Apollos. Apollos, 'an eloquent man, well versed in the scriptures' may very well have been a pupil of Philo." Pearson, "Cracking a Conundrum," 70.

at any rate determine that for the most part it originated without any reference to a canon of the NT.⁵²

On the other hand, the author of the second portion either directly or indirectly references nearly all of the books in the New Testament canon. A complete analysis of biblical references within the *Silvanus* text demonstrates sizeable and noticeable differences with regard to how the two portions of the text utilized the New Testament.⁵³ Of the 85 biblical references in the second part, most of these (72) refer to a New Testament text, and many are direct citations of New Testament writings.⁵⁴ (In contrast, the first part of *Silvanus* has only 23 biblical echoes and only 12 of these echo the New Testament.) In the second part there are references or echoes to all but four of the books of the New Testament.⁵⁵ Late in the second part of *Silvanus* the apostle Paul is specifically mentioned by name (“But he who makes himself like God is one who does nothing unworthy of God, according to the statement of Paul who has become like Christ”),⁵⁶ a direct reference to 1 Corinthians 11:1. The “scripture of God” is also referenced in a way that likely refers to the New Testament *as scripture* and not just the Hebrew Bible.⁵⁷

52. William Schneemelcher, “Introduction,” in *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2, ed. Wilhem Schneemelcher (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 3.

53. The intertextual relationship data in Figure 1 is from *Nag Hammadi Texts and the Bible: A Synopsis and Index*, ed. Craig A. Evans, Robert L. Webb, and Richard A. Wiebe (New York: E. J. Brill, 1993). The editors chaired a committee tasked with identifying parallels between Nag Hammadi and Biblical texts. While they acknowledge that their results are not (and never will be) definitive, it is methodologically sufficient and valid for our comparative examination.

54. A particularly compelling example is cited by both Peel and Pearson. It is clear that both portions of *Silvanus* are aware of Jewish wisdom literature. But a usage in the second part has sparked considerable interest. “[A] key passage crucial in Alexandrian Christology (viz., Wis 7:25–26 — about personified Wisdom as ‘an emanation of the Almighty’s glory,’ ‘a spotless mirror’ of ‘God’s working,’ and the ‘image of his goodness’) is specifically cited in *Teach. Silv.* 112, 37–113, 7. R. M. Grant has maintained that this Hellenistic Jewish wisdom text was not used by either Palestinian or Hellenistic Jewish writers (such as Philo), nor, apparently, by Gnostic authors either.” Peel, *Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies*, 259. Clement of Alexandria was the first to use Wisdom 7:25–26 in this manner and the second part of *Silvanus* directly echoes this argument about personified Wisdom.

55. The only books without a distinct echo are 2 Thessalonians, James, 2 John, and 3 John.

56. *Silvanus*, 108, 27–32.

57. *Silvanus*, 104, 3–6.

The two authors also have different vernaculars, lexicons, and word usage patterns. The first author refers to “God” only ten times, three of which are specific titles that writers of the Hebrew Bible favor (Most High God and Holy Father). On the other hand, the second author mentions God often — 57 times — but rarely gives an accompanying title. The second author also refers to the “Lord” while the first author does not. The second author mentions the name of “Christ” much more frequently (5 mentions versus 33 mentions) but only the first author ever uses the proper name “Jesus.” The first part includes the term “evil one” as a reference for the devil in a manner similar to Philo’s usage⁵⁸ while the second part uses the term “adversary.”

But the most compelling evidence for the conclusion that *Silvanus* has early and late sources is that the first and second parts’ teachings are *not a unified whole*; in fact, they often appear divergent.⁵⁹ These differences and how they relate to the restored teachings of Joseph Smith are the focus of the remainder of this paper.

The Teachings of Two Silvanuses

When approaching the Nag Hammadi texts, Tuckett offers good advice about historical context that I will try to adhere to whenever possible.

Nobody writes in a vacuum. Every literary text presupposes various traditions. The use of language itself is limited by sets of conventions concerning the meaning and use of words and phrases. ... Behind every writer there are many different influences: these include linguistic traditions concerning the meaning of the language used, social traditions reflecting the social structures within which the writer works, and, in the case of a religious text, religious traditions presupposed by the author.⁶⁰

Our focus will be upon examining the differences between the two parts of *Silvanus*. However, it should be noted that the majority of the two portions of the text display a number of ethical and theological commonalities. One example of such a similarity is the text’s unified

58. Pearson “The Teachings of Silvanus,” 504.

59. Van Den Broek provides a list of four differences before stating “I can only conclude that the materials in the *Teachings of Silvanus* come from different times and represent different stages of early Alexandrian theology.” Van Den Broek, “The Theology of the Teachings of Silvanus,” 17.

60. C. M. Tuckett, *Nag Hammadi and the Gospel Tradition: Synoptic Tradition in the Nag Hammadi Library* (Edinburgh, GBR: T&T Clark, 1986), 1.

teachings about deification. Both the early and late sources comment on the divine nature of man and each are doctrinally consistent with the prevailing beliefs of their respective time periods. Below is an early *Silvanus* passage on deification followed by a late *Silvanus* passage.⁶¹

EARLY: Do not bring grief and trouble to the divine which is within you. But when you foster it, request of it that you remain pure, and become self-controlled in your soul and body. Then you will become a throne of wisdom and a member of God's household.⁶²

LATE: He who has exalted man became like man, not in order to bring God down to man but to make man like God.⁶³

The topic of deification or *theosis* does not appear to have been heavily disputed in Alexandria during Christianity's formative years, thus the understandable agreement between the early and late parts of *Silvanus*.⁶⁴ In fact, the latter author seems to teach *theosis* more explicitly than the early author who merely implies it. Van Den Broek points out compelling similarities between the late *Silvanus* passage and the words of a fourth-century Alexandrian contemporary, Athanasius, who penned the famous statement "for he became man that we might become God."⁶⁵

61. Unless otherwise noted, all *Silvanus* quotations are from either the Birger A. Pearson or Malcolm Peel translations. See Pearson, "The Teachings of *Silvanus*," 504–21 and Peel, *Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies*, 279–369.

62. *Silvanus*, 92, 1–10.

63. *Silvanus*, 111, 7–13. Translation by Van den Broek, "Teachings of *Silvanus*," 16.

64. As an example see the quick summary regarding *theosis* among early Christians in Peterson and Ricks, "Comparing LDS Beliefs with First-Century Christianity." Evangelical theologian Clark Pinnock says "we have not felt comfortable saying that humans 'become gods,' as Latter-day Saints have, even though we know that early Christians did speak of our human destiny in such terms. For example, Irenaeus writes, 'Christ became what we are so that we might become what he is,' and Athanasius writes, 'He became man that we become divine.'" Clark H. Pinnock, "A Dialogue on Openness Theology," *Mormonism in Dialogue with Contemporary Christian Theologies*, ed. Donald W. Musser and David L. Paulsen (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007), 504.

65. Van Den Broek, "Teachings of *Silvanus*," 16. Because of this and other similarities between the late source and Athanasius, Van Den Broek argues that the late author knew of Athanasius' writings. Other scholars prefer a slightly earlier date for the late author (pre-Athanasius).

Another interesting teaching supported in both parts of *Silvanus* is self-assessment and self-determination. “In *Silvanus*’ view, human nature is not weakened by (‘original’) sin.”⁶⁶ Instead the source of evil is “blindness of mind” or “ignorance.”

There are also many individual subjects addressed by one part of the text without corresponding commentary in the other, many of which are intriguing to Latter-day Saint readers and warrant additional investigation. For example, in an early passage the son is told “when you were born again, you came to be inside the bridal chamber and you were illuminated in mind.”⁶⁷ Contextually, the text implies the bridegroom to be Christ, the bridal chamber analogy being quite popular in later Nag Hammadi texts.⁶⁸

The second part of *Silvanus* almost casually refers to Christ’s descent into the underworld and provides some intriguing details:

LATE: How many likenesses did Christ take on because of you? Although he was God, he was found among men as a man. He descended to the Underworld. He released the children of death. They were in travail, as the Scripture of God has said, and he sealed up the very heart of it.⁶⁹

With regards to topics like these where there is no apparent disagreement between the two parts of *Silvanus*, Latter-day Saint readers will find useful and familiar teachings from both the early and later portions. The second author, in particular, cites the New Testament significantly more often than the first author and echoes many of John’s and Paul’s teachings about Christ. Certainly, Latter-day Saint readers will find doctrinal commonality with many of these passages, especially as Christ’s divinity is emphasized (e.g., “He is the Light, the Angel, and the Good Shepherd”⁷⁰).

66. Piotr Ashwin-Siejkowski, “The Teachings of Silvanus (NHC VII,4) and the Education of the Christian Mind,” *Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies* 3 (2018): 193.

67. *Silvanus*, 94, 27–28.

68. Strathearn notes seven other texts that mention the bridal chamber (*Gospel of Thomas*, *Dialogue of the Savior*, *Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, *Authoritative Teaching*, *Exegesis of the Soul*, *Tripartite Tractate*, and *Gospel of Philip*). Gaye Strathearn, “The Valentinian Bridal Chamber in the Gospel of Philip,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 1 (2009): 85.

69. *Silvanus*, 103, 33–104, 8. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this passage. It is most likely that the text is directly citing Romans 8:22 here although some scholars, such as Pearson, suggest Psalm 7.

70. *Silvanus*, 106, 26–28.

But our interest in this paper lies in those instances where the first and second parts seem to disagree theologically, and our hypothesis is that Latter-day Saint readers will be more comfortable with the first author's position on these specific issues vis-à-vis the second. I also hypothesize that Protestant Christians, as represented by the archetype of Calvinism for this paper, will be more comfortable with the writings of the second author on these same issues. To determine the Latter-day Saint and Calvinist positions, I have used 1) the gospel topics portion of the Latter-day Saint website⁷¹ and 2) a theological guide written by Calvinist scholars on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth.⁷² The point of this paper is to not create a caricature strawman of the positions of either faith. Rather, if I have done my work correctly, practitioners of both traditions should nod their heads affirmatively at these comparisons.

While scholars have commented on the dichotomous nature of the *Silvanus* text and several have identified some of the differences, no paper that I know of has suggested that the latter author was purposefully commenting on or correcting the earlier author. Given the extent of topical duplication between the two parts, I suggest that "setting the record straight" was a motivating factor for the second *Silvanus* author, particularly in relation to topics such as the Godhead, the nature of God, and especially the personification of the divine feminine (wisdom).

71. I am aware that Latter-day Saint doctrine has evolved over time and that there are nuances and theological disagreements on nearly every subject. Realizing the impossibility of accommodating all of the nuances, I decided that the most definitive and official approach to determine current Church doctrine was to refer directly to the "Gospel Topics" section found at ChurchofJesusChrist.org (quotations from spring 2022).

72. *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes: Essays and Analysis*, ed. David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2008). While the Latter-day Saint position can be reasonably deemed "official," there is no such thing as "official" Calvinist theology. Even the popular moniker of TULIP is highly disputed among Calvinist scholars. For example, "The question as to whether Calvin taught limited or unlimited atonement has been the matter of considerable debate." Robert A. Peterson, "Calvin of Christ's Saving Work," in *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes: Essays and Analysis*, ed. David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2008), 246. I selected this collection of essays because it is representative of the active discussion underway regarding the writings and teachings of John Calvin.

The Nature of God

LATTER-DAY SAINT VIEW:

God the Father is the Supreme Being in whom we believe, whom we worship, and to whom we pray. He is the ultimate Creator, Ruler, and Preserver of all things. He is perfect, has all power, and knows all things. He “has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s.” ... As children of God, we have a special relationship with Him, setting us apart from all His other creations. We should seek to know our Father in Heaven.⁷³

CALVINIST VIEW:

God is not imaginable. All the things we invent are idols of the mind, products of our own imagination, for God ever remains like himself and is not a spectre or phantasm to be transformed according to our desires. It is a fact, however, that the mind of the fallen man remains a perpetual factory of idols and false imaginations of God, so that he is always projecting his own inventions or figments upon God.⁷⁴

Silvanus is written in the form of a Jewish wisdom text similar to Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the non-biblical *Book of Wisdom* and *The Wisdom of Sirach*. It includes common wisdom elements such as a) a father addressing a son, b) the giving of life advice and common-sense sayings, c) the contrasting between the wise and the foolish, and d) a focus on obtaining wisdom. Both the first and second portions of the text utilize this basic structure.⁷⁵

73. “God the Father,” Gospel Topics, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/god-the-father>.

74. T. F. Torrance, “The Hermeneutics of John Calvin” (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1988), 91. Calvin wrote God’s “infinity ought to make us afraid to try and measure him by our own senses. Indeed, his spiritual nature forbids our imagining anything earthy or carnal of him.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics 20–21, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1960), 1.13.1.

75. Discussing the similarity to wisdom texts, Peel argues “even so, the latter half of the text, which is more explicitly Christological and theological than the first half, seems to present a more structured scheme of presentations: warnings alternating with sections of discourse about Christ and/or God.” Peel, *Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies*, 254.

God is mentioned eleven times in the first portion of *Silvanus*, and many of these mentions are in the context of his role as a member of the Godhead. But there are some interesting themes that bear detailed examination. First, the early author often adds adjectival titles that modify the word “God.” Thus, he refers to “God, the holy Father,” “your first Father, God,” and God the “Exalted One.”⁷⁶ This latter title is interesting and brings the Hebrew name *El Elyôn* or “Most High God” to mind; “the title *Elyôn* is an old epithet of *El*.”⁷⁷

In the earliest Hebrew pantheon, the head God was referred to variously as El, Elohim, El Elyon, and El Shaddai, among other epithets. In the patriarchal age, El Elyon was the name of the God whom Melchizedek worshipped and to whom Abraham paid tithes. El Elyon can mean “the Supreme God,” or “the Most High God,” “El the Highest One,” or “El who is the God Elyon.”⁷⁸

There are only a handful of occurrences of *elyôn* in the New Testament and nearly all of these are by the author Luke (one of the others found in the book of *Hebrews* is quoting Genesis).⁷⁹ This title is not used in first- and second-century Alexandrian contemporary writings like the *Epistle of Barnabas*, *Gospel of Thomas*, or the *Didache*, so to find it here in early *Silvanus* is relatively rare.⁸⁰ These titles help establish the preeminence of the Father’s position in the Godhead, and their use implies that the early author is trying to distinguish the unique nature of God the Father — a topic that will be discussed in more specific detail later.⁸¹

76. *Silvanus*, 91, 7 and 88, 11.

77. Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 56.

78. Blake T. Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: Of God and Gods*, vol. 3 (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2008), 17.

79. “The Coptic expression is the equivalent of the Greek *uyistoç*. It occurs nine times in the NT as a designation of God, seven of which are found in the writings of Luke.” Jan Zandee, “The Teachings of Silvanus (NHC VII, 4) and Jewish Christianity,” *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions Presented to Gilles Quispel on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday* (Leiden, NDL: Brill, 1981), 510.

80. Zandee provides comparative examples of three Christian texts that use the nomenclature “Most High” (*Pseudo-Clementines*, *Acts of Thomas*, and *Odes of Solomon*) but concludes “as the use in the NT is rare, the occurrence in *Silvanus* might be a trace of Jewish Christianity.” Zandee, “The Teachings of Silvanus (NHC VII,4) and Jewish Christianity,” 510.

81. Early *Silvanus*’ references to God the father also bring to mind similar passages in the contemporary *Gospel of Thomas*. Of the 15 references to “God” in

Second, early *Silvanus* describes God using personal, relational, and intimate terminology. In the first mention of God in *Silvanus*, the father advises his son, using a personal fortress metaphor, to invite God to dwell in his personal camp.

EARLY: Entrust yourself to this pair of friends, reason and mind, and no one will be victorious over you. May God dwell in your camp, may his Spirit protect your gates, and may the mind of divinity protect the walls.⁸²

While this passage is clearly metaphorical, it does not seem outlandish for the author to suggest that God can *dwell* within the walls of one's personal camp. To dwell within an inner "camp" suggests the possibility of a deeply personal and intimate relationship with God himself. This metaphor also implies that it is possible to locate God in space or time independent of the other members of the Godhead.

The other mentions of God by the early author build upon this theme of relatability. The son is told "entrust yourself to God alone as father and as friend" and that if the son will "be pleasing to God you will not need anyone."⁸³ The imagery of father *and* friend implies an interpersonal relationship of depth, love, and respect that is unachievable without an intimate knowledge and shared experiences between two individuals.

The remainder of the early text attempts to establish the reasons for desiring such an intimate relationship. God is the exalted One, he is the pupil's "first" father, and the pupil is a "member of God's household."⁸⁴ The pupil's mind has been created in the "image of God," and he has taken shape "from the substance of God."⁸⁵ And God is the "spiritual one" upon whom the son should "cast his anxieties."⁸⁶ The author is explaining to his son that God is his first father, that he was created from the substance of God, that the son can become a member of God's household, and that God is the son's one true spiritual friend. In short, the son is being told to *seek to know his Father in Heaven*.

Thomas, only two use "God" and thirteen use "Father." The only use of the title God in *Thomas* is the phrase "Give Caesar the things that are Caesar's give God the things that are God's." (*Gospel of Thomas* 100; 2–3) while phrases like "the Father's kingdom," the "Father's light," and the "living Father" are common.

82. *Silvanus*, 86, 13–20.

83. *Silvanus*, 98, 8–10 and 98, 18–20.

84. *Silvanus*, 92, 8.

85. *Silvanus*, 92, 24–25; 93, 27. This will be discussed in greater detail later.

86. *Silvanus*, 89, 16–17; 93, 24–25.

Third, while both authors describe God in anthropomorphic terms, it is only the early author that appears comfortable with the concept of an embodied God the father. The earliest known Hebrew texts described God in anthropomorphic imagery (i.e., Ezekiel 1:26, Genesis 1:26–28) but post-Exilic Judaism consciously attempted to mute these images.

The avoidance of anthropomorphic imagery was by no means a general feature of Israelite religion after the Exile. While the tendency away from anthropomorphism marks priestly and Deuteronomistic traditions belonging to the eighth through the fifth centuries, later works belonging to the priestly traditions continued to transmit anthropomorphic imagery. ... Nonbiblical Jewish literature from the fourth to second centuries, including 1 Enoch and the Book of Jubilees, represents an additional source of speculation. The anthropomorphic language of Yahweh, other divine beings, and their heavenly realms never disappeared from Israel. The relative absence of this imagery from biblical texts during the second half of the monarchy reflects a religious reaction against Israel's old Canaanite heritage.⁸⁷

The New Testament and other early Christian writings do not attempt to mute this anthropomorphic imagery, rather they tend to embrace it. For example, every major New Testament author references Psalm 110:1 and the “right hand” of God.⁸⁸ Notably for our survey, Egyptian Christians were well-known defenders of the concept of divine embodiment. Catholic author Stephen Webb openly wonders what would have happened “if the monks of Egypt had won their battle in defense of anthropomorphism.”⁸⁹ He cites the example of an elderly fourth-century Egyptian monk named Sarapion who seemed befuddled after being taught the newly decreed doctrine of God's incorporeal nature. When another explained the new teachings to him, he said he understood and agreed to a joint outpouring of prayer. “Amid the prayers, however, the old monk became confused for he sensed that the human image of God which he used to draw before him as he prayed was now gone from his heart. Suddenly he began weeping in an anguished manner, threw

87. Smith, *The Early History of God*, 145–46.

88. Interestingly the second *Silvanus* author also references Psalm 110:1 (“for this hand of the Father is Christ”). *Silvanus*, 115, 5.

89. Stephen H. Webb, *Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 244.

himself to the ground, and cried out, ‘they’ve taken my God away from me.’”⁹⁰

The second *Silvanus* author, likely writing in the third century, effectively “takes away” this embodied God. According to the second author, not only is it not right to claim that God is embodied, it is difficult to even imagine what God’s true nature is, and even the angels find it difficult to fully comprehend God.

LATE: But we are able to mention what is more exalted than this: for do not think in your heart that God exists in a place. If you localize the Lord of all in a place, then it is fitting for you to say that the place is more exalted than him who dwells in it. For that which contains is more exalted than that which is contained. For there is no place which is said to be without a body. For it is not right for us to say that God is a body. For the consequence would be that we must attribute both increase and decrease to the body but also that one who is subject to these will not remain imperishable. Now, it is not difficult to know the Creator of all creatures, but it is impossible to comprehend the likeness of this One. For it is difficult not only for men to comprehend God, but it is also difficult for every divine being both the angels and the archangels.⁹¹

In stark contrast to the simple and inviting terminology of the first part of *Silvanus*, the second part describes God in a manner befitting philosophers under the influence of Neoplatonism. God the Father is now incorporeal, ineffable, impassible, unknowable, and incomprehensible. Statements like “it is impossible to comprehend what God is like,” “everything is in God but God is not in anything” and “God sees everyone; no one looks at him” are typical of the second author.⁹² In comparing the late *Silvanus* text to the writings of Church Fathers Clement and Origen, Peel and Zandee note “both these Fathers under the influence of late Platonic ideas view God as the Hidden One who is known only with great difficulty. Because He is ‘. . . above place and time, and name and thought’ we can know what God is not but not what He really is.”⁹³ Likewise, the second part of *Silvanus* states “for it is incomprehensible and unfathomable to know the counsel of God.

90. Ibid., 92.

91. *Silvanus*, 99, 29–100, 20.

92. *Silvanus*, 100, 16–17; 101, 9–10; and 101, 14–16.

93. Peel and Zandee, “The Teachings of Silvanus,” 306.

Furthermore, it is difficult to comprehend him.”⁹⁴ The pupil is cautioned to “not confine the God of all to mental images”; or, in Calvin’s language, to not *project his own inventions of figments upon God*.

While both authors use the word “father” to describe God, the early author paints a portrait of a loving parent who seems to desire to be actively involved in his child’s life. The second author, however, tends to use the term “father” primarily as a title and certainly does not emphasize the fatherly aspects of parental patronage and love. While the early author prays that God may physically dwell in our own spiritual encampment, the late author argues that the notion of God dwelling in a specific place is illogical because that would mean “that the place is more exalted than the one who dwells in it.”⁹⁵

The second part of *Silvanus* repeatedly mentions “God” (68 times) but rarely uses alternative nomenclature in lieu of this simple title.⁹⁶ The term “God” is also commonly used as a prepositional object in phrases such as “word of God,” “Spirit of God,” “Scripture of God,” “temple of God,” “Wisdom of God,” etc. As will be discussed later, there is also less distinction between the roles of God and Christ in the second part of *Silvanus*.

The second author allows that we can know God “a little” through his power and by partaking of his “truth,” but our primary avenue for knowledge of God is through Christ. Christ is now the “friend” and the one whom we are to know personally. Because the author has argued that we cannot truly comprehend God, it is clear that when the second author uses anthropomorphic terms for God, he intends a symbolical understanding. Thus, the phrase “hand of the Lord” is not meant to describe God’s physical hands, and a description of Christ as the “image” of God does not mean Christ is a physical “copy” of the embodiment of God but it is meant to represent unity with God’s purpose. As readers, however, there is no reason for us to make these same distinctions when the early author, in the context of and consistent with Middle Stoicism, refers anthropomorphically to the father.⁹⁷ In early second century Christianity, it was contextually proper to assume that God can dwell

94. *Silvanus*, 116, 19–24.

95. *Silvanus*, 100, 1.

96. Alternative names include “O Lord Almighty” (*Silvanus*, 112, 27) and “O Merciful God” (*Silvanus*, 112, 33).

97. The second part of *Silvanus* “denies that God can be found in a ‘place’ or occupies a ‘body.’ In this, he shares the perspective of Plotinus who wrote: ‘Finally, the School (i.e., the Stoics) even has the boldness to foist matter on divine beings so that, finally, God himself becomes a kind of matter — and this, though they make

with us, that he is a loving and doting father, and that he sits on a literal throne in heaven.⁹⁸ It was also contextually proper to assume that God is embodied in a real and tangible sense.

Christology

LATTER-DAY SAINT VIEW:

Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world and the Son of Heavenly Father. He is our Redeemer. Each of these titles points to the truth that Jesus Christ is the only way by which we can return to live with our Heavenly Father. ... “He was the Great Jehovah of the Old Testament, the Messiah of the New. Under the direction of His Father, He was the creator of the earth. ‘All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.’”⁹⁹

CALVINIST VIEW:

We have to think of the terms [Father and Son] as referring *imagelessly* to the Father and Son without intrusion of creaturely images or material forms of thought. ... Perhaps Calvin’s most fundamental proof of the absolute deity of the Christ is in the New Testament application to him of the covenant divine name revealed by God to Moses in the burning bush of Exodus 3:14: “I am who I am,” or the tetragrammaton — *jhvh* (“Yahweh,” or in older versions of Scripture, “Jehovah”). ... For it is certain that the name “Lord” was put there in place of “Jehovah” [or *Yahweh* — *jhvh*].¹⁰⁰

it corporeal, they describe as a body devoid of quality.” Peel, *Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies*, 261–62.

98. The Biblical record is unequivocal in this regard with the aforementioned exception of post-exile Israel. Cherbonnier made a bold but accurate statement when he claimed “for biblical scholarship is unanimous in confirming what Mormons have always held: that the God of the Bible is a personal Agent with a proper name...from Genesis to Revelation, the Bible conceives of God in the same terms that are peculiar to human beings, such as speaking, caring, planning, judging, and taking action.” Edmond LaB. Cherbonnier, “In Defense of Anthropomorphism,” in *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 160.

99. “Jesus Christ,” Gospel Topics, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/jesus-christ>.

100. Douglas F. Kelly, “The True and Triune God: Calvin’s Doctrine of the Holy Trinity,” in *A Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes: Essays and Analysis*, ed. David

The Son of God takes what is ours, “flesh from our flesh, bones from our bones, that he might be one with us ... to impart to us what was his.” Specifically, the Mediator assumed flesh and blood in order to “make of the children of men, children of God.”¹⁰¹

Latter-day Saint and Calvinist Christology have much in common. Both proclaim Christ as the Lord Jehovah, preach his atonement, affirm the many titles given him in the New Testament, and recognize his role in the creation of the world. The primary differences focus on the question of Christ’s divinity: the Latter-day Saint view maintains a clear separation between Christ and other members of the Godhead while the Calvinist view blurs some of these distinctions. For Latter-day Saints the process of deifying Christ beyond simple New Testament declarations were taken a step or two too far for our comfort (see the example from the *Gospel of Peter* below).

James M. Robinson and other biblical scholars have tracked this early Christian tendency to make Christ increasingly deified over time. According to Robinson, “Jesus apparently had no Christology. ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone’ (Mark 10:18). Probably he would have preferred we deify the cause: the kingdom of God.”¹⁰² Yet the New Testament authors clearly proclaimed Christ’s divinity with preferred titles of Messiah (Christ), Lord, and Savior, and so it was clear by the end of the first century that Jesus was viewed as uniquely divine and a member of the Godhead. The Church Fathers and other Christian writers (first to fourth centuries) added more titles to Christ and these began to impinge upon the distinctive roles of other members of the Godhead. For example, Christ’s familiar lament “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” in Mark 15:34 becomes “My power, O Power, thou hast forsaken me” in the second-century pseudepigraphic *Gospel of Peter*.¹⁰³

At first, clear subordination was retained (“God” for the Father, “Lord” for Jesus; giving glory to *God* was christianized

W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2008), 68, 79.

101. Derek W. H. Thomas, “The Mediator of the Covenant,” in *A Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes: Essays and Analysis*, ed. David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2008), 209.

102. James M. Robinson, “Very Goddess and Very Man: Jesus’ Better Self,” in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, ed. Karen L. King (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 114.

103. *Ibid.*, 115.

not as giving glory to *Jesus* but as giving glory to God *through* Jesus). But christological titles nonetheless headed in the direction of Chalcedon and the traditional deification of Jesus (and “subordinationism” ended as a heresy).¹⁰⁴

The two authors of *Silvanus* illustrate this later tendency towards lessening the distinction between God the Father and Christ. While the first author lays out specific roles for Christ within the Godhead, the second author stresses Christ’s centrality within the Godhead at the expense of the other members.

But before I delve into this tendency, it is worth noting that most *Silvanus* discussions regarding Christ, regardless of which portion they are found, would be heartily and universally accepted by both Latter-day Saint and Calvinist readers. Most teachings about Christ found in *Silvanus* are non-controversial. The second *Silvanus* author, in particular, often echoes the New Testament, which both faiths regard as holy writ. For example, the first words found in the second portion of *Silvanus* are:

LATE: Live with Christ and he will save you. For he is the true light and the sun of life. For just as the sun which is visible makes light for the eyes of the flesh, so Christ illuminates every mind and the heart.¹⁰⁵

It is hard to imagine any Christian having difficulty with this allegory. The vast majority of the Christ-related passages throughout *Silvanus* are similar to this one — affirmations of the importance of Christ to the well-being of the believer. With regards to Christology, the differences between the two portions of *Silvanus* are relatively minor.

So what are these differences? First, both portions of *Silvanus* write about Christ in a manner fitting to their compositional time periods. Take, as an example, the titles each author ascribes to Christ (see Figure 2). The early author, in nine mentions of Christ, employs eight titles; describing him as friend, brother, good teacher, and father.¹⁰⁶ In contrast, the second author mentions Christ 58 times and uses

104. Ibid.

105. *Silvanus*, 98, 20–28.

106. A passage late in the early text reads “this is your king and your father” referring to Christ. As confusing as this may seem, it is consistent with early Jewish Christian writings. “Thus we find in Jewish Christian writings frequent evidence that Christ was named ‘father’ like the God of the OT.” Jan Zandee, “‘The Teachings of Silvanus’ (NHC VII,4) and Jewish Christianity,” 528.

a staggering 38 different titles to describe him.¹⁰⁷ This is indicative of the later time period in which this author writes. According to Van Den Broek “before Origen, similar lists are very rare, after him they are very frequent, especially in the fourth century.”¹⁰⁸ Just to illustrate how voluminous and possibly even superfluous this list of titles is, I’ve used the Book of Mormon as a comparative text. In 531 pages, the Book of Mormon uses 67 different titles for Christ (at a rate of one title for every 7.9 pages of text).¹⁰⁹ The second portion of *Silvanus*, in comparison, gives 38 different titles to Christ in just 13 equivalent pages (a rate of one title for every 0.34 pages of text). The second author seems especially interested in the metaphor of light as a way to describe Christ. Christ is the Sun of Life, the Light, the True Light, the Light of the Father, the Light of Light Forever, the First Light, and the Light from the Power of God.

EARLY	LATE
Friend (2), Brother, Divine Mind, Good Teacher, the Word (Logos), Divine Teacher, King, Father	Word (Logos) (8), Wisdom (Sophia) (7), the Door (3), All (3), King (2), Friend (2), Image of the Father (2), the Light (2), True Light, Light of the Father, Light of Light Forever, First Light, Light from Power of God, True Likeness of God, the Image of His Goodness, Sun of Life, Angel, Unbegotten, Only Begotten, Incomprehensible, the Narrow Way, Tree of Life, the Power, Good Shepherd, True Vine, God, Teacher, Great One of the Heavens, the Judge, First Contender, the Mind, Firstborn, the Prototype, Beginning and the End, Hand of the Lord, Son of the Father, Divine Son, Ruler of Faith, One Who Is
8 titles – 9 total occurrences	38 titles – 58 total occurrences

Figure 2. Complete list of the titles of Christ by the early and late *Silvanus*.

It is important to distinguish that this difference between the two authors is more a difference in style than one of substance and does not necessarily illustrate a point of demarcation between Latter-day Saint and

107. This stark disparity has led to some scholars even questioning whether or not the early text is distinctively Christian or not. Pearson reasons that “the Christian additions consist largely of crediting Jesus Christ as the source of the teacher’s wisdom.” Pearson, “The Teachings of Silvanus,” 500.

108. Van Den Broek, “The Theology of the Teachings of Silvanus,” 3.

109. John W. Welch and Greg Welch, *Names Used for Christ by Major Book of Mormon Authors* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 1.

Calvinist beliefs. The second difference, however, is more theologically substantive and even possibly dividing. While the Christology of the first portion of *Silvanus* defines clear roles among the members of the Godhead, the second portion of *Silvanus* blurs many of these distinctions.

For example, the second portion of *Silvanus* refers to Christ as “God.”¹¹⁰ The written use of the term “God” as a title for Jesus was not common in early Christian literature. As Lohse explains “it is noteworthy that the New Testament, while in a few places it calls Jesus ‘God,’ usually displays great reserve toward this form of address. The reason for this was the strict monotheism of the Jewish environment, which would not tolerate such a designation.”¹¹¹

We have in Paul one God, one Lord, and one Spirit. I might add that Paul’s habit of reserving the designator *God* for the Father, and indicating the divinity of the Son and Spirit in ways usually other than calling them *God* straight out, is typical of the New Testament generally. This habit, combined with biblical characterizations of the Father as generator and sender, lies behind a Christian trinitarian tradition, especially pronounced in the Greek East, of regarding the Father as God proper, as the source or font of the divinity of Son and Spirit. The latter two may be fully divine, but they are derivatively so.¹¹²

While John 1:1 famously uses the designation “God” (*theos*) for the Word (“and the Word was God”), John importantly adds a Greek article when he says “the Word was with God” in order to maintain a critical difference between God and Jesus. “The word is also God — but God without the article (*theos*). However, the God that is with the Logos is *the* God, indicated by the article.” These two different designations (God and *the* God), unfortunately, are lost when the text is translated into

110. *Silvanus*, 110, 14–16 states “Know who Christ is, and acquire him as a friend, for he is the true friend. He is also *God* and teacher. He, being divine, became human for your sake.”

111. Bernhard Lohse, *A Short History of Christian Doctrine: From the First Century to the Present* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 73.

112. Cornelius J. Plantinga, Jr., “Social Trinity and Tritheism,” in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays*, ed. Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius J. Plantinga (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1989), 25.

King James English, simply becoming “God” and losing the hierarchal distinction.¹¹³

The second portion of *Silvanus* blurs many of these important distinctions maintained by Paul, John, and the other New Testament writers between God the Father and Christ. First, the late author begins to transfer some of the attributes traditionally associated with God to Christ. Though Christ is supposed to be approachable, he is also, according to the second author, in a sense “unapproachable.” Thus “it is as impossible to look at Christ as it is to look at the sun.”¹¹⁴ Or “on the one hand, he is comprehensible, on the other, he is incomprehensible in terms of his actual being.”¹¹⁵

Consider these two texts side-by-side; one early and one late.

EARLY: Accept Christ, who is able to set you free. He has taken on that one’s devices, so that through these he might destroy him with guile! For this is the king you have, who is forever invincible. Against him no one will be able to fight or speak a word. This is your king and your father. There is none like him. The divine teacher is with you at all times as a helper. He meets you because of the good you have within you.¹¹⁶

LATE: For he is light from the power of God, and he is a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty. He is the spotless mirror of the activity of God, and he is the image of his goodness. For he is also the light of light forever. He is the eye that looks at the invisible Father. ... For he is an incomprehensible Word, and he is Wisdom and life. All living things and powers he vivifies and nourishes; just as the soul gives life to all members of the body. He rules over all with power, and gives life to them. For he is the beginning and the end of everyone. He watches over all and encompasses them.¹¹⁷

For the later author, Christ is both the Word (*Logos*) and Wisdom (*Sophia*) and, “even if he was begotten, he is unbegotten.”¹¹⁸ Importantly, this author also asserts that “God the Almighty who always exists was

113. See Ostler, *Exploring Mormon Thought: Of God and Gods*, 167–70 for a useful discussion about John’s terminology here.

114. *Silvanus*, 101, 13–14.

115. *Silvanus*, 102, 3–4.

116. *Silvanus*, 96, 10–97, 2.

117. *Silvanus*, 112, 37–113, 23.

118. *Silvanus*, 102, 1.

not always reigning as king without also needing the divine Son.”¹¹⁹ In other words, God could not be God without Christ; an idea whose theological implications would require volumes to unravel.

Second, the language of the latter text is more predictive of Nicene theology than the early one is. For the second author, Christ is the “pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty” and is an “image of his goodness” as opposed to the image of the body of the Father. Notice how the text of the following passage interplays back and forth between God and Christ so that the reader is never quite sure what the distinction between the two really is.

LATE: Everything is in God, but God is not in anything. Now what is it to know God? God is all that is in the truth. But it is impossible to look at Christ as at the sun. God sees everyone; no one looks at him.¹²⁰

Throughout this passage it is unclear whether or not the term “God” is referring to “God the Father” distinct from Christ or “Christ as God.” This confusion is because elsewhere the second *Silvanus* author makes a stronger statement about “Christ being God” than most New Testament authors seem willing to make.

LATE: Know who Christ is, and acquire him as a friend, for this is the friend who is faithful. He is also God and Teacher. This one, being God, became man for your sake.¹²¹

Because the only version of *Silvanus* that we have is in Coptic (from a Greek original), it is impossible to determine if the author originally intended to distinguish between “God” and “the God” the way that John did. While Latter-day saint readers could accommodate this passage based on similar exhortations of Christ’s divinity in other scriptures, there would be considerable doctrinal discomfort if the use of the title “God” here was extended and equalized to “God the Most High,” “the God,” or “God the Father.”

While both Latter-day Saint and Calvinist theology attest that “Jesus is the Son of Heavenly Father,” Latter-day Saint readers view the relationship more literally than Calvinist readers do (who exclaim “we have to think of the terms [Father and Son] as referring *imagelessly* to the Father and Son”). The second part of *Silvanus* conveys Calvinist-like

119. *Silvanus*, 115, 10–11.

120. *Silvanus*, 101, 8–17.

121. *Silvanus*, 110, 15–19.

imagery portraying Christ as the Father's emanation, light and power, and slowly rewriting the parameters of what Christ's role as a Son of God means. In short, the distinctiveness between God the Father and Christ is blurred somewhat by the second author of *Silvanus* in ways that would tend to make Latter-day Saint readers and early Jewish Christians slightly uncomfortable.

Wisdom and the Divine Feminine

LATTER-DAY SAINT VIEW:

Little has been revealed about our Heavenly Mother beyond a knowledge of Her existence. Although we do not worship Her, we honor Her as a divine parent. Following the example of the Savior, we pray only to our Heavenly Father. We receive guidance and direction from Heavenly Father and His Son through the Holy Ghost.¹²²

CALVINIST VIEW:

Each God when considered in Himself; as the Father so the Son, as the Son so the Holy Ghost; the Three One God when contemplated together; each God because consubstantial; one God because of the Monarchia.¹²³

The average Latter-day Saint and Calvinistic worshiper is likely unaware that the question of the divine feminine (typically in the form of Wisdom or the Greek *Sophia*) permeates the study of ancient Judaism and, consequently, first century Christianity.¹²⁴ Depending upon the timeframe and context, Bible scholars are divided as to whether or not

122. "Heavenly Parents," Gospel Topics, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/heavenly-parents>.

123. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 40.41. Technically this is not a Calvinist "doctrine" but it is authoritatively quoted by Douglas F. Kelly, "The True and Triune God: Calvin's Doctrine of the Holy Trinity," 85.

124. "The figure of divine Wisdom (Greek: *Sophia*) spans a literary and iconographic history that emerges in, but is not confined to, the Hebrew Bible, Hellenistic Judaism, and early Christian literature." Deirdre J. Good, *Reconstructing the Tradition of Sophia in Gnostic Literature* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987), xiii. Speaking of *Beatitudes*, a Qumran text, Donald W. Parry says "wisdom is personified as a woman (the word *wisdom* in Hebrew [*hokmah*] is a feminine noun); those who hold her seek her with pure hands; those who attain her walk in God's law." Donald W. Parry, "The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible," *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 2 (2010): 20.

the most common representation of the divine feminine, “Wisdom,” represents an actual goddess, the feminine nature of an androgynous monotheistic God, a hypostasis of *Yahweh*, a metaphor, or a marginalized teaching of heretics.¹²⁵ What is undeniable is Wisdom’s presence in ancient Judaism and the long shadow that it casts upon scholars’ understanding of the Hebrew Bible, other ancient Jewish texts, and early Jewish manifestations of Christianity.

To better establish the context for the forthcoming discussion, it is worth sharing two summaries from scholars about the divine feminine and early Jewish Christianity. James M. Robinson offers a useful summary of how the divine feminine was slowly yet steadily minimized and marginalized during the first few centuries of Christendom.

The Hebrew word for “spirit,” *ruach*, is usually feminine (though at times it is used masculinely). Thus in a Semitic world of thought the tripartite deity could reflect the core family of father, mother, and child. But the Greek word for “spirit,” *pneuma*, is neuter, so that the question became relevant as to whether the third person (the Spirit’s position when no longer the mother in the core family) is actually a person at all. Since the Latin word for “spirit,” *spiritus*, is masculine, the personality of the Spirit was thereby assured as well as the all-male trinity. Even though a theologian-linguist such as Jerome (in commenting on Isa. 40:9–11) could point out that the three diverging genders of the noun for Spirit show that God has no sex, the metaphorical suggestiveness of the gender of the nouns dominated classical theology. ... In the Semitic branch of early Christianity the femininity of the Spirit and her role as Jesus’ mother are made explicit. ... A parallel development to that which we have sketched

125. “At this point most commentators believe that Asherah was a goddess in monarchic Israel (e.g., Ackerman, Binger, Day, Dever, Dijkstra, Edelman, Hadley, Handy, Keel and Uehlinger, Loretz, Merlo, Niehr, Olyan, Petty, Wyatt, Xella, Zevit, as well as NJPS [the New Jewish Publication Society translation] at 1 Kings 15:13). Some do not (e.g. Cross, Frevel, Korpel, Tigay; cf. Emerton’s very cautious formulation, McCarter’s asherah as Yahweh’s hypostasis, Miller’s nuanced position of secondary divinization of the symbol)...In conclusion, I am not opposed in theory to the possibility that Asherah was an Israelite goddess during the monarchy. My chief objection to this view is that it has not been demonstrated, given the plausibility of alternative views.” Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), xxxii, xxxvi.

regarding the Spirit may have been even more significant at the beginning and may be less well known today, since, unlike the Spirit, the protagonist has faded from the theological aristocracy: Wisdom. Here again the Hebrew word, *chokmah*, is feminine, as are the Greek *sophia* and the Latin *sapientia*. Thus the survival of Wisdom in the top echelon of deity would have assured a female part at the top (which may be part of the reason that Wisdom was dropped). Wisdom was fading fast by the time the New Testament itself was written.¹²⁶

And specifically writing about *Silvanus*, Jan Zandee argues that the text fits properly in the historical context of Jewish Wisdom teachings.

It is a Jewish and Jewish Christian tradition that God has a consort. Wisdom takes the place of the Logos as mediator of creation. There is a Jewish tradition of the Holy Ghost as mother. The best known instance is from the Jewish Christian Gospel of the Hebrews, quoted by Origen, where “the Savior himself says, ‘My Mother the Holy Spirit took me ... and brought me to ... the Tabor.’” In the *Gospel of Hebrews* the Holy Ghost speaks like personified Wisdom in Jewish wisdom literature, so that the Holy Ghost as mother is not far removed from Wisdom as mother. Thus the “mother” is an element of God.¹²⁷

The divine feminine as both archetypes of Wisdom (*Sophia*) and the “Mother” makes appearances in the *Silvanus* text. By examining the manner in which personified Wisdom is treated by the two portions of the text, we can show evidence of the divine feminine “fading fast” as early Christianity develops.¹²⁸ The early author renders a portrait of a divine goddess mother with neither comment nor apology; assuming an

126. Robinson, “Very Goddess and Very Man: Jesus’ Better Self,” 117–18. Interestingly in his response to Robinson’s article, Hedrick cites *Teachings of Silvanus* as “clear evidence of the kind of Wisdom Christology that Robinson finds in Q.” Charles W. Hedrick, “Response to ‘Very Goddess and Very Man: Jesus’ Better Self by James M. Robinson,” *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, 133.

127. Zandee, “‘The Teachings of Silvanus’ (NHC VII,4) and Jewish Christianity,” 517–18.

128. Elaine Pagels dates the disappearance of feminine divine imagery to the time period between our two *Silvanus* authors. “By the time the process of sorting the various writings ended — probably as late as the year 200 — virtually all the feminine imagery for God had disappeared from orthodox Christian tradition.” Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), 57.

audience familiar and comfortable with such imagery. The late author attempts to clarify what the Wisdom tradition means in a manner consistent with the writings of Clement and other later Christian commentators. In short, by the time we get to the second author, the question of the divine feminine has been settled and she has been effectively eliminated from the collective orthodox Christian experience.

Echoing Proverbs 8:22–30 and other Jewish Wisdom literature, the early author gives the following advice:

EARLY: My child, return to your first father, God, and Wisdom, your mother, from whom you came into being from the beginning.¹²⁹

According to Peel, in this *Silvanus* passage “personified ‘Wisdom’ is called the ‘mother’ of the pupil” being addressed, and God and Wisdom, conjointly, are modelled as the pupil’s Heavenly Parents.¹³⁰ Another portion of the early author’s writings states:

EARLY: Wisdom summons you, yet you desire folly. It is not by your own wish that you do these things, but it is the animal nature within you that does them. Wisdom summons you in her goodness, saying “Come to me, all of you foolish ones, that you may receive as a gift the understanding that is good and excellent. I am giving you a high-priestly vestment that is woven from every kind of wisdom.”¹³¹

In this passage, according to Peel, Wisdom “appears for the first time, an hypostatized attribute separate from God the Father.”¹³² In all, personified wisdom appears four times in the early text and it is difficult not to conclude that the early author is referencing a mother deity with qualities that appear human-like (e.g., speaks, invites to come, and desires to bestow gifts).

This divine family motif pattern is consistent with early first-century Alexandrian Jewish Christian thought. Philo, a prolific Jewish

129. *Silvanus*, 91, 5–15.

130. Peel, *Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies*, 264.

131. *Silvanus*, 89, 1–8. Examples of Wisdom calling to the foolish include Proverbs 1:20:23, 8:1–11, and 9:1–6. Also consider Sirach 24:19, which states “approach me, you who desire me, and take your fill of my fruits, for memories of me are sweeter than honey, inheriting me is sweeter than the honeycomb.”

132. Peel, *Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies*, 291.

Alexandrian writer who was also a contemporary of Christ and Paul, preferred this pattern when describing the divine.¹³³

With more or less mythological language, Philo is able to describe the relationship between God, Wisdom, and the Word in terms of family, God being the father, Wisdom representing the mother, and the Word being their son.¹³⁴

The early *Silvanus* author clearly parallels Philo's structure. Other Jewish Christian documents such as the aforementioned *Gospel of the Hebrews* do the same.¹³⁵ Philo's solution to the problem of how to remedy the logical disparity between the Hebrew requirement for strict monotheism and a three-member Godhead was to depersonalize the mother and son into the godly attributes Word (*Logos*) and Wisdom (*Sophia*). While Jewish Christianity inherited this need to maintain monotheism, a heavenly mother and a divine Son could be possible just as long as both were subordinate to the first father, God the Most High; both possessing divine attributes but also, like the angels, dependent upon the Father's divinity.

Second, as the concept of subordination was being actively debated, the later Patristic Fathers were then forced to explain the unexplainable: How could there be One God (monotheism) and yet three separate beings that were divine? Their solution, echoing Philo, was to declare Jesus the Word of God (*Logos*) and the logical extension would have been to associate Wisdom of God (*Sophia*) with the Holy Ghost and thus complete Philo's aforementioned triune Godhead. Instead, however,

133. Both portions of *Silvanus* are heavily influenced by Philo's writings. See Peel, *Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies*, 263–64.

134. Torrey Seland, *Reading Philo: A Handbook to Philo of Alexandria* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2014), 35.

135. One of the best known Jewish Christian examples of this are the following passages from the *Gospel of the Hebrews*: “even so did my mother, the Holy Spirit, take me by one of my hairs and carry me away to the great mountain Tabor” and “when the Lord was come up out of the water, the whole fount of the Holy Spirit descended and rested upon him, and said unto him: My son, in all the prophets was I waiting for thee that thou shouldst come, and I might rest in thee. For thou art my rest, and thou art my first begotten son, that reignest for ever.” Excerpted from Ron Cameron, *The Other Gospels: Non-Canonical Gospel Texts* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1982), 85–86. Other examples include the following from the *Acts of Thomas*: “We glorify and praise you and your invisible Father and your holy Spirit [and] the mother of all creation” (IV c.39) and “and they have glorified and praised, with the living spirit, the Father of truth and the mother of wisdom” (I c.7).

Jesus was also declared to be God's Wisdom as well; so Jesus became both *Logos* and *Sophia*. This transformation occurred after the time period of the early *Silvanus* author, and it is debatable whether or not evidence of this transformation (Jesus as Wisdom) can be found in the canonical scriptures. Analyzing the earliest canonical New Testament synoptic Gospels, Hamerton-Kelly concludes that "the evidence therefore seems to confirm Sugg's judgement that Q did not identify Jesus with pre-existent Wisdom."¹³⁶ Paul's essay to the Corinthians has both Christ and the Spirit playing Wisdom roles.¹³⁷ But by the time of Origen, "the Son is primarily God's Wisdom, his Firstborn, not to be conceived of as a divine quality but as a separate hypostasis."¹³⁸

In the early third century, Clement of Alexandria refashioned a stanza from the Jewish *Book of Wisdom*, recasting all of the divine imagery that describe personified Wisdom into attributes that describe Christ. While the first portion of *Silvanus* alludes to the *Book of Wisdom* several times, the second portion only references it once; echoing *Wisdom* in the exact same place and manner as Clement does. Whereas the *Book of Wisdom* states that feminine Wisdom flows from the "glory of the Almighty" and is the "spotless mirror of the power of God," the second *Silvanus* author declares that Christ is the "emanation of the glory of the Almighty" and the "spotless mirror of the activity of God."¹³⁹

Therefore, the late *Silvanus* author is unequivocally clear with regards to the identity of Wisdom. Wisdom is no longer the mother; Wisdom is personified in Christ. And Wisdom is no longer feminine. The feminine is no longer divine (at least not in relation to God) except possibly in metaphorical ways. Personified Wisdom is mentioned three times in late *Silvanus* and each time the author stresses that the personification is through Christ.

Consider the following three *Silvanus* passages:

136. R. G. Hamerton-Kelly, *Pre-Existence, Wisdom, and the Son of Man: A Study of the Idea of Pre-Existence in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 36.

137. See 1 Corinthians 1–4.

138. Van Den Broek, *Studies in Gnosticism and Alexandrian Christianity*, 129.

139. *Book of Wisdom* 7:25–26. *Silvanus*, 112, 37–113, 4. Zandee remarks: "This is virtually a literal rendering of *Wisdom of Solomon* 7:25–26 where personified Wisdom is the subject ... the transfer of these properties of Wisdom to Christ was not difficult for *Silvanus* since it equates Christ with Wisdom several times." Zandee, "'The Teachings of Silvanus' (NHC VII,4) and Jewish Christianity," 565.

LATE: Give them life, and they will live again. For the tree of life is Christ. He is Wisdom. He is Wisdom and also the Word. He is the life, the power, and the door. ... Since he is Wisdom, he makes the foolish person wise. She is a holy kingdom and a shining robe. Having much gold, she gives you great honor. The Wisdom of God became for your sake a foolish form, that she might pick you up, O foolish one, and make you wise.¹⁴⁰

LATE: It is he who has come forth from your mouth, the firstborn, Wisdom, the prototype, the first light.¹⁴¹

LATE: For he is an incomprehensible Word, and he is Wisdom and life.¹⁴²

Not only is Christ Wisdom, he is also the “tree of life,” an image historically associated with feminine Wisdom (Proverbs 3:18). In this way, the late author is purposely clarifying and correcting the early author’s reliance upon Jewish Wisdom texts and Philo’s *Logos* and *Sophia*.

Interestingly, the personified mother is only mentioned once in the second portion of *Silvanus*. Predictably, this mention also argues that the functions of the “mother” are actually responsibilities of Christ.

LATE: Only the hand of the Lord has created all these things. For this hand of the Father is Christ and it forms all. Through it, all has come into being since it became the mother of all. For he is always Son of the Father.¹⁴³

Thus with regards to the divine feminine, the differences between the two portions of *Silvanus* are substantial and difficult to reconcile. The son pupil is initially taught that he is a child of loving heavenly parents. In accordance with early Jewish Christianity, the son is led to assume that the Spirit is feminine; a belief commonplace to the time but rejected by both Latter-day Saint and Calvinist teachings. Over time the distinctly feminine qualities of the Godhead dissipate until the second *Silvanus* author declares that each of these attributes were actually incarnated in the distinctly male form of Christ and that two specific and important

140. *Silvanus*, 106, 20–26; 107, 3–9.

141. *Silvanus*, 112, 33–36.

142. *Silvanus*, 113, 14–15.

143. *Silvanus*, 115, 3–10.

emanations of God, “reason and mind are male names.”¹⁴⁴ At this point each of the three “triune” Gods is to be considered in HIMSELF.

The Godhead

LATTER-DAY SAINT VIEW:

The Church’s first article of faith states, “We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.” These three beings make up the Godhead. They preside over this world and all other creations of our Father in Heaven. ... Where Latter-day Saints differ from other Christian religions is in their belief that God and Jesus Christ are glorified, physical beings and that each member of the Godhead is a separate being. ... The Father is the ultimate object of [members’] worship.¹⁴⁵

CALVINIST VIEW:

The one true God for whose glory we were created, and whom to know is life eternal, is (1) infinitely spiritual in being and (2) triune in person. ... Let us not then, be led to imagine a trinity of persons that keeps our thoughts distracted and does not at once lead them back to that unity. Indeed, the words “Father,” “Son,” and “Spirit” imply a real distinction — let no one think that these titles, whereby God is variously designated from his works, are empty — but a distinction, not a division. In order reverently to explicate the biblical doctrine of the triune God, Calvin — in company with the whole Christian tradition both East and West — finds it necessary to employ a few crucial nonbiblical terms to set forth and safeguard the biblical truth. Such words as “person” and *homoousios* (“of the same substance or reality”) were developed by the church to provide an accurate and balanced explication of the scripture truth of who God is. ... Gregory refused to use the word “origin” for any of the Trinitarian persons, and taught that to subordinate any person of the three is to “overthrow the Trinity.”¹⁴⁶

144. *Silvanus*, 102, 15–16.

145. “The Godhead,” Gospel Topics, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/godhead>.

146. Douglas F. Kelly, “The True and Triune God: Calvin’s Doctrine of the Holy Trinity,” 66, 71, and 85.

A triune godhead, in some form or another, makes four appearances within the early source text (see Figure 3). The first is in the context of parental advice (“listen, my child, to my advice”) about guarding one’s camp with the words and counsels of God. The speaker petitions “may God dwell in your camp, may his Spirit protect your gates, and may the divine Mind protect the walls.”¹⁴⁷ Pearson argues that the “divine Mind” is a reference to Christ.¹⁴⁸

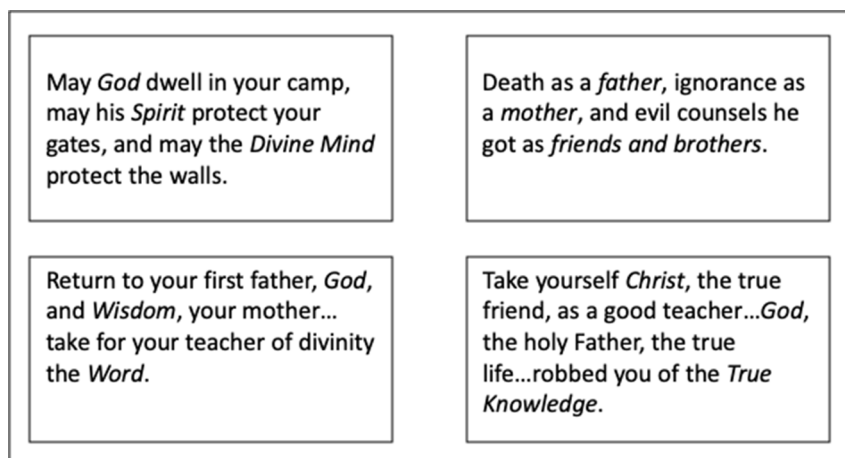


Figure 3. Four early *Silvanus* author references to a triune godhead.

The second appearance is an anti-trinity of sorts. The son is warned against three wrongs: “tossed to and fro by three evils: he got himself death as a father, ignorance as a mother, and evil counsels he got as friends and brothers.” Here the triune structure is father, mother, friend or brother. We know that this anti-trinity is purposely reflective of a triune godhead because the author explicitly contrasts the negative with a positive one later on.

EARLY: Take for yourself Christ, the true friend, as a good teacher. Cast death from yourself, which had become a father to you. But since you cast from yourself God, the holy Father, the true life, the spring of life, you have consequently inherited death as your father, and ignorance you have gotten as your mother. They have robbed you of the true knowledge.¹⁴⁹

147. *Silvanus*, 86, 16–20.

148. Pearson, “The Teachings of Silvanus,” 505.

149. *Silvanus*, 90, 31–91, 8.

Here the son is told to cast away death “which had become a father to you” and accept “God, the holy Father, the true life, the spring of life.” He is told to gain “true knowledge” instead of “ignorance.” And to cast away “these deceiving evil friends” and take upon himself “Christ, the true friend.”

The final appearance is the early author’s summary of the triune model:

EARLY: My child, return to your first father, God, and Wisdom, your mother, from whom you came into being from the beginning. Return, that you might fight against all your enemies, the powers of the adversary. My child, listen to my advice. Do not be arrogant, opposing every good opinion, but take for your teacher the divinity of the Word.

Thus, this triune pattern (Father, Spirit/Wisdom/Mother, Christ/Word/Friend) is repeated four times in the early *Silvanus* text. In the context of the late first or early second century, we can almost certainly assume that a) both Christ and the Spirit were deemed as separate from the Father and b) both Christ and the Spirit were subordinate to the Father. None of these four descriptions betray these assumptions. In the late first century, the three persons of the Godhead were assumed *homoiousios* (similar substance but not same substance) and Theophilus had yet to coin the word “trinity.”

James McGrath effectively explains the purview of the ancient world in relation to what strict monotheism actually meant:

[T]here was a common cosmology accepted by nearly all, whether pagans, Jews or Christians, right through until at least the second century. The clearest evidence is perhaps the statement made by Maximus of Tyre in the second century CE: “In spite of all this discussion ... one finds in the whole world a unanimous opinion and doctrine that there is one God, the king and father of everything, and many gods, God’s co-regents. So says the Greek, so says the barbarian.” There was apparently widespread agreement that there was what might be termed a “hierarchy of being,” with God at the top, his Logos or powers next, then various or angelic beings, then humans, and so on.¹⁵⁰

150. James F. McGrath, *John’s Apologetic Christology: Legitimation and Development of Johannine Christology*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph, Series 111 (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 2001), 75–76. In fairness

There are clearly echoes of the ancient world's "common cosmology" in the portrait of the Godhead presented by the early author. As discussed earlier, the specific role of each Godhead member is also referenced in detail separately by the early author. There are clear role distinctions and subordination between the three members of the Godhead consistent with late first- and early second-century teachings.¹⁵¹ The Father is "God the exalted one" and the Spirit and Christ are his subordinate yet divine "co-regents."

In the later source text, on the other hand, there are only two mentions of the entire triune Godhead. Leading up to the first mention, the author describes an "invisible" God whose true visible image is that of Christ.¹⁵² Thus "you cannot know God through any means except through Christ, who bears the image of the Father. For this image reveals the true likeness of God in a visible way. A king is usually not known

Protestant scholars contest this view of history and argue that the strict monotheism of Judaism carried over to early Christianity and that the New Testament authors understood the distinction that would lead to the doctrine of the trinity. "Primitive Christianity, like Judaism, was distinguished from paganism by its unqualified monotheism. ... In various ways, the early Christians confessed both Christ and the Spirit to be 'Lord,' and spoke of them and their work in terms proper to God himself — albeit less explicitly of the Spirit — than of the Son. The correlation of these new data of the Christian revelation with faith in one God had already begun in the New Testament, in semiformal confessional statements; both twofold (Father and Son: 1 Corinthians 8:6, 1 Timothy 2:5–6, Timothy 4:1, Galatians 1:3, 2 John 3, 1 Thessalonians 3:11) and threefold (Ephesians 4:4–6, 1 Corinthians 12:4–6, 1 Peter 1:2). ... The Greek apologists, who flourished ca. 150–200, were the pioneers of a more articulated account of the relation between God and his Word or son. To refute objections that, for example, creation and incarnation were incompatible with divine transcendence and immutability, they pressed into service, no doubt partly prompted by John 1, the concept of the Logos. . . .familiar to Hellenistic philosophical theology, especially in Philo, where it tended to merge with the figure of God's Wisdom." David F. Wright, s.v. "Trinity," *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 1142–43.

151. There are a number of examples of subordination in the early source. The order of presentation follows the consistent pattern of Father, Spirit, and Son; the first mention of the Spirit is preceded by the possessive "his"; we are to fear none "except God alone"; the ultimate goal of salvation is to become "a member of God's household"; etc.

152. The use of the term "invisible" brings to mind the Eusebius Creed where God is described as the maker of all things "visible and invisible." But it also brings to mind New Testament passage such as Colossians 1:15, which states that Christ "is the image of the invisible God."

apart from an image.”¹⁵³ Likely written before the Council of Nicaea, the specific roles of the Godhead are somewhat murky in the second author’s writings with Christ assuming many of the functions that the early text ascribed to other members.

The late author summarizes his view of the triune Godhead as follows:

LATE: This hand of the Father is Christ, and it fashions all things. Through it everything has come into being, since it became the mother of everything. It is he alone, existing always as Son of the Father.¹⁵⁴

This passage was discussed earlier. While the “mother” makes an appearance, it is not as a fully personified member of the Godhead per se, and it is not clear whether or not the author meant this mention to be representative of the role of the Holy Ghost or not. Instead, in this refashioning of the Godhead, the emphasis is upon Christ as the lynchpin. It is not difficult to envision a path from this text to the creedal faith declaration — “the Son is of the Father alone; not made, nor created; but begotten” — found in the Athanasian Creed written a few short years hence.

The second mention of the Godhead suggests that the author may have been more sympathetic to the position later espoused by Arius than that of Athanasius. A fundamental issue at the Council of Nicaea was the question of subordination, a doctrine clearly taught in the New Testament canon.¹⁵⁵ The proponents of Arianism struggled to reconcile the concept of three fully eternal and equal “Gods” with scriptural verses that implied the Son and the Holy Ghost were subordinate to the Father. This theological quandary was highly debated throughout the fourth century with Arianism making a comeback for much of the fourth century. Little known is that after the adoption of the Nicene Creed (325 CE), the Alexandrian church returned to a form of Arianism for the next forty years as attested by the Rimini-Seleucia Creed, which was

153. *Silvanus*, 100, 20–31.

154. *Silvanus*, 11 5, 4–8.

155. A sampling of New Testament verses that imply subordination include Matthew 27:46 — “My God, my god, why hast thou forsaken me?,” John 14:28 — “I said I go unto the Father: for my Father is greater than I,” and Matthew 24:36 — “But of that day and hour knoweth no man, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only.”

adopted in 359 CE.¹⁵⁶ Thus, it is understandable that the second author, who likely wrote before Nicaea, had not fully abandoned subordination. The second mention of the triune Godhead gives a specific example of a situation where both Christ and the Spirit are subordinate to the Father. The author, talking about how difficult it is to find God, states:

LATE: For he (God) is who dwells in every place and in no place. For no one who wants to can know God as he is, not even Christ or the Spirit, or the chorus of angels, or the archangels.¹⁵⁷

In his analysis on this passage, Pearson concludes that the knowledge of God “is denied here even to Christ” — a clear example of subordinationism.¹⁵⁸ Consistent with the time period, the late author vacillates between passages that imply subordination (Christ described as the “right hand” of God) and passages that blur the subordinate distinction between God and Christ. Consider the aforementioned passage, which quickly pivots from God to Christ and back again:

LATE: Everything is in God, but God is not in anything. Now what is it to know God? God is all that is in the truth. But it is as impossible to look at Christ as at the sun. God sees everyone; no one looks at him.¹⁵⁹

It is unclear whether or not Christ is assuming his “God” role in this passage or if the author is merely describing an attribute that both God and Christ share. But what is clear is that the second author is using the titles Christ and God almost interchangeably and thus blurring the distinction between these two members of the Godhead.

Both the early and late authors present their versions of the triune Godhead. Members of the early author’s Godhead have well-defined

156. Richard E. Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1999), 187–89. With regards to subordination, the creed states: “There is no uncertainty about the Father being greater: it cannot be doubted by anyone that the Father is greater in honor, in dignity, in glory, in majesty, in the very name of ‘Father,’ for he himself witnesses ... that ‘He who sent me is greater than I.’”

157. *Silvanus*, 116, 25–32.

158. Pearson, “The Teachings of Silvanus,” 520. This translation has proven controversial. Others have translated the passage to imply that God, Christ, and the Spirit are each unknowable. Consider this translation of the same passage from Peel and Zandee: “For no one who wants to will be able to know God as he actually is, nor Christ, not the Spirit, nor the chorus of angels, nor even the archangels.”

159. *Silvanus*, 101, 9–17.

roles, are separate beings, and have a subordinate hierarchy. While it appears as if the late author has retained some elements of subordination, Christ has become the visible image of the invisible father with much less separation between the two; the role of the Spirit also appears to have been minimized. Historically it is slightly too early for a fully developed belief in *homoousios* (beings of the same substance), but we can certainly witness the groundwork being laid.

Creation

LATTER-DAY SAINT VIEW:

Under the direction of Heavenly Father, Jesus Christ created the heavens and the earth. From scripture revealed through the Prophet Joseph Smith, we know that in the work of the Creation, the Lord organized elements that had already existed. He did not create the world “out of nothing,” as some people believe. ... We are all literally children of God, spiritually begotten in the premortal life. As His children, we can be assured that we have divine, eternal potential and that He will help us in our sincere efforts to reach that potential.¹⁶⁰

CALVINIST VIEW:

From this history we shall learn that God by the power of his Word and Spirit created heaven and earth out of nothing. ... Although Calvin will argue that the Hebrew term *bará* should be used exclusively for the creation *ex nihilo*, he does not depict the subsequent acts as results of second causes. Rather, the creative word of God works in the primal mass to bring forth the things that God created.¹⁶¹

Three aspects of creation theology are pertinent to this discussion: 1) the creation of matter *ex nihilo* or *ex materia*, 2) the pre-existence of the soul, and 3) what it means to be spiritually begotten. All three are discussed, to some degree or another, in *Silvanus*. Unless explicitly stated to the contrary, the historical assumption for the first and second century is creation *ex materia* vis-à-vis *ex nihilo*. As David Winston

160. “Creation,” Gospel Topics, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/creation>; also “God the Father,” Gospel Topics.

161. Joseph A. Pipa Jr., “Creation and Providence,” in *A Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes: Essays and Analysis*, ed. David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2008), 125–27.

states, “the theory of the creation of the world out of primordial matter finds its parallel in the *Wisdom of Solomon*, in Philo, in Platonism, and in rabbinic literature.”¹⁶² Freidman states that “creation of matter in the Torah is not out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), as many have claimed.”¹⁶³ And, according to Latter-day Saint scholar Barry Bickmore, Christian belief in creation *ex nihilo* was not adopted until after the second century.

Christian philosophers of the late second century discarded the early Christian and Jewish idea of creation from chaos in favor of the theory of *creatio ex nihilo*, as formulated by the Gnostic philosopher Basilides.¹⁶⁴

So the shift from *ex materio* to *ex nihilo* is nestled between the time periods when the *Silvanuses* were writing. Hubler claims “*creatio ex nihilo* marked a major redefinition of the material cosmos by the Christian apologists of the late second century.”¹⁶⁵ Importantly, it is useful to realize that two influential Alexandrian writers of the second and third centuries, Clement of Alexandria and Origen, held different opinions on this specific question; thus it is difficult to ascertain the prevailing thought from when the second *Silvanus* author was writing, especially given that his writings were influenced by both Clement and Origen.¹⁶⁶

162. David Winston, “Preexistence in Hellenic, Judaic and Mormon Sources,” *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Salt Lake City, Bookcraft, 1980), 34. The *Wisdom of Solomon* (a text echoed by both portions of *Silvanus*) states: “For not without means was your almighty hand, that had fashioned the universe from formless matter.” *Wisdom of Solomon* 11:17. Philo states: “This cosmos of ours was formed out of all that there was of water, and air, and fire, not even the smallest particle being left outside.” Philo, *De Plantatione* 2:6

163. Richard Elliott Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah with a New English Translation and the Hebrew Text* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 6.

164. Barry Robert Bickmore, *Restoring the Ancient Church: Joseph Smith & Early Christianity* (Phoenix: FAIR, 1999), 100. Ostler claims “the vast majority of scholars agree that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was first formulated around AD 200 in arguments with the Gnostics, Stoics, and Middle Platonists.” Blake T. Ostler, “Out of Nothing: A History of Creation ex Nihilo in Early Christian Thought,” *FARMS Review* 17, no. 2 (2005): 254. Ostler argues that *creatio ex nihilo* “seems to appear rather suddenly about AD 180 in the writings of Tatian and Theophilus.” *Ibid.*, 319.

165. James N. Hubler, “*Creatio ex Nihilo*: Matter, Creation, and the Body in Classical and Christian Philosophy through Aquinas” (PhD Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, Religious Studies, 1995), v.

166. Clement: “Out of a confused heap who didst create this ordered sphere, and from the shapeless mass of matter didst the universe adorn.” Clement of Alexandria,

Second, the pre-existence of souls was the predominate belief among Jews and early Christians. Truman Madsen notes that while there is a dearth of canonical sources explicitly teaching man's pre-existence, "early Christian and Jewish writings have accumulated in recent decades ... the idea that man himself had a premortal life. ... One scholar estimates that there are well over eight hundred references to the premortal existence of mankind in Jewish and Christian source materials."¹⁶⁷

Third and less often discussed in Jewish and early Christian writings is the question of where the soul actually comes from; or what it means anthropomorphically to be considered a child of God. Origen argues that there was no clearly accepted answer to this question in the early church:

But with respect to the soul, whether it is derived from the seed by a process of traducianism¹⁶⁸, so that the reason or substance of it may be considered as placed in the seminal particles of the body themselves, or whether it has any other beginning; and this beginning, itself, whether it be by birth or not, or whether bestowed upon the body from without or no, is not distinguished with sufficient clearness in the teaching of the Church.¹⁶⁹

The early portion of *Silvanus* includes two lengthy passages discussing man's nature in relation to his creator. Previously the son

The Instructor, 3:12. Origen: "And I cannot understand how so many distinguished men have been of opinion that this matter, which is so great ... was uncreated, i.e., not formed by God himself, who is the Creator of all things." Origen, *De Principiis*, 2:1:4.

167. Truman G. Madsen, *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 13. Likewise, Joseph F. McConkie gives the following summary: "Historically the story is simply this: belief in the premortal existence of the soul was dropped from Christianity in A.D. 553 by an edict known as the Anathemas against Origen, promulgated by the Roman emperor Justinian. The Pope consented under extreme duress. A quotation from the Secrets of Enoch serves well to introduce our subject. 'All souls,' he said, 'are prepared to eternity, before the formation of the world' (2 Enoch 23:5)." Joseph F. McConkie, "Premortal Existence, Foreordinations, and Heavenly Councils," *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-Day Saints*, ed. C. Wilfred Griggs (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 174. It is also interesting to note that Origen taught that spirits preexisted and had agency.

168. This is the belief that every soul was created in Adam and then individually propagated through earthly parents.

169. Origen, *De Principiis*, Preface 5.

had been admonished to return to his first Father, God, and his Mother, Wisdom, and that he should desire to join God's household. The author then explains his view of the divine origin of man.

EARLY: Know yourself, that is, from what substance you are, or from what race or from what species. Understand that you have come into being from three races: from the earth, from the formed, and from the created. The body came into being from the earth, with an earthly substance, but the formed, for the sake of the soul, came into being from the thought of the divine. The created, however, is the mind that came into being according to the image of God. The divine mind has substance from the divine, but the soul is that which he formed within them.¹⁷⁰

This teaching seems to have much in common with Philo's exegesis of Genesis 2:7 ("Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul").

The "image of God" only concerns the "mind, the sovereign element of the soul". ... The first human being was created in a composite nature consisting of body and soul. He was created mortal, i.e., mortal in respect of the body but immortal with respect of the mind, because God breathed the soul into him, in reality a divine breath.¹⁷¹

The teachings that man has been given part of God's "substance" is then repeated by early *Silvanus*.

EARLY: But I say that God is the spiritual one. Man has taken shape from the substance of God. The divine soul shares partly in this One; furthermore it shares partly in the flesh.¹⁷²

There is much to unpack in these two passages. *Silvanus* distinguishes, at least in relation to man, three creative sources or substances: the earth, the formed, and the created. The body is from the earth, but the soul is from the "formed" (implying pre-existent matter and creation *ex materia*) and the mind, Philo's "sovereign element of the soul," is from the "created." This portion of the soul was somehow created in the image of God and has "substance from the Divine." Thus, Van Den Broek

170. *Silvanus*, 92, 10–29.

171. Torrey Seland, *Reading Philo*, 37–38.

172. *Silvanus*, 93, 24–29.

specifically cites this passage as evidence for an early date of authorship for this portion of *Silvanus*.

There is also the idea that the essence of man derives from God: “Man has taken form from the substance of God” (*Silvanus* 93:26–27). Neither Origen nor Eusebius, let alone Athanasius, would ever have said this.¹⁷³

While Eusebius might never have written this passage, nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint writers such as Orson Pratt, W. W. Phelps, and Brigham Young, contemplating what it means for the soul to be “spiritually begotten,” could possibly have speculated along these paths.¹⁷⁴ From a Latter-day Saint perspective, it is reasonable to imagine an eternal intelligence (e.g., formed) whose “mind” (the most important part) is begotten through some unknown process by heavenly parents, retaining a portion of their divine “substance.” This seems as adequate an explanation of “being spiritually begot in the premortal life” as any I have seen.

By the time of the late author, in contrast, a “major redefinition” of the Christian understanding of the cosmos was well underway (although not yet fully complete). So the latter part of *Silvanus* lives in a milieu where creation is effectuated solely by God and his Son, where everything seems to come into being via God’s creative acts, and the presumptions of creation *ex materia* and the pre-existence of souls were actively being questioned and redefined.¹⁷⁵

173. Van Den Broek, “The Theology of the Teachings of Silvanus,” 17. This passage is one of the first he cites as evidence when arguing for a multi-author *Silvanus*.

174. “The doctrine that God, through a procreative act involving a heavenly mother, is the literal father of our spirits expresses the most fundamental and important relationship between God and humankind in LDS theology. Surprisingly, however, nowhere is this doctrine explicitly taught in any of the standard works, neither is it found in any of Joseph Smith’s recorded teachings. . . . The first clear allusion to the doctrine of spirit birth in LDS literature appeared in Orson Pratt’s *Prophetic Almanac*. . . . Pratt explained that human mortal existence was preceded by a spiritual state. In answer to the question of how humans began that state, Pratt wrote, ‘He was begotten and born of God.’ The next public mention of spirit birth was at the dedication of the Nauvoo Seventies Hall in December 1844 where Brigham Young, John Taylor, and W. W. Phelps all alluded to it.” Charles R. Harrell, “*This is My Doctrine*”: *The Development of Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 138, 141–42.

175. While Clement of Alexandria argued for *creatio ex materia*, Origen advocated *creatio ex nihilo*. Since most scholars date the later part of *Silvanus* post-Origen, it would be surprising if the second author advocated *ex materia*. With

The late portion of *Silvanus* does not focus exclusively on different aspects of creation but rather describes Christ's role in creation in Christological terms. The most relevant passages are the following:

LATE: You cannot know God through anyone except Christ who has the image of the Father.¹⁷⁶

LATE: Only the hand of the Lord has created all these things. For this hand of the Father is Christ, and it fashions all things. Through it, everything has come into being, since it became the mother of everything. It is he alone, existing always as Son of the Father. Consider these things about God: the Almighty who always exists was not always reigning as king without also needing the divine Son. Everything subsists in God, that is, the things that came into being through the Word, who is the Son as the image of the Father.¹⁷⁷

There are three overtones from these passages especially relevant to our discussion. First, there was a long tradition in early Christianity regarding the "actual" pre-existence of both the Word *and* Wisdom.¹⁷⁸ In the latter passage, however, the author seems to verify Christ's "actual" pre-existence but has purposely redefined elsewhere the role of Wisdom as Christ. Thus while the Son is "existing always," Wisdom's role has become the generic "mother of everything" and is no longer personified. This implies that the wisdom role is also no longer pre-existent but is a designation applied *a posteriori* by the hand of the Lord after the creative act.¹⁷⁹ Second, if Wisdom is no longer pre-existent, this would also then question the pre-existence of the human soul and the mind. Third,

regard to the pre-existence of souls, however, Origen argued positively towards the idea so it is likely that both *Silvanus* authors would concur.

176. *Silvanus*, 100, 23–27.

177. *Silvanus*, 115, 3–19.

178. R. G. Hamerston-Kelly offers two definitions of pre-existence: "ideal," which means existing only in God's mind prior to creation and "actual," which means actually existing in some form. Both types of pre-existence are found within early Jewish and Christian thought. Hamerston-Kelly, *Pre-Existence, Wisdom, and the Son of Man*, 2.

179. "The *Wisdom of Solomon* contains three different conceptions concerning the creator, 1. God as creator, 2. God as creator while Wisdom is present, 3. Wisdom as creator. It is the view of Alexandrian philosophical theology that the transcendent God cannot be directly involved in creation, so that one of his personified properties, Wisdom, acts as a mediator in creation." Zandee, "'The Teachings of Silvanus' (NHC VII,4) and Jewish Christianity," 570–71.

the late author seems to presuppose creation *ex nihilo* while the early author seems to presuppose *ex materia*. The phrase of interest here is “everything has come into being.” Compare this to the earlier author’s statement that man has three “races”: earth, formed and created. The distinction between these forms of creation have been removed. Thus, it is not much of a stretch to take the imagery of the latter part of *Silvanus* and conclude that “God by the power of his Word and Spirit created heaven and earth out of nothing.”

Soteriology

LATTER-DAY SAINT VIEW:

To be cleansed from sin through the Savior’s Atonement, an individual must exercise faith in Jesus Christ, repent, be baptized, and receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. ... Salvation is conditional, depending on an individual’s continuing in faithfulness, or enduring to the end in keeping the commandments of God. Individuals cannot be saved in their sins; they cannot receive unconditional salvation simply by declaring a belief in Christ with the understanding that they will inevitably commit sins throughout the rest of their lives. However, through the grace of God, all can be saved from their sins as they repent and follow Jesus Christ.¹⁸⁰

CALVINIST VIEW:

Faith originates in response to the Word of God. Faith rests firmly upon God’s Word; it always says amen to the Scriptures. ... Thus Calvin’s line of reasoning proceeds like this: (1) The purpose of election embraces salvation. (2) The elect are not chosen for anything in themselves, but only in Christ. (3) Since the elect are in Christ, the assurance of their election and salvation can never be found in themselves or even in the Father apart from Christ. (4) Rather, their assurance is to be found in Christ; hence communion with him is vital. ... Self-deception is a real possibility because the reprobate often feels something much like the faith of the elect.¹⁸¹

180. “Salvation,” Gospel Topics, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/salvation>.

181. Joel R. Beeke, “Appropriating Salvation: The Spirit, Faith and Assurance, and Repentance,” in *A Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes: Essays and Analysis*,

It is reasonable to ask the question “why did the monks cherish *Silvanus* enough to hide it along with the other documents?” One possibility is due to the texts’ teaching about *gnosis* (knowledge). Both the early and the late authors admonish the son to search for knowledge as part of the salvific equation. Unlike traditional Gnostic teachings, however, this *gnosis* is meant to be neither secret nor particularly status enhancing.¹⁸² The son is told to “know” himself, to illuminate his mind with heavenly light, to control his thoughts, and to allow God to dwell in their inner temple.¹⁸³ Most 21st-century Christian readers, regardless of denomination, would generally be comfortable with these themes.

Soteriological declarations are frequently found within both parts of *Silvanus*, are fairly consistent with New Testament teachings, and are not especially controversial. Both authors urge their pupil to accept Christ, keep the commandments, do what is good and right, control his thoughts, avoid sin, reject his animalistic nature, be humble, and return to the Father. With one notable exception that will be discussed below, the two parts consistently teach the message of salvific self-control. Below are two examples of the fatherly advice given, one early and one late.

EARLY: Put an end to every childish time of life, acquire for yourself strength of mind and soul, and intensify the struggle against every folly of the passions of love and base wickedness, and love of praise, and fondness of contention, and tiresome jealousy and wrath, and anger and the desire to avarice.¹⁸⁴

ed. David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2008), 278, 291–93.

182. According to Bernhard Lohse, there was a decisive church-wide struggle in the second century over Gnostics’ teachings related to salvation. “Furthermore, in opposition to Gnosticism the necessity of works had to be set forth in no uncertain terms. Most Gnostics were of the opinion that the redemption offered by Christ affects only a part of man, his divine spirit-substance, which is encased in nonspiritual matter. Man, they taught, is redeemed if he comes to know his true self and thus initiates the return of his divine spark to God the Redeemer. The emphasis here was upon ‘knowledge.’” Lohse, *A Short History*, 103.

183. He is also admonished to “not swim in any water and do not allow yourself to be defiled by strange kinds of knowledge.” In other words he is being warned specifically against secret *gnosis*. *Silvanus*, 94, 29–32. He is also told that the adversary “casts spurious knowledge into your heart disguised as mysterious sayings.” *Silvanus*, 96, 3–5.

184. *Silvanus*, 84, 16–26.

LATE: My child, guard yourself against evil, and do not let the spirit of evil throw you down into the abyss. For he is mad and bitter. He is terrifying, and throws everything he can into a pit of mud. It is a very good thing not to love fornication, and not even to think of that wretched subject at all, for to think of it is death. It is not a good thing for any person to fall into death. For a soul that is dead will be without reason. It is better to not live at all than to acquire an animal's life. Watch yourself, so that you are not burned by the fires of fornication. Many shooters of the arrow are slaves to it. These whom you don't know are your enemies. O my child, strip off the old garment of fornication, and put on the clean and shining garment. In it you are beautiful.¹⁸⁵

A singular soteriological theme common to both parts is that of overcoming a person's inherent carnal nature. In the early part, the father pleads with his son to "cast out the animal nature which is within you and do not allow based thought to enter you."¹⁸⁶ In the late part, the second author elaborates upon this analogy with the following caution:

LATE: Do not become the nest of foxes and snakes, nor a hole of serpents and asps, nor a dwelling place of lions, or a place of refuge of vipers.¹⁸⁷

Nevertheless, despite all of the commonality between the two portions of *Silvanus*, there is one interesting difference between the two parts that relates to divine foreknowledge and free will. During the first and second centuries, the prevailing Christian attitudes towards salvation, divine foreknowledge, and free will were hopefully optimistic.

Yet the generally prevailing conviction among the early fathers is that man is equipped with a free will, and that no sin can effectively keep him deciding for the good and from avoiding the bad.¹⁸⁸

The early Church Fathers did not question the existence or theological limitations of true free will. Men were free to choose right or wrong. The gift of the atonement is freely offered to all but the individual choice to

185. *Silvanus*, 104, 24–105, 10.

186. *Silvanus*, 87, 27–31.

187. *Silvanus*, 105, 27–32.

188. Lohse, *A Short History*, 104. Notably both parts of *Silvanus* "blame," at least partially, the deceptiveness of the "Adversary" for sinful behavior.

accept this gift is based upon the singular purview of the recipient. The early part of *Silvanus* thus explains:

EARLY: My son, listen to my teaching which is good and useful and end the sleep which weighs heavily upon you. Depart from the forgetfulness which fills you with darkness, since if you were unable to do anything, I would not have said these things. But Christ came in order to give you this gift. Why do you pursue the darkness when the light is at your disposal?¹⁸⁹

The pertinent phrase here is “for if you were powerless to do anything, I would not have said these things to you.” Therefore, the pupil is empowered with the freedom to choose righteousness and, if he decides to “live in Christ,” he will receive “treasure in heaven.” Notably he will not be compelled to choose Christ and, if he turns his back to Christ, will suffer the consequences of this choice.

By the fourth and fifth centuries, however, Christian theologians were wrestling with whether or not God’s divine foreknowledge implies limitations upon free will. What does it mean to have free will if God already knows what will happen (predetermination)? While it would not be until the late fourth century that St. Augustine formulated answers to these questions by arguing for the “election of God,”¹⁹⁰ the latter *Silvanus* author appears to be contemplating some these same issues as his contemporaries were, thus ultimately helping to lay the groundwork for Augustine.

LATE: The soul that is a member of God’s household is one that is kept pure, and the soul that has put on Christ is one that is pure, and it is impossible for it to sin. Where Christ is, sin is idle.¹⁹¹

189. *Silvanus*, 88, 25–34.

190. Lohse describes the situation: “Salvation from this sinful state is possible only through grace, a grace which, however, is grounded wholly in the election of God. This gracious election precedes every merit on the part of man. In saying this Augustine did not deny the freedom of will altogether. To be sure, man’s will cannot of itself find salvation. Divine election is decisive. Still, the will must will, for without this volitional act the offer of grace would be futile. Even in this tract, however, Augustine already says ‘Clearly it is vain for us to will unless God have mercy. But I do not know how it could be said it is vain for God to have mercy unless we willingly consent.’” Lohse, *A Short History*, 112.

191. *Silvanus*, 109, 4–11.

This passage states that it is impossible for any true follower of Christ to sin. While this is a romantic ideal, it has tremendous ramifications upon the doctrine of man's agency and free will along with Calvin's idea of self-deception. Recall that the early author had told his son that he has the power to choose Christ. The late author alternatively states "it is not you who will throw him (meaning Christ) out, but he will throw you out." The implication when comparing these two passages is that one puts the onus on the individual ("if you were unable to do") while it is Christ controlling the process in the other ("he will throw you out"). This is a remarkable difference between the early part's exhortation that one is fully free to choose Christ and the second part's declaration that Christ's power is the prime salvific determinant and that man's desire is, ultimately, subordinate to God's.

Another interesting passage reads:

LATE: But you, on the other hand, with difficulty give your basic choice to him with a hint that he may take you up with joy. Now the basic choice, which is humility of heart, is the gift of Christ.¹⁹²

Here the late author is talking about the faculty of free choice. Zandee notes "in order to strip it (choice) of every trace of merit, it is said that free choice is identical with humility, and that this human endowment ultimately is a gift of Christ's grace."¹⁹³ Thus, at least in the hypothetical presented by the second author, it is practically impossible to separate our free choice and the causality of Christ's gift.

Near the end of *Silvanus*, the late author makes this fascinating statement to his son:

LATE: But this divine is not pleased with anything evil. For it is this which teaches all men what is good. This is what God has given to the human race so that for this reason every man might be chosen before all the angels and the archangels. For God does not need to put any man to the test. He knows all things before they happen, and he knows hidden things of the heart. They are all revealed and found wanting in his presence.¹⁹⁴

192. *Silvanus*, 104, 15–19. Translation by Zandee.

193. Zandee, "Silvanus" 546.

194. *Silvanus*, 115, 27–116, 5.

This passage illustrates the paradoxical contradictions underlying the doctrines of agency and God's omniscience. The claim that "God does not need to test man because He already knows what each individual outcome will be" theoretically impinges upon the concept of free will espoused by the early author. While it is unlikely that the late author wholly contemplated the ramifications of these statements, I am assuming these ideas are just reflective of his time period; a milieu of theological mulling, which, just a few years later, would produce Augustine's famous treatise on free will and ultimately Calvin's doctrine of irresistible grace.

Conclusions

By now I am hopeful that I have effectively demonstrated that because the two portions of *Silvanus* stem from two different time periods, the teachings of the early and late authors differ substantively on topics such as the nature of God, Christology, the divine feminine, the Godhead, soteriology, and the creation. By way of conclusion, I formally summarize the differences and commonalities between the two portions of *Silvanus* and Latter-day Saint and Calvinist beliefs and then I make some final general remarks regarding *Silvanus* and Latter-day Saint scholarship.

Silvanus, the Restored Church, and Calvinism

A few words of caution are in order here as we examine teachings from the Restored Church and Calvinism side by side with those of the early and late *Silvanus* sources. First, it is important to realize that most biblical faiths are generally able to accommodate canonical teachings that seem, *a priori*, inconsistent with their core teachings. Few Latter-day Saints are troubled by the triune formulation found in the so-called Johannine Comma (1 John 5:7–8), and Protestants have long learned to treat passages conveying *imago dei* metaphorically (e.g., Genesis 1:26). But Latter-day Saints are more doctrinally comfortable when all three members of the Godhead are present at Jesus' baptism (Matthew 3:16–17) and Calvinists are more comfortable with John's declaration that "God is a spirit" (John 4:24). It is important to emphasize that this analysis will focus more on comfort and not how a particular faith is able to doctrinally accommodate difficult passages.

Second, Latter-day Saint scholars S. Kent Brown, Stephen E. Robinson, and C. Wilfred Griggs have each independently and, in my mind, appropriately urged restraint when comparing Latter-day Saint doctrine with the writings from both Qumran and Nag Hammadi.

In a statement I consider representative of the opinions of these three scholars, Robinson preaches caution:

But is it not dishonest to represent an apocryphal book as being firm evidence for the truth when it agrees with us, and yet quietly look the other way when it does not? The truth is that it's just as easy to support Catholicism or Lutheranism or Calvinism by proof-texting the apocrypha as it is to prove our views. It's all a matter of which passage one decides to use. ... Indeed, the apocrypha do have great value, but not because they teach Mormonism; for by and large they do not.¹⁹⁵

Germaine to conducting a fair comparative evaluation is the full examination of the complete text, warts and all, not just a selection of handpicked passages supportive of the pundit's hypothesis.¹⁹⁶ While *Silvanus* is not considered a Gnostic text, our comparative analysis should consider the writings of the two *Silvanus* authors in their entirety. As I have analyzed *Silvanus*, I have not discovered any significant "warts" that would alter my fundamental conclusion: *Latter-day Saints beliefs are much closer aligned with the early Silvanus author and Calvinist beliefs best align with the later author.*

It is also important to realize that the point of this comparison is not to prove or disprove the tenets of any particular faith. Rather the point is to establish which historical milieu alternative faiths best align with. The two authors of *Silvanus* were neither Latter-day Saint nor Calvinist. But I believe they are useful representations of their respective Alexandrian time periods and can, therefore, help illuminate how Jewish and Christian doctrine changed over time.

Figure 4 portrays my assessment of the comparability between Latter-day Saint and Calvinist beliefs with the early and late *Silvanus* authors. According to this assessment, Restored Church beliefs are

195. Stephen E. Robinson, "Lying for God: The Uses of the Apocrypha in Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-Day Saints," *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-Day Saints*, ed. C. Wilfred Griggs (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 148.

196. An example of a troublesome Nag Hammadi text comes from "The Secret Book of John." "The first ruler defiled Eve and produced in her two sons, a first and a second: Elohim and Yahweh. Elohim has the face of a bear, Yahweh has the face of a cat. One is just, the other is unjust. He placed Yahweh over fire and wind, he placed Elohim over water and earth." "The Secret Book of John," in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 127. Obviously Latter-Days Saints do not believe that Elohim and Yahweh are offspring of a defiled Eve.

generally compatible with nearly all of the early *Silvanus* author’s doctrinal positions; there is only one single notable exception, the early author’s suggestion that the Holy Spirit is feminine.¹⁹⁷

Where the Doctrine is Taught in <i>Silvanus</i>				
		Early Only	Both	Late Only
Doctrinal Agreement and Comfort	Latter-day Saint Only	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Soul comes from God's substance• Soul pre-exists• Divine feminine• <i>Creatio ex materia</i>• Three separate and distinct Godhead members• God is personal• God is passable• God is corporeal• Free will is not predetermined	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Deification• Subordination within Godhead• Salvific importance of works	
	Both		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Christ is knowable• Christ roles and titles• Man's nature is animalistic	
	Calvinist Only			<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Only Christ pre-exists• Christ is the divine feminine (Wisdom)• <i>Creatio ex nihilo</i>• Blurred subordination within Godhead• God is unknowable• God is impassable• God is incorporeal• Irresistible grace
	Neither	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Holy Spirit is feminine		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Christ is unknowable

Figure 4. Latter-day Saint and Calvinistic comfort with *Silvanus* by early and late portions.

On the other hand, Calvinist beliefs are generally most compatible with the doctrinal positions of the late author. The only substantial exceptions are the teachings on the Son’s subordination to the Father, our inability to fully know Christ, and the deification of Man.¹⁹⁸

197. The early *Silvanus* author twice links the third member of the Godhead, the Spirit, with feminine Wisdom (*Sophia*). This is consistent with Jewish tradition and is represented in Wisdom literature. Zandee notes “It is a Jewish and Jewish Christian tradition that God has a consort. Wisdom takes the place of the Logos as mediator of creation. There is a Jewish tradition of the Holy Ghost as mother. The best known example is from the Jewish Christian *Gospel of the Hebrews*, quoted by Origen, where ‘the Saviour himself says, ‘My Mother the Holy Spirit took me ... and brought me to ... the Tabor.’” In the *Gospel of the Hebrews* the Holy Ghost speaks like personified Wisdom in Jewish Wisdom literature, so that the Holy Ghost as mother is not far removed from Wisdom as mother.” Jan Zandee, “Silvanus and Jewish Christianity,” *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions*, ed. R. Van Den Broek and M. J. Vermaseren (Leiden, NDL: Brill, 1981), 517–18. In contrast, Latter-day Saint doctrine proclaims the third member of the Godhead to be masculine.

198. I acknowledge the difficulty of generalizing orthodox Christian beliefs. The comparison I have created is, I believe, reasonably aligned to the Protestant Calvinist position. Other groups of believers such as Evangelical practitioners of open-

Therefore, within the confines of this one document from Nag Hammadi Codex VII, *The Teachings of Silvanus*, we see dramatic evidence of the alteration of Christian belief from a structure that echoes many major Latter-day Saint doctrines to a structure that is almost creedal and much more representative of the Western Christian tradition. There is a wealth of supporting evidence of this doctrinal change to be found in early Christian writings and history, yet the uniqueness of *Silvanus* is its juxtaposition of these contrasting views in a single text; a veritable microcosm portraying the development of early Christian thought.

Towards a Latter-day Saint “Discovery” — Warts and All

It seems apparent that the late author was, in a sense, attempting to “answer” the claims of the earlier author. This is most evident with regards to the figure of Wisdom; a topic in which the late author not only responds to the early text but also recasts a poem found in another Jewish Wisdom text, the *Wisdom of Solomon*, to purposely redefine the role of Wisdom and to cast the imagery of the divine feminine upon Christ. But he also responds to nearly every other thematic element in the early text: the nature of God, Christ, Wisdom, creation, salvation, deification, and the nature of man. Between the first and the fourth century, Christian doctrine undoubtedly changed and the two portions of this one document highlight many of the relevant theological issues and disputes.

Latter-day Saint scholars have yet to “discover” *Silvanus*. The only Latter-day Saint mention of *Silvanus* I could find was by C. Wilfred Griggs who simply refers to its non-Gnostic status.¹⁹⁹ This is somewhat understandable since biblical scholars have only reached a tenuous “consensus” regarding the dual authorship of the text and *Silvanus* is underappreciated within the body of Nag Hammadi scholarship. My analysis hopefully demonstrates that the earliest portions of the *Silvanus* text should be of great interest to church members who are interested in

theism, for example, would likely disagree with the late *Silvanus* author’s positions on topics such as divine embodiment, subordination, and divine foreknowledge. Roman Catholic practitioners would likely embrace the importance of works and the deification of Man.

199. “A very few texts, such as the fragment of Plato’s *Republic* and the *Teachings of Silvanus* are arguably non-gnostic and therefore non-apocryphal in the esoteric meaning of the term.” C. Wilfred Griggs, “Origin and Formation of the Corpus of Apocryphal Literature,” in *Apocryphal Writing and the Latter-Day Saints*, 48. Gaye Strathearn also mentions *Silvanus* in a footnote.

understanding early Jewish Christianity. I look forward to further work by Latter-day Saint scholars as they discover this hidden gem.

As I conclude my analysis on *Silvanus*, the words of Roman Catholic scholar Stephen H. Webb come to mind:

I think of both Mormonism and Calvinism as branches on the Christian tree. Calvinists will protest that surely they are closer to the trunk, but Mormonism actually goes deeper in trying to restore neglected practices and overlooked beliefs from ancient Christianity. . . . Both branches, as far as I can see, bear good fruit, and both return ample nourishment to the tree's roots, but I must admit that the Mormon branch looks to me like it begins closer to the center of the tree and that it is reaching farther toward the light. I would go so far as to say this: No other branch of the Christian tree is so entangled in complex and fascinating ways with the earliest and most neglected doctrines of the church, and no other branch extends so optimistically and brazenly upward as it stretches toward a horizon bound only by the cosmic significance of Christ. To drop the tree image, if I had to choose between Smith and Calvin, I would unhesitatingly choose Smith. . . . Mormonism is just a bigger set of ideas than Calvinism.²⁰⁰

Using *Silvanus* as my guidepost, I share Webb's fascination at just how effectively Joseph Smith was able to locate the earliest roots of the Christian movement.

[Author's Note: *I would like to thank Brett McDonald whose family home evening lesson motivated me to read the Nag Hammadi texts and Davin and Jessica Fish and Brayden Clark for tracking down some particularly hard to find papers.*]

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200. Stephen H. Webb, *Mormon Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 181–82.

UNAVAILABLE GENETIC EVIDENCE, MULTIPLE SIMULTANEOUS PROMISED LANDS, AND LAMANITES BY LOCATION? POSSIBLE RAMIFICATIONS OF THE BOOK OF MORMON LIMITED GEOGRAPHY THEORY

Brian C. Hales

Abstract: *This paper is composed of three parts connected consecutively because their conclusions build upon each other. The first part investigates the transportation methods used in the Book of Mormon, concluding that horse and river travel contributed little and that foot travel dominated all journeying. The second part uses that conclusion to estimate the overall dimensions of the Promised Land by examining Alma the Elder's journey from Nephi to Zarahemla. This exercise reaffirms the 200-by-500-mile size promoted by John L. Sorenson decades ago. The third part looks at four ramifications of this 100,000 square-mile Promised Land footprint when stamped upon a map of the Western Hemisphere. (1) It allows for more than one Promised Land (occupied by other God-led immigrants) to exist simultaneously in the Americas. (2) It predicts that no matter where the Book of Mormon Promised Land was originally located, most Native Americans today would have few or no direct ties to the Jaredites-Lehites-Mulekites. (3) It demonstrates that research efforts to identify evidence of the Book of Mormon peoples could be exploring locations thousands of miles away from their original settlements. And (4) If any of the post-400 CE localized population losses in the Americas due to disease, war, or unknown causes involved the original Promised Land location, then the primary locus of organic evidence of the existence of the Jaredite-Lehite-Mulekite populations might have been largely destroyed.*

For almost 200 years, scholars have discussed three important geographical questions regarding the Book of Mormon's Promised

Land. The first question, “*Where is the original location?*” is still sometimes hotly debated.¹ This article will not address this issue directly. The second, “*Were indigenous populations present or absent on the arrival of the Jaredites, Lehites, and Mulekites (empty continent versus inhabited continent theories)?*” has been largely resolved for most researchers, who acknowledge multiple Book of Mormon textual references that demonstrate the existence of preexisting populations.² Similarly, the third question, “*What does the Book of Mormon portray as the geographic size of the Promised Land (hemispheric versus limited geography theories)?*” has been settled in favor of a limited geography as observers discard the idea that the Book of Mormon peoples inhabited the entire Western Hemisphere.

A fourth question, perhaps one that will remain controversial, asks *What does the narrative say about the general dimensions of the limited geography?* The first two parts of this paper focus on this question. Part I examines Book of Mormon transportation methods by addressing references to horses in the text, as well as theories that river travel may have predominated. After concluding that foot travel prevailed, Part II analyzes transit speeds for Alma the Elder’s journey from Nephi to Zarahemla to estimate that distance and then approximate the overall dimensions of the Promised Land. These results reaffirm John L. Sorenson’s geographic size of about 200 by 500 miles.³ Part III investigates several of the ramifications of a 100,000-square-mile Promised Land when that footprint is stamped on a map of North and South America.

1. See Andrew H. Hedges, “Book of Mormon Geographies,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2021): 193–202.

2. See 2 Nephi 5:5; Jacob 2:23–24; Jarom 1:6, Alma 2:24, 28; 43:51; 49:6; 51:11; Helaman 1:19, 6:6, 7:1–2. See also Matthew Roper, “Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations,” *FARMS Review* 16, no. 2 (2004): 225–75; Matthew Roper, “Nephi’s Neighbors: Book of Mormon Peoples and Pre-Columbian Populations,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011* 15, no. 2 (June 2003): 91–128; John L. Sorenson, “When Lehi’s Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (1992): 1–34; Ugo A. Perego and Jayne E. Ekins, “Is Decrypting the Genetic Legacy of America’s Indigenous Populations Key to the Historicity of the Book of Mormon?” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 12 (2014): 237–79.

3. John L. Sorenson, *Mormon’s Map* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 78.

Part I: Book of Mormon Transportation

The Book of Mormon contains hundreds of references to locations and journeys between those locations. It often states or implies relative travel times of a few days to a few weeks. No distances in the Promised Land require months or years to traverse.⁴ Estimating those distances demands an understanding of the transportation methods that were used. While modern overland transportation did not exist, foot traffic, water navigation, animal-drawn vehicles, and riding on mammals (like horses) were all possibilities.

Horses in the Book of Mormon

Undoubtedly, the most famous animal mentioned in the Book of Mormon is the horse, but not due to its indispensable contributions to societies in the unfolding saga. Instead, critics usually list it as their leading supposed anachronism and as primary evidence against the Book of Mormon's historicity.⁵ For example, in his conclusion of *An Imperfect Book: What the Book of Mormon Tells Us about Itself*, Earl Wunderli wrote in 2013: "Throughout my study of the Book of Mormon, I have been surprised by the anachronisms [that] others before me have identified, including horses."⁶ Such critiques consistently reflect presentism by assuming that horses in the Book of Mormon were *Equus caballus*, the common horse found throughout the world today.

Horse and Non-Horse Nations

Historical records predictably show that the presence or absence of *Equus caballus* affects the expansion of growing nations. "In the history of humankind there has never been an animal that has made a greater impact on societies than the horse," explains horse historian Sandra Olsen.⁷ "Other animals were hunted much more or domesticated

4. Mosiah 7:4 speaks of a multi-week wandering: "And now, they knew not the course they should travel in the wilderness to go up to the land of Lehi-Nephi; therefore they wandered many days in the wilderness, even forty days did they wander." But no direct journeys are described as requiring weeks or months.

5. See, for example, David Persuitte, *Joseph Smith and the Origins of The Book of Mormon*, 2nd ed. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000), 87; and Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 67.

6. Earl M. Wunderli, *An Imperfect Book: What the Book of Mormon Tells Us about Itself* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2013), 322.

7. Sandra L. Olsen, ed., *Horses through Time* (Boulder, CO: Roberts Rhinehart Publishers, 1995), 3.

earlier, but the horse changed the world in innumerable ways with its tremendous swiftness. While asses, camels, elephants, yaks, and other animals were ridden by people, the horse provided the first source of ‘rapid transit.’”⁸ Ann Norton Greene explains other important reasons:

Horses are one of only fourteen large (over 100 pounds) domesticated animals in the world, the others being camels, llamas/alpacas, reindeer, yak, asses (donkeys), pigs, sheep, goats, and several kinds of cattle (including water buffalo). Only three of these — horses, donkeys, and cattle — are used worldwide. All of them share the same set of characteristics. All of them are large enough to be useful for work or food, but not too large to control. None are carnivores that might view humans as lunch. All are herd animals with stable, sociable dispositions, accustomed to living in hierarchical social groups and fitting comfortably into the hierarchy of human society. They breed easily in captivity and have gestation periods of less than a year. They have nicely balanced fight-flight instincts, neither too aggressive nor confrontational, nor flighty and inclined to panic and stampede.⁹

In 2009, Pita Kelekna published *The Horse in Human History*, where she spends most of her final chapter contrasting societies that evolved with and without *Equus caballus*, outlining specific differences in areas of agriculture, metallurgy, trade, dissemination of ideas and inventions, warfare, religion, language distribution, and colonial expansion:¹⁰ She observes: “It is almost as if there existed on the planet two experiments in human civilization — one horsed, the other horseless.”¹¹ Her observations are summarized in Table 1.

8. Olsen, *Horses through Time*, 3.

9. Ann Norton Greene, *Horses at Work: Harnessing Power in Industrial America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 13.

10. Pita Kelekna, *The Horse in Human History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1–2, 12, 39, 51, 162, 334–36, 354–60, and 380–96.

11. *Ibid.*, 380.

Table 1. Comparison of characteristics of societies that evolve with and without *Equus caballus*.

	Horse Nations	Non-Horse Nations
Agriculture	Horses were used for harrowing, plowing, planting, harvesting, and hauling. Equine could easily transport the heavy plow to fields in outlying areas not previously cultivated due to distances. The main asset was versatility.	Without domesticated work animals, sustaining large-scale agricultural projects across flatlands remained difficult. Most prairie lands remained agriculturally undeveloped and largely uninhabited. Mountain terraces with irrigation projects were typical.
Metallurgy	Horsepower allowed more distant mineral deposits to be surveyed and prospected. Equine increased the ease of moving metals and disseminating new metalworking techniques. Heavy coins could be easily transported.	Metallurgy was invented independently in centers isolated by just a few hundred miles. Little or no industrial communication and interstimulation existed between centers. All minerals were moved by human transport.
Trade	Horse-drawn vehicles were standard. <i>Equus</i> is unparalleled in the animal kingdom over long distances for speed, strength, and stamina. Rulers embarked on ambitious programs of road construction over thousands of kilometers to promote trade and establish dominance across many regions.	Commodities were traded in small loads on foot by human porters who averaged only 23 kg [51 lbs] per day over a distance of 21–28 km [13–17 miles]. Without rapid, high-volume overland trade capacity, there was no great stimulus for diverse maritime transportation.
Dissemination of ideas and inventions	Horse-drawn and horse-mounted messengers facilitated the conveyance of technologies like writing, mathematics, science, art, and calendaring. A society could share and exploit discoveries in distant regions more quickly through equine-enabled communications.	Diffusion of ideas and inventions, when it did occur, occurred less effectively, requiring more time. Commercial, religious, and entertainment centers were regionally delimited.
Warfare	Light-weight horse-drawn chariots designed for speed accompanied by horse-born riders allowed equestrian armies to advance up to 100 km [62 miles] a day. Armed equestrians in cavalry units quickly overwhelmed infantry. An experienced horse-mounted archer could shoot arrows from either side of a horse at full gallop. ¹² Riders could scout greater distances to learn of opposing forces and to identify suitable camping areas for large armies.	Foot armies could transport supplies for about an eight-day round trip. While arrows, spears, and stones lengthened a warrior's effectiveness, battle efforts depended on human strength to transport and engage in combat.

12. Ann Hyland, *The Medieval Warhorse: From Byzantium to the Crusades* (Thrupp, UK: Sutton Publishing, 1994), 21.

	Horse Nations	Non-Horse Nations
Religion	The world’s most populous religions, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, emerged between 2000 BCE and 1000 CE when equestrian empires were forged. These horse-spread religions today are represented on every continent in temples, churches, and mosques.	Great ceremonial temples were centers of sacred pilgrimage and were regionally delimited. Religious diffusion remained restricted by topographical distances.
Language Distribution	Horses enabled the evolution of large linguistic geographic blocs. With the help of horse transportation, Spanish, Portuguese, and English became the dominant language across the Americas after Europeans with their horses arrived in 1500 CE.	Although geographic isolation did not always involve great distances, adjacent regional languages could evolve into highly contrasting vernaculars, despite a common origin.
Colonial Expansion	Horses consistently represent ancient symbols of wealth, physical power, and social mastery, a marker of upward mobility and social status. ¹³ Potent symbols of military might, cavalry, and artillery horses were vital in all programs of imperial expansion, including those with advanced maritime capabilities. The use of horses at least doubled the geographic range of patrols, at least quadrupling the area of potential dominance. ¹⁴	Travel speeds for foot soldiers, guards, and messengers diminished the ability of a sovereign to exercise direct control over an extensive territory. Expanding that dominion demanded increased decentralization of the political structure with the potential for destabilizing remote rebellions.

The Book of Mormon Describes Non-Horse Nations

Kelekna’s findings can be applied to Book of Mormon civilizations to discern whether the Jaredites, Nephites, or Mulekites evolved with or without the services of *Equus caballus*. That is, her research can classify Book of Mormon peoples as horse nations or non-horse nations based on historical descriptions of the same topics she has identified.

Agriculture: More than sixty passages refer to agriculture in the Book of Mormon, but none mention the horse contributing.¹⁵ The Jaredites may have used a beast to pull a plow-like tool: “And they did make all manner of tools to till the earth, both to plow and to sow, to reap and to hoe, and also to thrash. And they did make all manner of tools with which they did work their beasts” (Ether 10:25–26). To “till” the “land” or “ground” is also repeatedly referenced, but none of the verses specifically describe a horse pulling a plow.

13. Greene, *Horses at Work*, 29.
14. Jens Lorenz Franzen, *The Rise of Horses: 55 Million Years of Evolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 24.
15. Denis L. Largey, ed., *The Book of Mormon Reference Companion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 31.

Transportation: Transportation in the Book of Mormon never explicitly involves horses. Author Orson Scott Card observes: “In the Book of Mormon, nobody rides anywhere. ... People in Joseph Smith’s day rode everywhere they could — on either a horse or a wagon.”¹⁶ Likewise, for moving materials or products, “There is no question that the basic means for transporting goods in Mesoamerica has always been the human back,” notes John L. Sorenson. “No phrasing anywhere in the record indicates land transport other than on the backs of humans.”¹⁷ This appears to apply to transportation throughout North America during the Book of Mormon period. While llamas transported goods in areas of South America for centuries, they were too small to routinely transport adults.

Chariots: The Book of Mormon contains six references that associate horses with “chariots,” but one of them is mentioned only as part of a quoted Bible passage (2 Nephi 12:7). The Lamanite King Lamoni has horses and chariots and is later described as “journeying,” but whether it was on foot, by horse, or by chariot is not specified (Alma 20:8). Chariots with wheels are not described in the Book of Mormon. Wheeled effigies have been identified in the Americas, but as John L. Sorenson explains: “Scholars have long operated on the assumption that the wheel was unknown in ancient American technology. The Book of Mormon implicitly agrees.”¹⁸ So assuming Lamoni’s “chariots” had wheels may not be justified. One definition for *chariot* in the Oxford Dictionary specifies “a stately vehicle for the conveyance of people,” and “vehicle” is defined as a “receptacle in which anything is placed in order to be moved.”¹⁹ Wheels would assist in moving but are not implicit in the definitions.

Traveling Distances: The distances described in the Book of Mormon are always defined according to foot-travel speeds.²⁰ This account and

16. Orson Scott Card, *A Storyteller in Zion: Essays and Speeches* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1993), 37.

17. John L. Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 350.

18. *Ibid.*, 350. After noting the presence of “wheeled toys,” Sorenson concludes: “The apparent uniqueness of that historic invention establishes with high probability that diffusion of the concept to Mesoamerica must account for the American wheeled toys also” (351).

19. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary: Complete Text Reproduced Micrographically*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) 1:383, 2:3599.

20. Sorenson, *Mormon’s Map*, 54–78.

all other accounts describing journeying in the Book of Mormon fail to mention horses, wagons, carriages, or coaches, which would have vastly improved travel speeds and efficiency.²¹

Slow Communications: The slowness of communications in the Promised Land is consistent with foot travel (rather than the more rapid transmission of information via horse travel). This is demonstrated as Alma addresses “the awful dilemma that our brethren were in at Zarahemla” (Alma 7:3). He immediately declares repentance and puts the church in order there. Then, “When Alma had made these regulations he departed from them, yea, from the church which was in the city of Zarahemla, and went over upon the east of the river Sidon, into the valley of Gideon, there having been a city built, which was called the city of Gideon” (Alma 6:7). The journey does not seem far. The river Sidon was close to Zarahemla and the valley on the other side of the river. Whether it is ten miles, twenty, or even thirty, it seems a short distance. Alma discovers that the inhabitants of Gideon were “not in a state of so much unbelief as were your brethren” (Alma 7:6). Consequently, he reports: “I shall also have joy over you” (Alma 7:5). Although separated by a relatively short geographic distance, the perversions of the Zarahemla residents had apparently not traveled to the city of Gideon.

Warfare: The Book of Mormon references eighty-five instances of armed conflict.²² Many of the accounts contain detailed descriptions of operations, strategy, and military tactics. William J. Hamblin has identified many of the intricacies of wars discussed (in no particular order):

- prebattle war councils
- guerrilla warfare techniques
- communal bases of military loyalty
- patterns of flight after the battle
- weapons technology and typology
- divination before battle
- extensive scouting and spying
- the ideology of holy war
- seasonal patterns in warfare
- treatment of robbers as brigands

21. See Mosiah 8:7–9; 18:1–7, 31–34; 21:25–27; 23:1–3, 25–26; 24:18–25; Alma 2, 5–15, 43:1–62:42 and Mormon 2–6.

22. William J. Hamblin, “Book of Mormon, History of Warfare” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1992), 1:164.

- military implications of geography and climate
- recruitment based on tribes and communities
- limited use of animal resources
- importance of plunder in warfare
- the use of only pre-gunpowder weapons
- ritual capture of kings
- fortifications
- ritual destruction of cities
- social and economic impact of warfare
- human sacrifice
- agricultural economic base
- treatment of prisoners
- laws of war
- disposal of the dead
- complex prebattle maneuvering
- centrality of war to the elite culture
- use of banners for mobilization and organization
- camp purity to gain divine assistance
- proper tactical role of missile and melee combat
- the military implications of changing demographic patterns
- the problems of supplying soldiers in times of war
- the importance of oaths of loyalty and surrender
- religious ritual behavior before, during, and after battle
- the fundamental interrelationship between war and religion²³

Despite these types of described war details in the numerous battles, “no animal is ever mentioned as being used for military purposes ... animals did not play a significant role in Book of Mormon warfare, either in battle or for transportation of war supplies.”²⁴

Horsemeat: Another possible benefit of horses involves horsemeat. “Horses almost certainly were first domesticated for use as food animals, like cattle or pigs,” writes Sandra Olsen.²⁵ Historically, many civilizations have included horsemeat in their diets, but not in recent millennia.

In temperate Eurasia ... horsemeat was highly regarded and these tastes can be traced back a very long way. During the

23. William J. Hamblin, “The Importance of Warfare in Book of Mormon Studies,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990).

24. *Ibid.*, 486–87.

25. Olsen, *Horses through Time*, 59.

last great Ice Age horsemeat was a staple in the diet of *Homo sapiens*; it has now become clear how widespread and how longlasting was this dependence on horsemeat.²⁶

Four verses in the Book of Mormon place horses with animals that might be used for food (1 Nephi 18:25, Enos 1:21, 3 Nephi 4:4; 6:1).

The preceding discussions identify many characteristics of nations possessing *Equus caballus* when compared to those that have progressed without it. From these observations, it appears that the horses mentioned in the Book of Mormon behaved and were treated different from *Equus caballus*. (For a complete listing of mentions of horses in the Book of Mormon, see Table 5, in the Appendix.) Kelekna’s research supports that the civilizations of the Jaredites, Nephites, and Mulekites were non-horse nations, despite a few references to horses within their narratives (see Table 2).

Table 2. Comparing Kelekna’s horse and non-horse nations to the Book of Mormon civilizations and Joseph Smith environment.

	Kelekna’s Horse Nations	Kelekna’s Non-Horse Nations	Book of Mormon Civilizations	Joseph Smith’s Environment
“Horses” present	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Swift transportation	Yes	No	No	Yes
Extra-Regional Distances	Yes	No	No	Yes
Military cavalry	Yes	No	No	Yes
Military chariots	Yes	No	No	No
Pulling “chariots” or wagons	Yes	No	Possibly	Yes
Pulling a plow	Yes	No	No	Yes
Used for food	Sometimes	No	Possibly	No

Other evidence could be supportive. For example, Mesoamerica incorporated all sorts of animals into their art and iconography — jaguar, turtle, and snake — but the horse is not usually included. “Figures in art occasionally picture humans riding on animals, usually deer.”²⁷ It is also true that *Equus* fossil remains have been found that may date to Book of Mormon times.²⁸ However, current paleontological evidence does not

26. Robert Drews, *Early Riders: The Beginnings of Mounted Warfare in Asia and Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 8.

27. Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex*, 315.

28. Wade Miller et al., “Post-Pleistocene Horses (*Equus*) from México,” *Texas Journal of Science* 74, no. 1 (January 2022), https://doi.org/10.32011/txjsci_74_1_Article5. See also “When Lehi’s Party Arrived in the Land, Did They

support the wide use of *Equus caballus* in the Americas before the arrival of the Europeans circa 1600 CE.

What could explain the Book of Mormon references to horses that, apparently, did not behave like *Equus caballus*? Several explanations are possible.²⁹ Perhaps those horses represent an inexact translation of a different animal with some horse characteristics. Ironically, the much-maligned tapir (Figure 1), which has been suggested as a possible Book of Mormon “horse,” is taxonomically related to the *Equus caballus*, both being in the Perissodactyla order.³⁰ Historically the tapir has been domesticated but apparently not tamed, raising questions about whether it could be the Book of Mormon horse.³¹



Figure 1. Tapirs foraging.

A second possibility is that *Equus caballus* was present but proliferated poorly and disappeared sometime after Christ’s visit.³² A third explanation is that wild horses existed but were not widely domesticized to perform duties universally applied to horses in other civilizations (like transportation and warfare). This seems less likely,

Find Horses There?” KnoWhys, Book of Mormon Central, October 17, 2022, <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/when-lehis-party-arrived-in-the-land-did-they-find-horses-there>.

29. See Brant Gardner, *The Book of Mormon as History* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015), 289–97.

30. Franzen, *The Rise of Horses*, 145.

31. Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex*, 315–16.

32. Wade E. Miller and Matthew Roper, “Animals in the Book of Mormon: Challenges and Perspectives,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (2017): 160.

because, throughout history, societies consistently exploited their value in transportation and warfare when they were available. In summary, although the horse is mentioned in the Book of Mormon, multiple observations support that it was not *Equus caballus*, not an anachronism, did not contribute in any meaningful way to the transportation needs of the Promised Land's populations, and most importantly, would not have facilitated the expansion of Book of Mormon territories as it had affected civilizations in the Old World.

A River Travel Theory

A relatively new theory promotes river travel as the predominant transportation method used by Book of Mormon peoples. It also assumes that watercraft on rivers could move people and supplies faster than on foot. Such assumptions portray river travel as providing the same advantages as horse travel, but without the need for *Equus caballus*. By facilitating rapid communication and interchanges between far-distant cities and lands, river travel ostensibly expanded the perimeter of the Promised Land well beyond the 100,000 square miles predicted by foot-travel-based estimates.

Jonathan Neville, a primary proponent of this theory, reports: "Ancient people always travel on rivers, and you can travel a lot farther on a river than you can through a jungle."³³ This theory posits that "the people in Nephi's group would have been familiar with boats, yachts, canoes, and barges."³⁴ As Neville explains, "people can travel faster by boat than by land; by boat, they can travel faster downstream than upstream."³⁵ According to this hypothesis, the Book of Mormon peoples preferentially chose faster river travel to foot travel throughout the Promised Land for hundreds of years. By actively using watercraft on rivers, the Nephites and Lamanites increased the geographic footprint of the Promised Land perhaps tenfold beyond the territorial boundaries projected by a non-horse civilization's foot traffic.³⁶

33. Jonathan Neville and Rick Bennett, "Jonathan Neville on the Heartland Theory," March 17, 2022, in *Gospel Tangents*, podcast, 1:09:47 and 1:11:24, <https://www.patreon.com/posts/listen-jonathan-63906369>.

34. Jonathan Neville, *Moroni's America: The North American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Digital Legend Press, 2015), 87.

35. *Ibid.*, 41.

36. Maps 2 and 3 in Rian Nelson and Jonathan Neville, *Moroni's America (Maps Edition): Maps and Explanations of the Book of Mormon in North America* (Digital Legend Press, 2018) portray the Promised Land as encompassing more than 1,000,000 square miles of eastern United States and Canada.

Challenges to the River Travel Theory

Undoubtedly the Book of Mormon populations employed some river travel. As John L. Sorenson explains, “Where a network of waterways allowed, fleets of canoes swarmed, carrying all kinds of goods as well as people. Most were simple dugouts that went only a short distance before the load was moved to another vessel.”³⁷ Yet, several observations support that watercraft did not significantly affect Book of Mormon travel.

An obvious challenge is that rivers do not always go in the direction desired. Joseph Smith lived in a heavily rivered environment, but when his family moved from Sharon, Vermont, to New York, they went by wagon and on foot.³⁸ When Joseph and his family traveled to Harmony, Pennsylvania, they went by buckboard. Their trips to find a printer in Rochester involved horseback and foot travel. Even with many rivers in the area, waterway excursions were less common because downstream currents did not arrive at the desired destination. Similarly, as the Saints crisscrossed the eastern United States from Western New York (and the hill Cumorah) to arrive in Nauvoo, Illinois, on the Mississippi River, some river travel supplemented the primary migration efforts, which were by horse, wagon, or on foot.

A second problem is the existence of fall lines, where an upland region meets a lower geological plain, creating elevation drops that produce waterfalls of varying heights. Even small drops could impede river travel in both directions. If blindly encountered while moving downstream, waterfalls could destroy watercraft and threaten the lives of travelers.³⁹ To circumvent such obstacles, small rivercraft and their supplies needed to be transported by land around the falls. Larger riverboats require the construction of locks.

The third challenge, possibly the most important of all, involves the unalterable directionality of river travel. Going downstream is usually less arduous so long as the river is navigable without obstructive sandbars, rocks, debris, waterfalls, and other obstacles. In contrast, continuous traveling upriver, depending upon the flow and breadth of the current, is almost always more difficult than simply walking along a parallel trail or roadway. The advent of the steamboat in the early

37. John L. Sorenson, *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 56; see also 16.

38. Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853), 67–70.

39. See Charles Grymes, “Geology of the Fall Line,” <http://www.virginiaplaces.org/regions/fallshape.html>.

nineteenth century permitted captains to navigate larger waterways easily in either direction, but before their implementation, upstream travel often required immense human or animal energy.

Drawings from pre-steam-engine publications illustrate the four primary methods for moving a boat upstream.⁴⁰ The most desirable involves setting sails and letting the wind move the boat forward into the current (see Figure 2). This requires a cooperative wind direction and a relatively straight river.

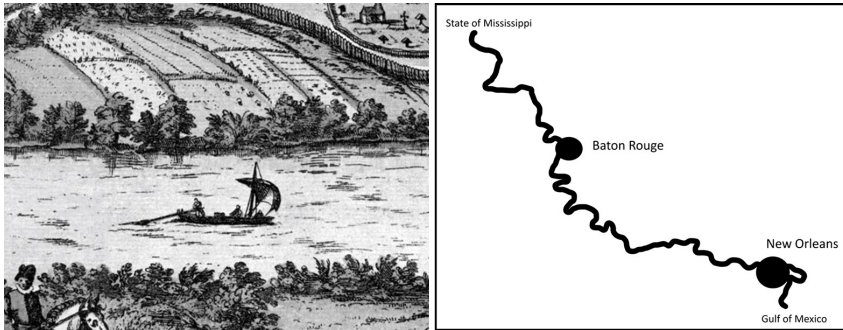


Figure 2. (Left) The ship raises its sail to take advantage of the breeze to propel the craft upstream. (Public domain.) (Right) The Mississippi River, as it flows through the state of Louisiana, shows its winding course. Wind direction could change rapidly, making sailing less efficient or even ineffective.

Amos Stoddard, in his 1812 book *Sketches, Historical and Descriptive, of Louisiana*, described some of the limits of sailing up the Mississippi:

Such is the rapidity of the current in the Mississippi, that no craft will be able to ascend it above Natchez [Mississippi] by means of sails only. Most of our boats make use of sails, when the wind is favorable; but this is merely occasional. Owing to the zig-zag course of the river ... the wind is seldom favorable.⁴¹

Natchez is about 200 miles north of the Gulf of Mexico, nearly 600 miles south of St. Louis, and roughly 750 miles south of Nauvoo. If the challenges of Mississippi River travel in 1812 reflect those of previous centuries, ships destined for the St. Louis area could have sailed only

40. See the atlas of world cities by Georg Braun and Franz Hogenberg, *Civitates Orbis Terrarum*, 6 vols. (Cologne: Peter von Brachel, 1572 to 1617), http://historicit-cities.huji.ac.il/mapmakers/braun_hogenberg.html.

41. Amos Stoddard, *Sketches, Historical and Descriptive, of Louisiana* (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1812), 373.

about a third of the distance. Beyond that point, stronger propulsion methods would have been required.

A second approach, called “poling,” involves moving upstream by planting a pole in the river bottom alongside the boat and pushing forward into the current, as illustrated in Figure 3. In an 1810 book, Christian Schultz details how boatmen use their strength and long poles to impel the boat forward:

It is not often, however, that a fair wind will serve for more than three or four miles together, as the irregular course of the river renders its aid very precarious; their chief dependence, therefore, is upon their pike poles. These are generally from eighteen to twenty-two feet in length, having a sharp pointed iron, with a socket weighing ten or twelve pounds affixed to the lower end; the upper has a large knob, called a button, mounted upon it, so that the poleman may press upon it with his whole weight without endangering his person. This manner of impelling the boat forward is extremely laborious, and none but those who have been for some time accustomed to it can manage these poles with any kind of advantage. Within the boat on each side is fixed a plank running fore and aft, with a number of cross elects nailed upon it, for the purpose of giving the polemen a sure footing in hard poling. The men, after setting their poles against a rock, bank or bottom of the river, declining their heads very low, place the upper end or button against the back part of their right or left shoulders (according to the side on which they may be poling), then, falling down on their hands and toes, creep the whole length of the gang-boards, and send the boat forward with considerable speed.⁴²

42. Christian Schultz, *Travels on an Inland Voyage Through the States of New-York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky and Tennessee, and Through the Territories Of Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi and New-Orleans; Performed in the Years 1807 and 1808; Including a Tour of Nearly Six Thousand Miles*, 2 vols., (New York: Isaac Riley, 1810), 1:5–6.

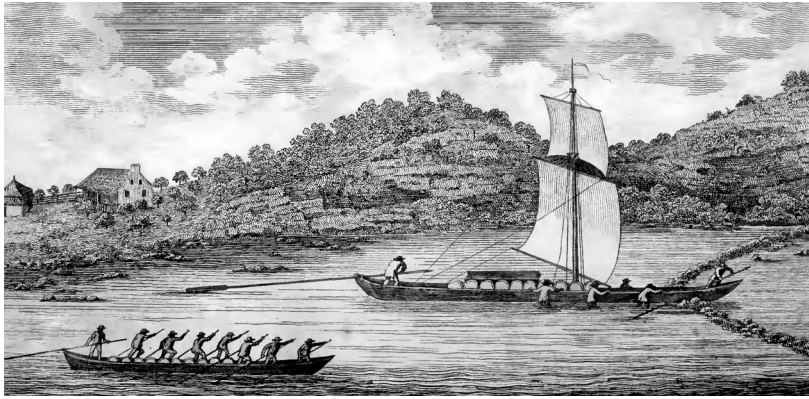


Figure 3. The boat to the left ascends the river with only poling efforts. The boat on the right uses sails, poling, and the strength of men in the water pushing.
(Public domain.)

The third method, shown in Figure 4, involves attaching a rope to the boat and pulling it forward by animals or men who walk in shallow water or along the shoreline. Sometimes, vegetative overgrowth or steep riverbank walls make this nearly impossible. Well-traveled waterways with sections of rapids could be traversed by hiring ox teams and their handlers along the shore to pull the ropes.

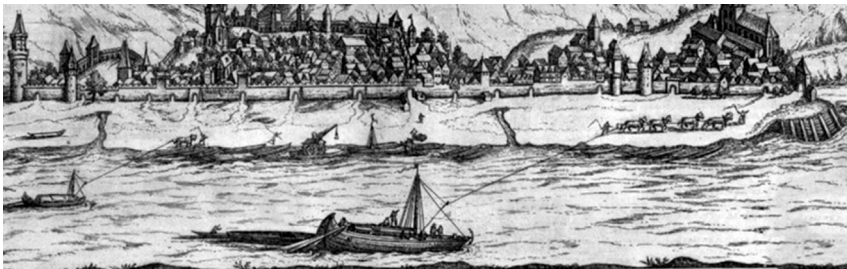


Figure 4. Both boats in the channel are being towed by animals on shore. (Public domain.)

A fourth technique employs oars and rowing to propel the boat upstream at a rate faster than the downstream current. For slower-moving rivers, this may not be difficult. But as Ben Bachman, author of *Upstream: A Voyage on the Connecticut River*, reports, “There are pitches of current that can easily defeat paddlers far stronger than I.”⁴³

A technique reserved for wider rivers involves crossing at an angle to zigzag up the stream against the current, as shown in Figure 5.

43. Ben Bachman, *Upstream: A Voyage on the Connecticut River* (Chester, CT: The Globe Pequot Press, 1988), 20.

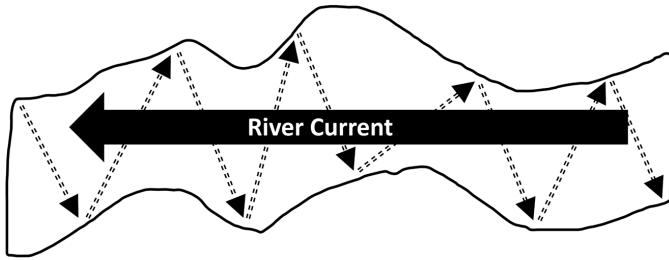


Figure 5. Travel upstream of wider rivers requires zigzagging across the channel. Rowing effort and distances are greatly increased.

Cutting across the down-flowing water is necessary because rowers cannot generate enough speed to counter the rapid currents by heading into them directly and simultaneously driving the craft upstream. This method of upstream travel is evident in Figure 6.

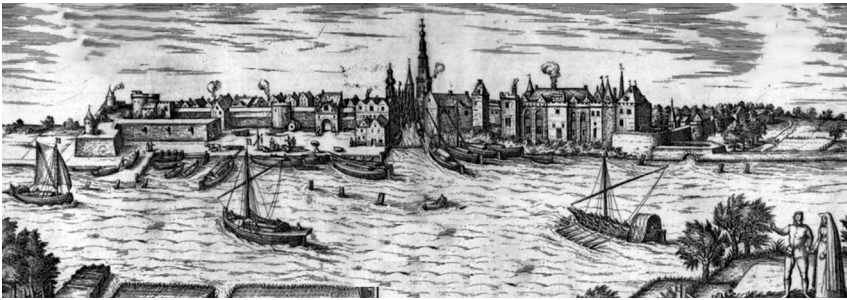


Figure 6. The boat on the right with multiple oarsmen rowing shows upstream travel at an angle to the downstream current. (Public domain.)

Rowing Upstream on the Mississippi River

A 1796 publication commented on the difficulty of going up the Mississippi River: "In navigating that river we often find places like a horse-shoe, where we do not gain more than a mile by sailing or rowing five miles."⁴⁴ Amos Stoddard agreed: "The river is so winding, that the daily progress of boats to their destination, is very inconsiderable. In one instance they are obliged to stem the current for fifty four miles to gain five; in another thirty miles to gain one and a half."⁴⁵ Stoddard further explains:

44. Daniel Smith, *A Short Description of the State of Tennessee: Lately Called the Territory of the United States, South of the River Ohio; To Accompany and Explain a Map of that Country* (Philadelphia: Lang and Ustick, 1796), 22.

45. Stoddard, *Sketches of Louisiana*, 375.

Keel boats, however strongly manned, cannot possibly ascend to any great distance in the middle of the current; in some places, indeed, they cannot make head against it. They are obliged not only to ply along the shore, where the water is less rapid, and where counter currents or eddies frequently prevail, but they also find it necessary to keep on the side opposite to the bends. Hence they cross the river at the lower extremity of every bend, which can seldom be done without falling down with the current about half a mile. It is said by old boatmen, that they are obliged to cross the Mississippi three hundred and ninety times on ascending from New-Orleans to St. Louis.⁴⁶

Stoddard noted that “one of our gun boats was about eighteen months in ascending from Natchez [Mississippi] to the Ohio [River],” a distance of over 350 miles.⁴⁷ The Ohio River joins the Mississippi River about sixty miles downstream from St. Louis, Missouri.

Lewis and Clark

A classic example of river transportation is the Lewis and Clark expedition that “traveled 10,624 miles, 9,046 miles of it by river (5,498 miles downstream, 3,548 miles upstream) during a period of more than three years (August 31, 1803, through September 23, 1806).”⁴⁸ Forty-four men and one woman, translator Sacagawea, boarded a keelboat and several smaller watercraft at St. Louis to ascend the Missouri River. Historian Verne Huser describes their primary vessel:

The keelboat was fifty-five feet long and eight feet wide. ... It was equipped for four means of propulsion: a large square sail for sailing, twenty-two oars and thole pins “to row by,” a supply of push poles for poling or pushing, and several ropes for towing. It could be sailed when the wind was right; rowed by a large crew of strong men; poled by a coordinated team; or towed by oxen, horses, or men. ... Traveling upstream against a four- or five-mile-an-hour current is hard work, whatever method is used.⁴⁹

46. Ibid., 374.

47. Ibid., 373.

48. Verne Huser, *On the River with Lewis and Clark* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), ix.

49. Ibid., 53–54, 110.

Each of the “four means of propulsion required significant human strength to implement.” Huser further declared: “The crew members often served as beasts of burden; traveling down the Ohio on low water, they literally had to lift the boat over shoals on numerous occasions.”⁵⁰ Huser concludes: “Even though rivers were highways in the days of Lewis and Clark, they were often undependable.”⁵¹

The Book of Mormon Describes No River Travel

The Book of Mormon’s references to rivers and transportation methods represent another challenge to the theory that river travel was common or popular among the Jaredites, Lehiters, and Mulekites. The words “river” or “rivers” are referenced 47 times in the Book of Mormon, but riverboats or river migrations are never mentioned. Jonathan Neville explains that this is because the prophet-scribe Mormon states that he could not write “a hundredth part” of “their shipping and their building of ships” (Helaman 3:14).⁵² A ship is, by definition a “large sea-going vessel (opposed to a *boat*).”⁵³ The only ships mentioned in the Book of Mormon are those traveling by sea, not in rivers. Nephi builds a ship large enough to carry the Lehiters to the Promised Land (1 Nephi 18:2, 8), and Hagoth built ships that were launched into the west sea (Alma 63:5).

Another problem is that the verbs commonly used in the Book of Mormon to describe human transit are often limited to foot travel: march (82), wander (17), drive (99), flee (68), pursue (42), and scattered (73). In contrast, words that might describe water travel between cities in the Promised Land — like float, glide, row, waft, sail, cruise, voyage, or paddle — are absent.⁵⁴ Neither are additional references found to river craft design, construction, usage, and benefits (especially in wartimes). Attributing such silences to a declaration by Mormon that *shipping* was not going to be mentioned seems inadequate.

In addition, the Book of Mormon describes 149 distinct geographic locations that are referenced 670 times. Only eleven are described as being near a river: the land of Zarahemla, city of Zarahemla, hill Amnihi,

50. Ibid., 54.

51. Ibid., 12.

52. Neville and Bennett, “Heartland Theory,” 1:09:47 and 1:11:24. This reasoning is repeated by Neville four times in *Moroni’s America*.

53. *Compact Edition*, 2:2788.

54. Sailing is mentioned twice in the Book of Mormon. Once in conjunction with Lehi’s transoceanic voyage (1 Nephi 18: 22–23) and as Hagoth “did sail forth” to unknown locations from the West Sea (Alma 63:5–8).

valley of Gideon, city of Gideon, land of Melek, borders of Manti, land of Manti, hill Riplah, land of Cumorah, and hill Cumorah.⁵⁵

If river travel in the Book of Mormon were important enough to significantly expand the dimensions of the Promised Land, perhaps ten times or more, readers must accept several assumptions. First, more cities were located near rivers than the text describes. Second, a crucial boating and travel industry existed that the text treats with complete silence. Third, river commuters developed effective upstream travel techniques, all of which demanded significant time and human energy, to consistently convince travelers to abandon walking along trails parallel to the river. And fourth, that transportation between cities not connected by a river was also expedited through an undescribed process to be more rapid than foot travel. Reviewers unwilling to accept the assumptions will likely conclude that river travel did not enable Book of Mormon travelers to journey at speeds fast enough to greatly expand the Promised Land's geographic boundaries.

Part II: Estimating the Size of the Promised Land

Accepting that foot travel was essentially the only form of transportation in the Book of Mormon allows the estimation of distances by using descriptions of transit times. For example, "It was only the distance of a day and a half's journey for a Nephite, on the line Bountiful and the land Desolation, from the east to the west sea" (Alma 22:32). While the exact mileage a Nephite could travel by foot in a day and a half is not known, a range of probable distances can be accepted. In contrast, the distances a horserider or a boat moving downstream could travel for a day and a half would be much greater, but these do not apply to the Promised Land. Fortunately, the Book of Mormon describes the number of days needed to travel between two major metropolitan centers, the city of Nephi, located at the southern end, and the land of Zarahemla, located close to the center of the Promised Land.

The Distance Between the Cities of Nephi and Zarahemla

The book of Mosiah describes the number of days required for Alma the Elder and his people to traverse the terrain between Nephi and Zarahemla. The account includes many essential details regarding the travelers, the supplies they carried, and the accompanying animals:

55. See John L. Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 217–326.

1. About 145 BCE, Alma gathers believers in the place of Mormon, outside of the city of Nephi (Mosiah 9:8).
2. King Noah sends an army to destroy them (Mosiah 18:33).
3. Alma and his followers depart into the wilderness with their families, tents, flocks, and grain (Mosiah 18:34; 23:1).
4. Noah's army returns, having searched in vain (Mosiah 19:1).
5. Alma's followers include 450 men, women, and children (Mosiah 18:35).
6. They travel eight days and settle in the land of Helam (Mosiah 23:3, 19).
7. Alma's people build a city and multiply and prosper exceedingly (Mosiah 23:5, 20).
8. About 120 BCE, a Lamanite army arrives and subjects Alma's people to bondage (Mosiah 23:25).
9. God promises he will deliver Alma and his people from bondage (Mosiah 24:17).
10. Alma and his followers spend the night gathering their flocks and grain (Mosiah 24:18).
11. God causes a deep sleep to come upon the Lamanites (Mosiah 24:19).
12. Alma and his followers travel one day and camp in a valley (Mosiah 24:18, 20).
13. God tells Alma to leave, and he will stop the Lamanites in that valley (Mosiah 24:23).
14. They travel twelve days and arrive in the land of Zarahemla (Mosiah 24:25).
15. In the land of Zarahemla, King Mosiah receives them with joy (Mosiah 24:25).

These verses describe the travel time from the place of Mormon to the land of Zarahemla as twenty-one days.⁵⁶ The distance from Nephi to the place of Mormon is unaccounted for, perhaps adding one more day. Twenty-two days of travel seems a reliable approximation.

The question is, how fast could Alma and his followers have made the entire journey? Some authors allege that this group could travel

56. The borders of the *land* of Zarahemla were undoubtedly close to the *city* of Zarahemla. Mormon describes them as synonymous when accounting for Lamanite gains: "They have got possession of the land, or the city, of Zarahemla" (Alma 61:8; see also Helaman 1:18). Throughout the text, travel distances to a *city* in a *land* of the same name are never represented as being chronologically important (see Mosiah 7:1; Alma 50:14, 53:3, 56:14, 61:8, and 62:14).

at speeds of three to four miles per hour for ten-to-twelve hours a day or traverse a span of up to 1,000 miles in a twenty-two-day trek.⁵⁷ Yet, theories promoting these scenarios provide few details. Travel without animal-drawn wagons, horses to ride, or hundreds of canoes and a handy downstream river current leading to their destination suggests that transit speeds can be estimated by examining the travel capabilities and limitations of the group.

Travelers’ demographics: The first group of 450 (Mosiah 18:35) at the place of Mormon would have likely doubled in number in the twenty-five years, for they did “multiply and prosper exceedingly” (Mosiah 23:5, 20) in the Land of Helam.⁵⁸ With families including men, women, and children, some elderly and toddlers would probably have journeyed at slower paces, as indicated in Table 3. Babies would have been carried.

Table 3. Human foot travel speed estimates.

	Foot Travel Speed
Adult	2–4 mph
Adult with pack	2–3 mph
Children (across flat ground)	1–1.25 mph
Children (hiking up elevations)	<1 mph
Toddlers and babies	[Carried]
Elderly (healthy)	2–3 mph
Elderly (unhealthy)	?
Disabled	?

Fleeing with armies in pursuit: With destroying armies in hot pursuit, Alma and his followers would have initially fled as quickly as possible. However, fears of being overtaken would have diminished after the second day because Noah’s armies immediately returned, and God stopped the Lamanites through an undisclosed means.

Stamina and fitness: Undoubtedly, many in the group were used to the hard physical labor of farming and living a subsistence lifestyle. But traveling for a mile or two is different from sustaining a longer migration of over ten miles a day for multiple days. The group’s overall progress would have been paced by the least fit of the travelers. The young children, the elderly, the sick, and the impaired would determine their daily progress, or they would have been carried or left behind. The need

57. See Neville, *Moroni’s America*.
58. A two percent growth rate for 450 initial inhabitants for twenty-five years predicts a total population of 738; four percent rate growth rate, 1200.

to rest and eat would slow the advancement, as would hunting for water or additional food if needed.

Packing grain and supplies: Both groups carried their “grain” with them as they moved along, presumably quantities needed for a journey of an underminable length. Without pack animals or wheeled conveyances, these burdens would have decreased travel performance.

Terrain and trail condition: Additional time would have been required if the groups encountered poor trail conditions and changes in elevation. Each entered the “wilderness,” which was so labeled for characteristics that probably would have made travel more difficult.

Weather conditions: The trekkers might have enjoyed ideal traveling conditions throughout the journey. Alternatively, snow, rain, and other inclement weather would have slowed the march, making the trail slippery and possibly more dangerous. Strong winds could affect balance problems for individuals carrying heavy packs (of grain). Extreme temperatures or humidity could demand more stops for hydration, warming, or rest.

Herding flocks: Having been warned to leave the next day, Alma’s people at Helam “gathered their flocks together ... even all the night-time were they gathering the flocks together” (Mosiah 24:18). The need to gather flocks through the night could be due to a large number of animals, or to their scattered locations at the time, or both. The specific animals are not mentioned, but turkeys are indigenous to the Americas and might serve as an example. For example, turkey farmers Marvin and Eva Lee Sumner observe that “turkeys, unlike chickens, can be rounded up in flocks and driven.” But they warn,

One hazard of herding is the stampede. A turkey stampede sounds funny, but is no joke. As with steers, a turkey stampede is a blind rush away from danger. What danger? Who knows? A goblin scares one turkey. Every other turkey says, “I’m scared too!” Off they go. Turkeys spook easiest on moonlit nights. All that the herder can safely do is lie still and cover up. Two thousand birds, each a bundle of ten or twenty scared pounds, flying blind in the dark, can knock down almost anything they hit if it isn’t tied.⁵⁹

Even without identifying the type or number of faunae in the flocks, several factors suggest that a sustained, rapid drive might have

59. Neil M. Clark, “Turkeys are Dopes,” *The Saturday Evening Post*, November 9, 1946, 27.

been difficult. “Too much driving pressure on the flock will result in some individuals reacting in panic and seeking an escape route by themselves.”⁶⁰ Flocks not accustomed to sustained overland travel in a specific direction from morning until evening continuously for up to three weeks would probably not have been speedy or easily driven.

Group Travel

Examining the average daily speeds of other traveling groups in history (Table 4) might help estimate how far Alma and his followers journeyed during their twenty-two days in the wilderness.⁶¹

Table 4. Daily transit distances for various types of travelers.

	Daily Travel Averages	Comments
Driving a herd of pigs ⁶²	11 miles	Many similarities to driving the flocks mentioned by Alma.
Handcart companies	13.5 miles	Wheeled carts carried provisions.
Lewis and Clark	14 miles	44 men and one woman. No flocks.
Pioneer wagon trains	15 miles	Used oxen and horse-drawn wagons.
Mormon Battalion	15-20 miles	Over 500 men, dozens of women and children. Wagons, mules.
Zion’s Camp (Camp of Israel)	19.1 miles	90% of the group were men who marched, rode horses, and rode in horse-drawn wagons. No flocks.
1884 cattle drive ⁶³	20 miles	Cowhands on horses herded the stock.

60. A. F. Fraser and D. M. Broom, *Farm Animal Behaviour and Welfare*, 3rd ed. (Wallingford, UK: CAB International, 1997), 286.

61. John E. Clark allows 12 USDs (4 + 1.5 + .5 + 6) with a USD defined as “one day’s normal travel over flat land” for Alma’s party to travel from the waters of Mormon (by the city of Nephi) to Zarahemla. This estimate supports a travel speed for the diverse group of about half that possible under ideal conditions, since the journey required 22 days. John E. Clark, “A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011* 1, no. 1 (1989): 53–54, 57, 68.

62. Richard E. W. Adams, “The Ceramic Chronology of the Southern Maya,” Second Preliminary Report, National Science Foundation Grant GS 610, University of Minnesota, duplicated (Minneapolis 1966), 5; quoted in John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 358n11.

63. Richard W. Slatta, “‘Just a Continual Rumble and Roar’: A Texas Cowboy Remembers an 1884 Cattle Drive,” *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 114, no. 2 (October 2010): 175n7.

While the data set in Table 4 is not extensive, it supports a land-travel range of 242 to 440 miles for the entire trip. Also, the faster groups all benefited from one or more of the following: horses, wagons or carts, male dominance, and a lack of flocks. Since Alma's groups would have been limited in their speed by their slowest traveler — whether a child, elderly person, or animal — the lower number may actually be optimistic. Also, the number of miles traveled would have been more than the direct mapped distance between the two cities of perhaps 180 miles.

Identifying the 180-mile distance (as the crow flies) between Nephi and Zarahemla is helpful because Zarahemla is described as being in the “heart of their lands” (Helaman 1:18). But as John L. Sorenson points out, “the city of Zarahemla might be somewhat south of the land's geographical center.”⁶⁴ Doubling the Nephi-to-Zarahemla distance of 180 miles and adding additional space to the north for settlements could provide a workable estimate of the longitudinal dimension of the Promised Land.

In his book *Mormon's Map*, John L. Sorenson, while examining the descriptions of movement across the Book of Mormon lands, concludes: “The promised land in which the Nephites history played out was on the order of five hundred miles long and over two hundred miles wide, according to Mormon's mental map.”⁶⁵ This constitutes a footprint of 100,000 square miles (see Figure 7). Critic Earl Wunderli agrees: “Sorenson's construction of a limited geography based on the clues he uses is not unreasonable ... Sorenson's calculations are not unreasonable.”⁶⁶

In summary, if *Equus caballus* and river travel did not affect transportation in the Book of Mormon, the population was restricted to foot travel. Estimating travel distances that foot traffic would permit according to the time intervals described in the text supports that the interactions of the Promised Land inhabitants extended through an area of approximately 100,000 square miles. Skeptics may understandably question the accuracy of any estimate, but accepting that the events occurred and that travel distances were accurately described should allow useful calculations to be made.

64. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 10.

65. Sorenson, *Mormon's Map*, 78.

66. Earl M. Wunderli, “Critique of a Limited Geography for Book of Mormon Events,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 35, no. 3 (2002): 182, 175.

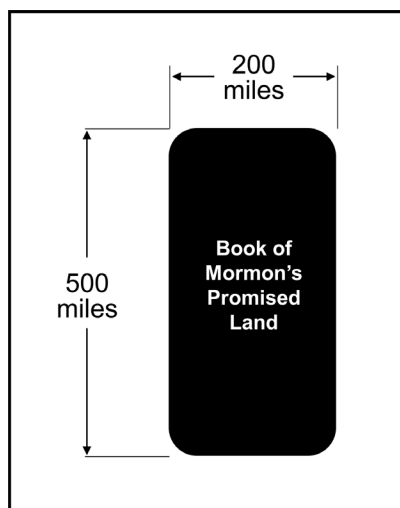


Figure 7. Regardless of the actual topographical shape of the Promised Land, the dimensions, calculated from foot-travel distances, would be approximately 200 by 500 miles.

Part III: Possible Ramifications of a 100,000 Square Mile Promised Land

Part III now attempts to place the 100,000 square mile footprint of the Book of Mormon on a map of the Western Hemisphere. A territory of roughly 200 miles by 500 miles is little smaller than Ecuador or a little bigger than the state of Wyoming. Also, it should be understood that the influence of the Promised Land inhabitants undoubtedly spread beyond its geographic borders. Hagoth sent ships northward via the sea (Alma 63:5–7), land migrations occurred to the north (Helaman 3:3; Alma 50:11), and Nephite missionary efforts reveal the presence of other peoples not described in detail in the Book of Mormon (Alma 21:11, 31:37; 3 Nephi 9:10). Despite these probable expansions, observers willing to accept that the primary focus of Promised Land activities occurred in approximately 100,000 square miles can next explore some of its possible ramifications. While none of these ideas may be new, the remainder of this article examines their apparent implications for current interpretations and future research.

More than One Promised Land Could have Existed

Over the past decades, multiple sites attempting to identify an on-the-ground site for the Book of Mormon's Promised Land have been

promoted.⁶⁷ Plausible theories must account for four variables: location, size, shape, and topographical features. To date, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has refrained from assigning a specific physical location as the setting for the Book of Mormon.⁶⁸ Regardless, acknowledging that the Promised Land inhabitants occupied a space of about 200 by 500 miles provides a visual context for placement somewhere in the Americas. Dozens of theories have advanced different locations throughout the hemisphere, as Figure 8 shows.

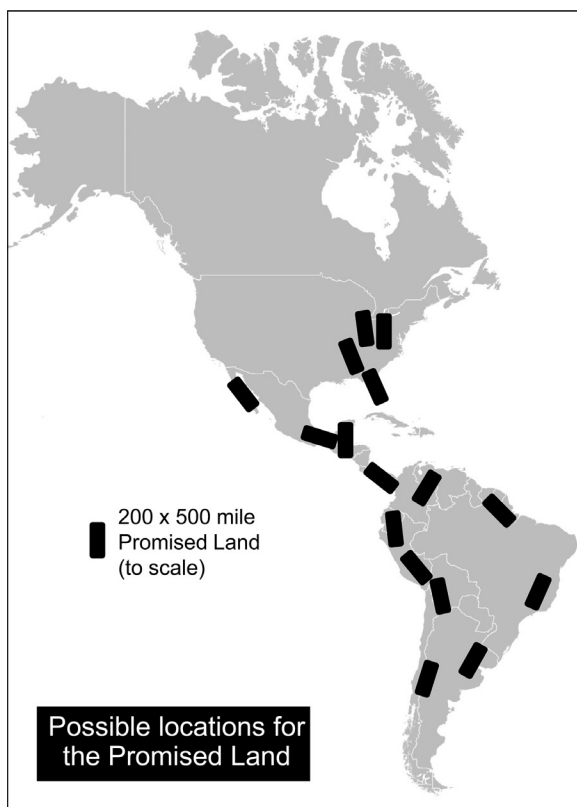


Figure 8. This illustration places a scale model of the Promised Land over locations promoted in the past.

To be credible, theories in the future that describe the Book of Mormon peoples traversing much smaller or larger territorial boundaries need to

67. See Hedges, “Book of Mormon Geographies.”

68. See “Book of Mormon Geography,” Gospel Topics, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/book-of-mormon-geography>.

defend their chosen locations, as well as the dimensions they promote. Irrespective of its actual location, an area of 200 by 500 miles occupies a very small portion of the available landmass. A 100,000 square miles area constitutes 0.6% of the Western Hemisphere (16,428,000 square miles), 1.5% of South America (6,888,000 square miles), 1.0% of North America (9,540,000 square miles), or 51% of Central America (196,000 square miles).⁶⁹ It appears that the Jaredites, Lehites, and Mulekites existed in a very small portion of North or South America. If they had occupied Central America, they would have dominated much of the landscape but would have left North and South America essentially unexplored.

Archaeologists have shown that long-distance trading occurred throughout the Americas anciently, probably through sequential exchanges, usually of smaller, higher-valued goods, resulting in their transport across multiple societies into more distant territories.⁷⁰ It is also true that small city-states in the past have exerted far-reaching influence and dominance through their armies and by sharing superior locally developed technologies. However, living without horses and rapid means of communication would have impeded widespread contact, extended dominion, or far-reaching influence. The prophets who engraved on the Nephite plates consistently relate a delimited, non-hemispheric, geographic zone where the events took place. They describe only local wars between cities that could be marched to in a matter of days. While the Book of Mormon peoples undoubtedly possessed some awareness of other populations outside their Promised Land, as far as the text is concerned, incidents occurring just a few hundred miles away transpired without their overall concern.

In light of the geographic limitations of the Book of Mormon world, a 100,000-square-mile Promised Land admits the possibility of other peoples (in their own Promised Lands) being led to the Americas by God besides the Lehites, Mulekites, and Jaredites. Several passages seem to support this possibility. Lehi instructed, “The Lord hath covenanted this land unto me, and to my children forever, and also all those who should be led out of other countries by the hand of the Lord” (2 Nephi 1:5).

69. Central America is not a continent, but it describes the combined countries of Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama.

70. See Gardner, *Book of Mormon as History*, 314–16. See also Bennett Sherry, *Long-Distance Trade in the Americas*, (World History Project), <https://www.oerproject.com/-/media/WHP/PDF/Era4/WHP-4-2-11-Read---Long-Distance-Trade-in-the-Americas---740L.ashx>.

Concerning the lost tribes of Israel, Nephi recorded, “The more part of all the tribes have been led away; and they are scattered to and fro upon the isles of the sea” (1 Nephi 22:4). And he quotes the Lord:

For I command all men, both in the east and in the west, and in the north, and in the south, and in the islands of the sea, that they shall write the words which I speak unto them. ... I shall also speak unto the other tribes of the house of Israel, which I have led away, and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto all nations of the earth and they shall write it. (2 Nephi 29:11–12)

The only known records today are those of the Lehiters and Palestinian Israelites.

When speaking to the Nephites, Christ related, “I have other sheep, which are *not of this land*, neither of the land of Jerusalem. ... But I have received a commandment of the Father that I shall go unto them, and that they shall hear my voice, and shall be numbered among my sheep” (3 Nephi 16:1, 3). Whether Jesus considered the Nephite “land” to be similar in size to the “land of Jerusalem” or much larger is unclear. The whole of ancient Israel spanned about 8,000 square miles. Still, even if “land” meant ten times that size, there would have been plenty of space for some of Christ’s “other sheep” to have existed elsewhere on the American continents, unknown to Book of Mormon scribes.

Perhaps in past millennia, God led members of the house of Israel to the heartland of North America, another group to present-day Peru, and still others to Mesoamerica or the Mexican Baja, with the Book of Mormon describing only one of these groups. If such groups had been divinely guided, it is conceivable that each migration party would have remained unaware of the other (Figure 9), especially if believers in each group were eventually destroyed by unbelievers. Likewise, as remnants of the House of Israel, each group would have infused additional blood of God’s chosen people among the inhabitants of the American Continents.

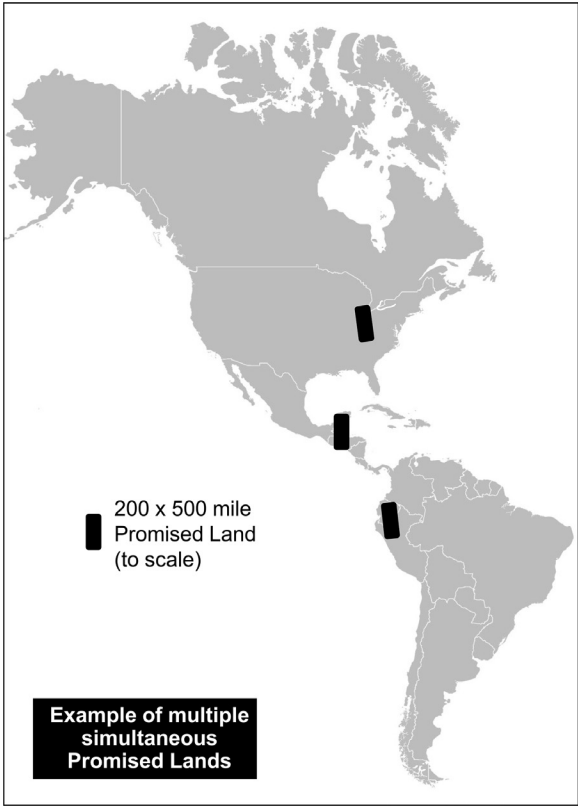


Figure 9. An example of how multiple Promised Lands might have existed without the other righteous groups being aware.

Two Book of Mormon “Promised Lands”: One Limited and the Other Hemispheric

Independent of the observation that multiple Promised Lands might have simultaneously existed in the Americas is the realization that the Book of Mormon refers to two Promised Lands of differing sizes. Besides the 100,000 square mile Promised Land, a continental or hemispheric version is alluded to in Nephi’s visionary view of Columbus as “he went forth upon the many waters, even unto the seed of my brethren, who were in the promised land” (1 Nephi 13:12). Since Columbus’s multiple voyages ended in the Caribbean islands and along the coasts of the Gulf of Mexico, they spanned more than 100,000 square miles. Likewise, his landings do not correlate to the topography described by Book of Mormon settlers. Nephi also saw how the European “Gentiles” would be led to “the land that the Lord God hath covenanted with thy father that

his seed should have for the land of their inheritance” (1 Nephi 13:30). There, the gold plates would “be hid up, to come forth unto the Gentiles” (1 Nephi 13:35), which translation and publication occurred in upstate New York, thousands of miles from Columbus’s Promised Land contacts.

While the Book of Mormon does not define the specific borders of the larger Promised Land, Joseph Smith clarified: “The Book of Mormon is a record of the forefathers of our western Tribes of Indians ... By it we learn that our western tribes of Indians are descendants from that Joseph which was sold into Egypt, and that the land of America is a promised land unto them.”⁷¹ By “land of America,” he later explained he meant the combined areas of the North and South American continents.⁷² So it appears that the narratives of the Jaredites, Lehites, and Mulekites occurred in what might be called the *limited* Promised Land of about 100,000 square miles. This area was actually part of what might be called the *hemispheric* Promised Land comprising 16,400,000 million square miles of the whole Western Hemisphere.

This differentiation is important, because a few decades after the death of the last Nephite believer (about 500 CE), three things occurred:

1. The Nephite religious teachings that included a 100,000-square-mile Promised Land disappeared from the collective memory of the remaining inhabitants of that territory.⁷³
2. For all practical purposes, the limited Promised Land ceased to exist.⁷⁴ This is attested to by the fact that we do not know its geographic location today.

71. Joseph Smith, Letter to Noah C. Saxton, January 4, 1833, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letterbook-1/29>.

72. See “The Location of Zion, or the New Jerusalem,” *Times and Seasons* 2 (July 15, 1841): 475; and William Clayton Report: 8 April 1844; in Andrew F. Ehat, and Lyndon W. Cook, eds. *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980), 362–63.

73. Mormon wrote that “the Lamanites would destroy” any Nephite records that fell into their hands (Mormon 6:6; see also Enos 1:14). Moroni also noted that the Lamanites “put to death every Nephite that will not deny the Christ” (Moroni 1:2). In this anti-Christian environment, it appears the teachings of the Nephites would not survive among the generations of the remaining inhabitants.

74. The promise or covenant of the land was conditional, and disobedience caused it to be revoked. “Wherefore I, the Lord, command and revoke, as it seemeth me good; and all this to be answered upon the heads of the rebellious” (D&C 56:4).

3. A hemispheric Promised Land would dominate modern references, without differentiating it from the the Book of Mormon limited Promised Land. For example, Joseph Smith taught, “Zion to be built upon this continent: for this is a promised land to the tribe of Joseph,” and “The whole of North and South America is Zion.”⁷⁵

In summary, two Book of Mormon Promised Lands of differing sizes are mentioned. A limited Promised Land where the Book of Mormon narrative occurred with the Jaredites, Lehites, and Mulekites. Realistically, it ceased to exist when it faded from the recollections of the residents in that area sometime after 421 CE. References after that time imply a hemispheric Promised Land (see Figure 10).

Evolving Definitions from Original Lamanites to Modern Lamanites

Recognizing the existence of two Promised Lands of differing sizes affects the definition of “Lamanites” today. Technically, the first Lamanites in the Promised Land would have been Laman and his offspring, but that definition, if ever considered by any of the Lehites, was short-lived. Tracing the evolution of the term throughout the rest of the Book of Mormon and beyond provides insights regarding the expected relationship today between Native Americans and the Book of Mormon Lamanites.⁷⁶

75. “The Location of Zion, or the New Jerusalem,” *Times and Seasons* 2, (July 15, 1841): 475; Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 363. See also Brigham Young, “Faithfulness and Apostacy,” in *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1855), 2:253; Brigham Young, “Extensive Character of the Gospel, Etc.,” in *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1859), 6:296; Orson Pratt, “Evidences of the Bible and Book of Mormon Compared,” in *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1860), 7:33; Orson Hyde, “Celebration of American Independence,” in *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1860), 7:108; and Wilford Woodruff, “The Signs of the Coming of the Son of Man,” in *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1873), 15:279.

76. See Gordon C. Thomasson, “What Exactly Does the Word Lamanite Mean?” *Ensign* 7, no. 9 (September 1977), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1977/09/i-have-a-question/what-exactly-does-the-word-lamanite-mean>.

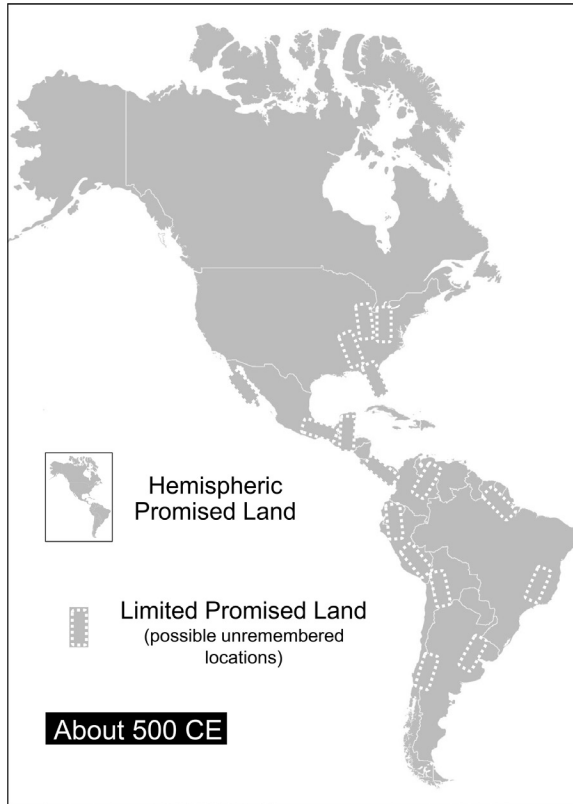


Figure 10. As the Book of Mormon Promised Land was forgotten about 500 CE, the only remaining Promised Land was hemispheric.

570 to 87 BCE — Ideological Differences Separate Lamanites and Nephites

About 570 BCE, Nephi first used the term “Lamanite” to describe Laman and all his followers who tried to destroy Nephi and his people (2 Nephi 5:14). A few years later, Nephi’s brother Jacob further clarified the dichotomy: “I shall call them Lamanites that seek to destroy the people of Nephi, and those who are friendly to Nephi I shall call Nephites,” (Jacob 1:13–14). Jumping ahead to 87 BCE, the Book of Mormon writers continued to divide Nephites from Lamanites based upon their beliefs, not bloodlines: “Whosoever suffered himself to be led away by the Lamanites was called under that head” (Alma 3:10). Those living outside the Promised Land are not acknowledged in the descriptions.

36 CE — No Manner of “-ites”

After the coming of Christ about 36 CE, the Book of Mormon describes how the Promised Land inhabitants united to create a society that was without “Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites; but they were in one, the children of Christ” (4 Nephi 1:17). The geographic boundaries of the “children of Christ” during the next two centuries are not specified, but probably extended to the limits of the knowledge of the prophet-scribes chronicling those years, probably the borders of the 100,000-square-mile Promised Land. Consistent with previous Nephite accounts, indigenous peoples living beyond the believers’ settlements were left unidentified in the narrative, as illustrated in Figure 11.



Figure 11. Using Central America as an example, by 36 CE, the residents of the Promised Land were united as the children of Christ without divisions or any “-ties.” People living outside that region were not mentioned.

231 CE — “*They Who Rejected the Gospel are Lamanites*”

By 185 CE, “a small part of the people who had revolted from the church [took] upon them the name of Lamanites” (4 Nephi 1:20). The division is described as socio-religious and unrelated to genetics, race, or ethnicity.⁷⁷

The rivalry continued until, by 231 CE,

there was a great division among the people. And it came to pass that in this year there arose a people who were called the Nephites, and they were true believers in Christ ... And it came to pass that they who rejected the gospel were called Lamanites. (4 Nephi 1:35–36, 38)

By labeling all unbelievers as Lamanites, indigenous inhabitants inside and outside of the Promised Land were included because of their ignorance of Christ, as Figure 12 shows.

400–421 CE — *Final Conflict Between the Nephites and Lamanites*

The Nephite-Lamanite struggle expanded throughout the third and fourth centuries until armed combat resulted in the annihilation of all Nephite believers. As discussed above, this final conflict was *not* between

- The literal descendants of Nephi and the literal descendants of Laman.
- The righteous and the wicked.
- People with light-colored skin and people with dark-colored skin.

The final Nephite-Lamanite conflict was a civil war between two unrighteous populations, with a common religious tradition introduced by Jesus Christ in 36 CE. Their primary difference was that one arose as an anti-Christian movement around 185 CE and the other progressively rejected Christ and the prophets over the next two centuries.

77. Max Mueller seems to disagree, writing that after two hundred years of unification, “Lehi’s progeny return to their respective original roles” based upon lineage. Max Perry Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2017), 37. In fact, nothing in Mormon’s description of the two competing factions in the final conflict includes differences in ethnicity, race, or blood pedigrees.

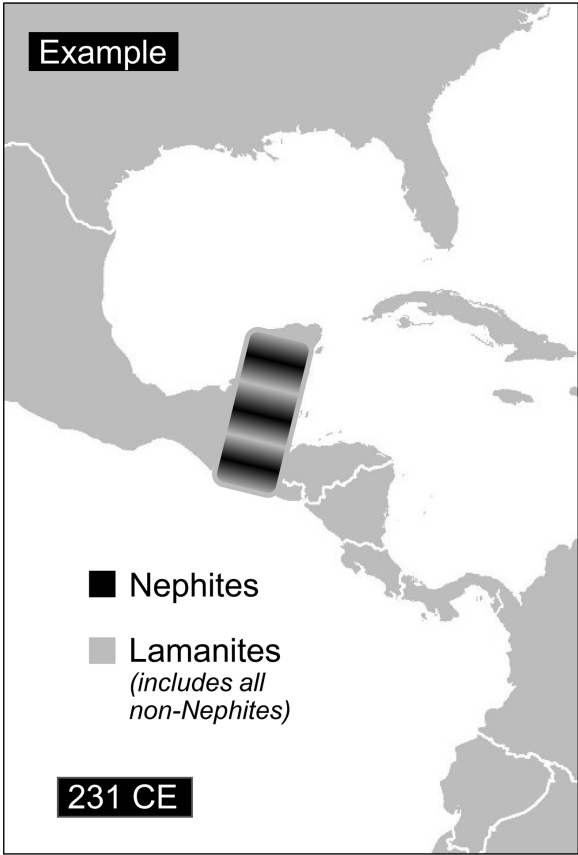


Figure 12. If the Promised Land, for example, was in Mesoamerica, the diagram shows that by 231 CE, a division occurred, with believers in Christ being Nephites and all surrounding unbelievers designated as Lamanites.

Mormon describes how by 260 CE, “the people who were called the people of Nephi began to be proud in their hearts, because of their exceeding riches, and become vain like unto their brethren, the Lamanites” and just a few decades after that, “both the people of Nephi and the Lamanites had become exceedingly wicked one like unto another” (4 Nephi 1:43, 45). As Armand Mauss observed, about 400 CE “the Nephite and Lamanite antagonists were distinguished only by their differential spiritual condition rather than by skin color or other ‘racial’

characteristics.”⁷⁸ Elizabeth Fenton agrees: “The Lamanites’ story begins, but does not end, with racial delineation.”⁷⁹

In the opening chapters of the Book of Mormon, before Nephites and Lamanites existed, Nephi describes the final battles in vision: “I beheld that the seed of my brethren did overpower the people of my seed” (1 Nephi 12:19). *Seed* in this application apparently refers to those who followed a specific religious tradition, regardless of race or ethnicity.⁸⁰ For example, Isaiah wrote of Christ: “When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed” (Isaiah 53:10; see also Mosiah 14:10, 15:10). Abraham was told, “As many as receive this Gospel shall be called after thy name, and shall be accounted thy seed, and shall rise up and bless thee, as their father” (Abraham 2:10; see also D&C 84:34). Consistent with his vision, Nephi’s seed (later collectively called Nephites) were those who believed the teachings about Christ and were destroyed by the seed of Nephi’s brethren (later collectively called Lamanites) who did not. The division was nearly always ideological, not biological or genealogical.

It is unfortunate that the first dissenters (circa 185 CE) chose the name *Lamanites* instead of something else, like Republicans, Democrats, Red Sox, or Rotarians.⁸¹ Adopting the same name as the Lamanites with ethnic origins of the first 600 years of the Book of Mormon has generated ongoing confusion among some readers who connect them with the socio-religious Lamanites of the last 400 years.⁸² Commonly,

78. Armand L. Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 49.

79. Elizabeth Fenton, “Open Canons: Sacred History and American History in the *Book of Mormon*,” in Colby Townsend, ed., *Envisioning Scripture: Joseph Smith’s Revelations in their Early American Contexts* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2022), 92.

80. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines “seed” as “offspring” or “progeny,” and among the definitions for “progeny” is “spiritual or intellectual descendants, successors, followers, disciples.” (*Compact Edition*, 2:2708, 2:2318.)

81. Regarding the “Nephites” after Christ’s visit, is it possible in the subsequent centuries that their church leaders ever counseled believers to avoid the nickname “Nephite”? Instead, instructing them to adopt a fuller name, perhaps equivalent to “The Church of Jesus Christ of the Promised Land Saints” (see 3 Nephi 27:5, 8), just as modern leaders have encouraged all media and Church members to avoid the term “Mormon”?

82. See Wunderli, *An Imperfect Book*, 182; Simon G. Southerton, *Losing a Lost Tribe: Native Americans, DNA, and the Mormon Church* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 12–13; Dan Vogel, *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 66–67; Jillian Sayre, “Books Buried in the Earth:

authors focus on the Lamanites of the first half of the Book of Mormon — cursed, dark, and racialized — seemingly unaware that the Lamanites of the second half are simply apostates from the Christian religion with an adopted designation, having dissented earlier than the Nephites.

Post-421 CE — “Whosoever Remaineth” are Lamanites

Regarding the victors in the ultimate conflict between the Nephites and Lamanites, Alma the Younger prophesied,

And when that great day cometh, behold, the time very soon cometh that those who are now, or the seed of those who are now numbered among the people of Nephi, shall no more be numbered among the people of Nephi. But *whosoever remaineth*, and is not destroyed in that great and dreadful day, *shall be numbered among the Lamanites*, and shall become like unto them, all, save it be a few who shall be called the disciples of the Lord; and them shall the Lamanites pursue even until they shall become extinct. (Alma 45:13–14; see also Helaman 3:16 and D&C 10:48)

As far as the Book of Mormon is concerned, the final battle resulted in the extinction of the Nephites, and “whosoever remaineth” throughout the *land* (vv. 8, 16) was “numbered among the Lamanites” (see Mormon 8:7–8). Whether Alma (or other prophet-scribes) fully understood the vastness of that *land* the Lamanites would occupy under such declarations is unclear. For them, whether the Nephites were extinct in a 100,000-square-mile Promised Land or a 16.4-million-square-mile Promised Land was unimportant. As time passed, the unremembering of the original Promised Land left the remaining Lamanites with only one Promised Land to inhabit — the entire American continent from the tip of Argentina to northern Canada.⁸³

The observation that the Book of Mormon describes a changing definition of Lamanite is not new. But understanding how the limited size of the Promised Land affects that definition could have implications for those recognized as Lamanites today.

The Book of Mormon, Revelation, and the Humic Foundations of the Nation,” in Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman, eds., *Americanist Approaches to the Book of Mormon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 35; Nancy Bentley, “Kinship, The Book of Mormon, and Modern Revelation,” in Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman, eds., *Americanist Approaches to the Book of Mormon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 235.

83. See Mauss, *All Abraham’s Children*, 33, 138.

Zelph and Central American Lamanites

Two examples from Joseph Smith's life demonstrate his apparent belief that Lamanites could be found throughout the American continents. While traveling with Zion's Camp, Joseph identified bones found in Pike County, Illinois, in 1834, as the bones of a Lamanite named Zelph.⁸⁴ Although conflicting accounts exist regarding Joseph's exact description, that he would attribute the human remains to the Book of Mormon peoples is unsurprising.

Similarly, in 1841, Smith received a copy of John Lloyd Stephens' *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* from John Bernhisel. Later that year, he wrote to Bernhisel, "I have read the volumes with the greatest interest & pleasure" and declared "many things that are of great importance to this generation & corresponds with & supports the testimony of the Book of Mormon."⁸⁵ The following year, the *Times and Seasons* referenced John Stephens's volumes, saying they produced "proof of Lamanites and Nephites," even though they describe archaeological remains in Mesoamerica.⁸⁶

Without the benefit of knowing where the Book of Mormon peoples specifically played out their narratives, the entirety of the Americas became Lamanite territory, as Figure 13 shows. Joseph Smith apparently viewed ancient ruins as evidence of the Lamanites and the then-extinct Nephites. This view has generally continued today without necessarily analyzing the exact relationship between the original Lamanites and modern Lamanites.

Distances Could Impede Efforts to Validate the Location of Book of Mormon Peoples

The limited geography of the Book of Mormon Promised Land and its unknown location affect all linguistic field studies, archaeological digs, and genetic samplings today that seek to identify scientific evidence of the migrations of the Jaredites, Lehighites, or Mulekites. The simple reality

84. See Kenneth W. Godfrey, "The Zelph Story," *BYU Studies* 29, no. 2 (1989): 31–56; Kenneth W. Godfrey, "What Is the Significance of Zelph in the Study of Book of Mormon Geography?" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8, no. 2 (1999): 70–79, 88.

85. Letter to John M. Bernhisel, 16 November 1841, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-johnm-bernhisel-16november-1841/1>.

86. "Facts are Stubborn Things," *Times and Seasons* 3 (September 15, 1842): 921.

is that the research efforts could be hundreds or thousands of miles away from the original Promised Land (Figure 14).

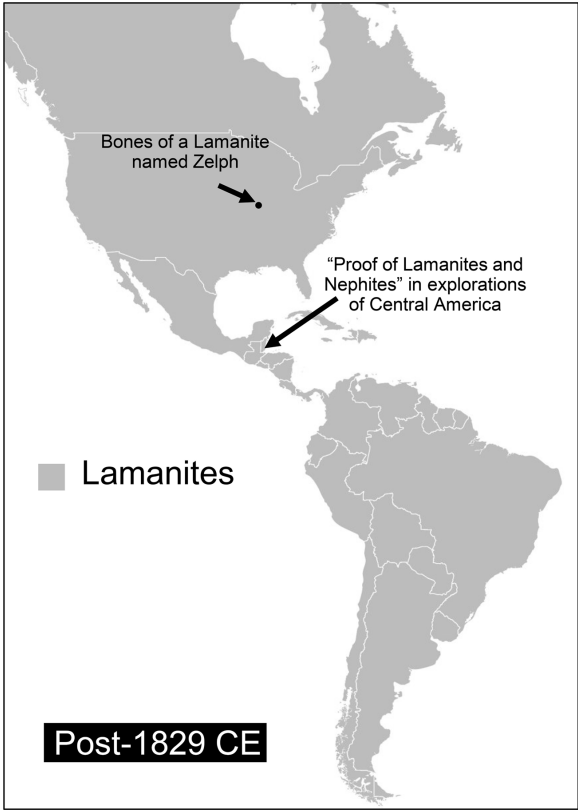


Figure 13. According to Book of Mormon descriptions, bones and ruins across the Americas encountered after 421 CE would be those of the Lamanites.

Anthropological evidence of the Promised Land peoples would undoubtedly have diffused outside of the confines of the original area. Yet, without the horse or other forms of rapid transit to support long-standing consequential exchanges, detecting their impact today on language, DNA, or archeology just a few hundred miles away might be hampered.

Concentrated Native American Losses at the Original Promised Land Location

Researchers seeking to document the existence of the Book of Mormon peoples must confront the possibility that the Promised Land residents experienced devastating losses after 400 CE. Over the past millennia,



Figure 14. Native American archaeological, genetic, and linguistic data gathered from thousands of miles away from the original Promised Land would be less likely to contain evidence of the Book of Mormon peoples.

multiple territories throughout the Americas have experienced localized losses of indigenous inhabitants. Some of these involved areas over 100,000 square miles. If such localities overlapped or encompassed the original Promised Land, significant genetic and linguistic losses of the Book of Mormon populations would have been unavoidable.

700 to 900 CE — Mayan Decline

An example of a localized population loss is the Mayan nation. LIDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) uses laser pulsations to produce high-definition scans that highlight “smaller features covered by dense rainforest canopy.”⁸⁷ In 2016, scientists used LIDAR to scan more than 800 square miles along the borders of Guatemala and the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico, identifying 61,480 structures. “Extrapolation of this settlement density to the entire 95,000 square kilometers [37,000 square miles] of the central lowlands produces a population range of 7 million to 11 million” during the Late Classic period [600–900 CE].⁸⁸ These estimates are based on “both on the number of structures revealed by the lidar data and on the estimated amount of land that may have been used for agriculture, taking into consideration the traditional farming practices of the area, average yields, and basic caloric requirements. The estimate is somewhat conservative, falling within a range of others made for this area and time period.”⁸⁹

Ground explorations support that these numbers could be low. Ben Guarino explains,

For all its power, lidar cannot supplant old-fashioned archaeology. For 8 percent of the survey area, the archaeologists confirmed the lidar data with boots-on-the-ground visits. This “ground truthing” suggests that the lidar analysis was

87. Takeshi Inomata et al., “Archaeological Application of Airborne LiDAR with Object-Based Vegetation Classification and Visualization Techniques at the Lowland Maya Site of Ceibal, Guatemala,” *Remote Sensing* 9, no. 6 (2017), <https://www.mdpi.com/2072-4292/9/6/563>.

88. Marcello A. Canuto et al., “Ancient Lowland Maya Complexity as Revealed by Airborne Laser Scanning of Northern Guatemala,” *Science* 361, no. 6409 (September 2018), <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/361/6409>.

89. William E. Carter, Ramesh L. Shrestha, and Juan Carlos Fernandez-Diaz, “Estimating Ancient Populations by Aerial Survey,” *American Scientist* 107 (January-February 2019): 34.

conservative — they found the predicted structures, and then some.⁹⁰

As a sidebar observation, the buildings identified include “individual defensive features.” According to the primary researchers,

Bridges, ditches, ramparts, stonewalls, and terraces ... were constructed as components of “built defensive systems.” These combined with natural defenses to protect “defended areas.” There were five types of built defensive systems: landscape ditch-and-rampart, hilltop ditch-and-rampart, contoured terrace, stand-alone rampart, and stone wall.⁹¹

These discoveries are consistent with some of the fortifications described in the Book of Mormon.⁹²

Archaeologists have demonstrated that the Mayan empire extended beyond the “central lowlands,” occupying over 100,000 square miles. Surface expeditions have revealed that most of the buildings and edifices are currently uninhabited and overgrown with local foliage. If, for example, the Promised Land was initially located in this area and then a few centuries after the Nephite extinction the area was devastated and vacated, the primary locus of the Book of Mormon peoples’s genetic and linguistic elements would have been lost (see Figure 15).

1492 CE — European Explorers Encounter Millions of Indigenous People

The earliest European adventurers to arrive in the Americas after 1492 CE “encountered a large native population that was distributed over a massive geographical expanse from the Arctic regions of North America through the Amazonian forests of Brazil to the bleak landscape of Tierra del Fuego, South America.”⁹³ Anthropologists have debated for decades the precise number of these Native Americans.⁹⁴

90. Ben Guarino, “This Major Discovery Upends Long-Held Theories about the Maya Civilization,” *The Washington Post*, September 27, 2018.

91. Canuto et al., “Ancient Lowland Maya Complexity.”

92. Alma 48:8; 49:4,18; 50:1; and 53:3 describe how earth (or dirt) was “heaped” up into a “ridge” or wall “round about” the city. Alma 49:18 mentions a “ditch ... round about” the outside of the wall or bank. A timber palisade, picket, or parapet on top of the earthen wall is discussed in Alma 50:2–3.

93. Michael H. Crawford, *The Origins of Native Americans: Evidence from Anthropological Genetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1.

94. See David Henige, *Numbers from Nowhere: The American Indian Contact Population Debate* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 23–33, 77–79.

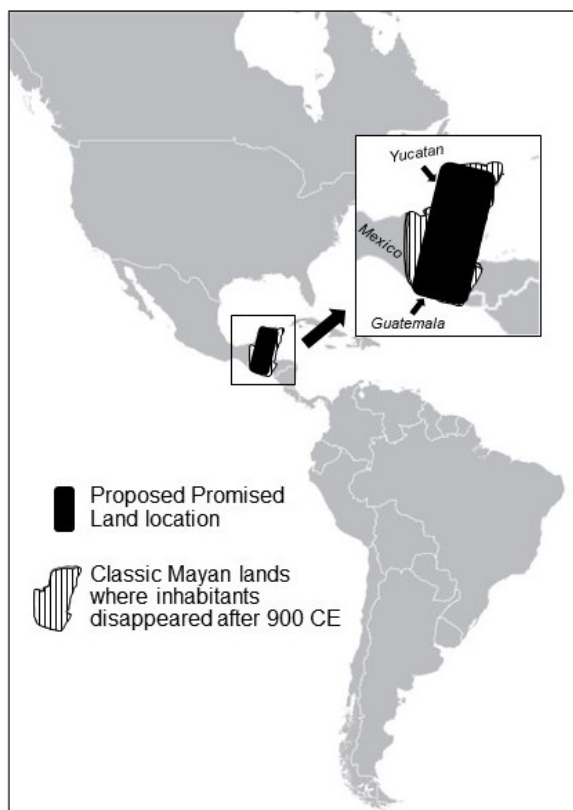


Figure 15. Millions of Mayans in Mesoamerica disappeared by 900 CE. If, for example, the original Promised Land were within this geographic area, the genetic and linguistic focus of its Book of Mormon peoples would have been lost.

A variety of scientific methods have been applied to provide accurate estimation, the result ranging 8.4 million to 112 million indigenous Americans.⁹⁵ A 1997 article, “How Many People Were Here before Columbus,” summarizes:

No one, in fact, knows how many people lived *anywhere* in those days, except for perhaps a city or two in Europe. The first national censuses occurred centuries later: 1749 in Sweden, 1790 in the fledgling United States, 1801 in France

95. William M. Denevan, *The Native Population of the Americas in 1492* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), 3–4, 7, and 291; Donald Joralemon, “New World Depopulation and the Case of Disease,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 38, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 108; Henry F. Dobyns, “An Appraisal of Techniques with a New Hemispheric Estimate,” *Current Anthropology* 7, no. 4 (September 1966): 395–416.

and Britain; it was 1953 when China took a complete count ... A recent effort by geographer William Denevan to reconcile the many conflicting estimates, by using the best findings of various scholars, concludes that 54 million people inhabited the Americas in 1492.⁹⁶

Tzvetan Todorov, author of *The Conquest of America*, estimated a higher population: "In 1500, the world population is approximately 400 million, of whom 80 million inhabit the Americas. By the middle of the sixteenth century, out of these 80 million, there remain ten" million still living.⁹⁷

1500 CE — European Diseases Decimate Amerindian Populations

Regardless of the actual population numbers, virtually all scholars agree that upon the arrival of the Europeans in 1492 CE, diseases and armed conflicts ravaged the indigenous inhabitants. "There is little doubt about the massive and rapid drop in that population in the sixteenth century," writes William Denevan. "The discovery of America was followed by possibly the greatest demographic disaster in the history of the world."⁹⁸ Further,

Isolation, such as that of the American Indians from the Old World, rendered populations very susceptible to catastrophic epidemics from diseases introduced from overseas. The major killers included smallpox, measles, whooping cough, chicken pox, bubonic plague, typhus, malaria, diphtheria, amoebic dysentery, influenza, and a variety of helminthic infections.⁹⁹

George Milner and George Chaplin agree that "the loss of life following the introduction of Old World diseases" among the eastern North American population was "horrific and devastating to native

96. Lewis Lord, "How Many People Were Here before Columbus?: One of the Few Certainties: The Indian Populations Of North And South America Suffered A Catastrophic Collapse after 1492," *U.S. News and World Report*, August 18, 1997, emphasis original, <https://web.archive.org/web/20080305224956/http://www.usna.edu/Users/history/kolp/HH345/PRE1492.HTM>. See also Denevan, *Native Population*, 3. See also Crawford, *Origins of Native Americans*, 32–33.

97. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 133. He continues: "Or limiting ourselves to Mexico; on the eve of the conquest, its population is about 25 million; in 1600, it is one million."

98. Denevan, *Native Population*, 7.

99. Ibid., 5. See also Crawford, *Origins of Native Americans*, 5, 7.

societies.”¹⁰⁰ One study reported the Native American population “declined by 87% following European colonization.”¹⁰¹ As British historian Michael H. Crawford further explains,

English settlements may not have been possible [in the Americas] had disease imports not paved the way. Without the effects of smallpox, Francisco Pizarro would probably not have succeeded in his conquest of the Inca Empire of Peru. The first smallpox epidemic started in Vera Cruz, Mexico, during Cortez’ first contact in 1519. This disease spread into Guatemala, and then into what is now northern Peru in 1524–26. The Inca ruler and his entourage, including the only legitimate heir, all contracted smallpox and died. The result of their demise was the division of the Empire between rivals, thus lessening Inca resolve and facilitating the conquest of the Empire.¹⁰²

How many Amerindians died during the first century after Columbus? The estimates of death percentages range from lows around 75% to a high of 95%.¹⁰³ Scholars agree that the loss of life during this period was cataclysmic. As William M. Denevan acknowledges, “Despite recent population increases, most Indian cultures have become extinct or nearly so.”¹⁰⁴

Post-1600 CE — Continued Indigenous Losses

The early epidemics (circa 1600 CE) that leveled Amerindian populations were just the beginning. Subsequent waves of smallpox and other diseases continued to devastate Native Americans by the thousands. Adam Hodge described the death encountered around 1780:

The mid-nineteenth-century artist George Catlin once observed that smallpox was “the dread destroyer of the Indian race.” Repeated epidemics produced a staggering death toll. Among those epidemics was one that swept the

100. George R. Milner and George Chaplin, “Eastern North American Population at CA. A.D 1500,” *American Antiquity* 75, no. 4 (October 2010): 723.

101. Matthew J. Liebmann et al., “Native American Depopulation, Reforestation, and Fire Regimes in the Southwest United States, 1492–1900 CE,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 113, no. 6 (February 2016): 1459.

102. Crawford, *Origins of Native Americans*, 51.

103. Dobyns, “Appraisal of Techniques,” 414.

104. Denevan, *Native Population*, 7.

northern Great Plains of North America for eighteen months from 1780 to 1782, killing half or more of the region's Native population. The Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras, who lived in semisedentary villages on the northern Plains, lost approximately 70 to 80 percent of their populations. The crowded, stationary nature of their large villages led to rapid smallpox diffusion and high human mortality.¹⁰⁵

Multiple other endemics and pandemics can be documented throughout North and South America well into the nineteenth century. In examining the epidemic of 1830–1833, it was determined that malaria was the “killer of three-fourths of the Native Americans then inhabiting the Sacramento and the northern San Joaquin valleys and the lower Columbia River banks.”¹⁰⁶

These observations illustrate how residents of a limited-sized Promised Land might risk annihilation in the wake of even a single disease outbreak or extended localized armed conflict. Archaeological research supports that such concentrated population losses occurred at multiple locations throughout North and South America, even before the arrival of the Europeans. Their influx also introduced additional waves of total territorial destruction. Obliteration of the original region of Book of Mormon linguistics and genetics would not have completely eliminated their existence from the continents, but it could impede their subsequent detection by geneticists, anthropologists, and archaeologists today.

All Native Americans as a “Remnant of the House of Israel”

A limited Promised Land geography affects expectations regarding the potential relationship of Native Americans today to the original Lamanites. Joseph Smith described the title page of the Book of Mormon as “a literal translation, taken from the very last leaf, on the left hand side of the collection or book of plates.”¹⁰⁷ The title page states that the

105. Adam R. Hodge, “‘In Want of Nourishment for to Keep Them Alive’: Climate Fluctuations, Bison Scarcity, and the Smallpox Epidemic of 1780–82 on the Northern Great Plains,” *Environmental History* 17, no. 2 (April 2012): 366.

106. Henry F. Dobyns, *Native American Historical Demography: A Critical Biography* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 24.

107. Joseph Smith, “History of Joseph Smith,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (October 15, 1842): 943.

Lamanites “are a remnant of the house of Israel.”¹⁰⁸ As discussed above, authentic genealogical ties to the house of Israel would be predicted to be geographically focused in the area of the original location of the Promised Land. Since that location is unknown and since Joseph Smith’s revelations refer to all Native Americans as Lamanites, God seems willing to co-opt all Amerindians into the house of Israel regardless of their locations.¹⁰⁹ This grouping assures that those with literal connections receive the promised blessings in the last days.

That the lineage of Israel would be distributed throughout the world was scripturally predicted: “And the Lord shall scatter thee among all people, from the one end of the earth even unto the other” (Deuteronomy 28:64). Nephi, too, foretold this dispersion throughout the word: “It appears that the house of Israel, sooner or later, will be scattered upon all the face of the earth, and also among all nations” (1 Nephi 22:3). It seems that as the tribes of Israel became scattered, they became salt to season the peoples in the areas where they settled (see Matthew 5:13).

The primary covenant blessing promised to the House of Israel in the latter days is that they will be gathered. Christ told the Nephites, “I gather them in from the four quarters of the earth; and then will I fulfil the covenant which the Father hath made unto all the people of the house of Israel” (3 Nephi 16:5). “I shall gather in, from their long dispersion, my people, O house of Israel” (3 Nephi 21:1).

While such promises may suggest that only a particular lineage will be gathered, the Book of Mormon teaches that “God is mindful of every people, whatsoever land they may be in” (Alma 26: 37) and “all are alike unto God” (2 Nephi 26:33). God also promises that he will gather his “lambs” (Isaiah 40:11), his “sheep” (John 10:16; Alma 5:60), and the “elect”: “I will I gather mine elect from the four quarters of the earth, even as many as will believe in me, and hearken unto my voice” (D&C 33:6). None of these analogies specify genealogy.

Likewise, Paul explained, “For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel” (Romans 9:6 NIV). *Belief*, not *lineage*, ultimately governs those who are gathered. Jesus Christ “manifesteth himself unto all those who believe in him, by the power of the Holy Ghost; yea, unto every

108. Joseph Smith, trans., *The Book of Mormon* (Palmyra, New York: E. B. Grandin, 1830), front matter.

109. As discussed above, it is possible that other members of the House of Israel were led to their own Promised Lands in the Americas. If this occurred, they would have introduced their lineages into the general population independent of the Book of Mormon peoples’ contributions.

nation, kindred, tongue, and people, working mighty miracles, signs, and wonders, among the children of men according to their faith” (2 Nephi 26:13). Isaiah wrote: “I will gather *all nations* and tongues; and they shall come, and see my glory” (Isaiah 66:18; emphasis added).

It might be like a shepherd who has a sheep that wanders into the wilderness. When the shepherd searches to find it, he encounters many wild sheep. Rather than focusing only on gathering his own sheep, he invites all the sheep to follow his voice to enjoy his pasture and the subsequent blessings of his constant presence and care.

While some Native Americans today, referred to as Lamanites in modern scripture, may not possess genetic connections to the House of Israel, God’s promises to them are not diminished. Through obedience, they and all nations may join the *gathered* House of Israel, defined as those who “have loved me and kept my commandments” (D&C 29:12).¹¹⁰ Nothing is lost as Christ offers to gather us “as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, if ye will repent and return unto me with full purpose of heart” (3 Nephi 10:6).

Conclusions

Observers who accept the conclusion that the Book of Mormon saga transpired in a limited geographic area — perhaps less than one percent of the Western Hemisphere — can contemplate some of the possible ramifications. First, more than one remnant of the House of Israel might have been led to the Americas without the Book of Mormon prophet-scribes knowing of their existence. Second, evidence of the existence of the Jaredites, Lehiters, and Mulekites may be much more difficult to locate than initially thought because researchers might be looking in the wrong places, or the primary concentration of organic evidence may have been lost. Third, only a subset of Native Americans living in an unknown location today would be expected to have genetic or linguistic ties to the Lamanites. From a Book of Mormon standpoint, all other Amerindians have been numbered with those Lamanites due to their presence in the Americas at the time of the restoration (1830s and beyond). And fourth, as missionary work proceeds, direct ties to the original Book of Mormon peoples are less important as salvific blessings are extended to all.

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110. See also 1 Nephi 14:2; 2 Nephi 10:18, and 3 Nephi 16:13.

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Appendix: Book of Mormon References to “Horse” or “Horses”

Table 5. References to the *horse* in the Book of Mormon, with commentary.

Book of Mormon Reference	Verse	Comments
1 Nephi 18:25	And it came to pass that we did find upon the land of promise, as we journeyed in the wilderness, that there were beasts in the forests of every kind, both the cow and the ox, and the ass and the horse , and the goat and the wild goat, and all manner of wild animals, which were for the use of men.	Wild horses are mentioned along with other wild animals.
2 Nephi 12:7	Their land also is full of silver and gold, neither is there any end of their treasures; their land is also full of <i>horses</i> , neither is there any end of their chariots.	See Isaiah 2:7.
2 Nephi 15:28	Whose arrows shall be sharp, and all their bows bent, and their <i>horses'</i> hoofs shall be counted like flint, and their wheels like a whirlwind, their roaring like a lion.	See Isaiah 5:28.
Enos 1:21	And it came to pass that the people of Nephi did till the land, and raise all manner of grain, and of fruit, and flocks of herds, and flocks of all manner of cattle of every kind, and goats, and wild goats, and also many <i>horses</i> .	Domestication of “many horses” is implied as they were “raised.”
Alma 18:9	And they said unto him: Behold, he is feeding thy <i>horses</i> . Now the king had commanded his servants, previous to the time of the watering of their flocks, that they should prepare his <i>horses</i> and chariots, and conduct him forth to the land of Nephi; for there had been a great feast appointed at the land of Nephi, by the father of Lamoni, who was king over all the land.	One of five associations of horses and chariots. Implied is that they provide transportation for a king.

Book of Mormon Reference	Verse	Comments
Alma 18:10	Now when king Lamoni heard that Ammon was preparing his <i>horses</i> and his chariots he was more astonished, because of the faithfulness of Ammon.	Second of five associations of horses and chariots.
Alma 18:12	And it came to pass that when Ammon had made ready the <i>horses</i> and the chariots for the king and his servants.	Third of five associations of horses and chariots.
Alma 20:6–7	Now when Lamoni had heard this he caused that his servants should make ready his <i>horses</i> and his chariots. And he said unto Ammon: Come, I will go with thee down to the land of Middoni.	Fourth of five associations of horses and chariots. Implied is that horses and chariots provide transportation for a king.
3 Nephi 3:22	... they had taken their <i>horses</i> , and their chariots, and their cattle, and all their flocks, and their herds, and their grain, and all their substance, and did march forth by thousands and by tens of thousands.	Fifth of five associations of horses and chariots. Implied is that the horses may be a source of food.
3 Nephi 4:4	The Nephites being in one body, and having so great a number, and having reserved for themselves provisions, and <i>horses</i> and cattle, and flocks of every kind, that they might subsist for the space of seven years, in the which time they did hope to destroy the robbers from off the face of the land.	Horses are listed with “provisions,” implying a source of food.
3 Nephi 6:1	And now it came to pass that the people of the Nephites did all return to their own lands in the twenty and sixth year, every man, with his family, his flocks and his herds, his horses and his cattle, and all things whatsoever did belong unto them.	Horses included with other sources of food.
3 Nephi 21:14	Yea, wo be unto the Gentiles except they repent; for it shall come to pass in that day, saith the Father, that I will cut off thy <i>horses</i> out of the midst of thee, and I will destroy thy chariots.	Micah 5:10
Ether 9:19	And they also had <i>horses</i> , and asses, and there were elephants and cureloms and cumoms; all of which were useful unto man, and more especially the elephants and cureloms and cumoms.	A separate civilization mentions horses in the context of named unknown animal species (<i>cureloms</i> and <i>cummons</i>)

“IN THE CAUSE ... OF THEIR GOD”: CLARIFYING SOME ISSUES REGARDING THE BOOK OF MORMON AND A GOSPEL VIEW OF WAR

Duane Boyce

Abstract: *A recent effort to think about war concludes that the Book of Mormon displays two righteous approaches to conflict: a violent approach that is justified and therefore “blessed;” and a nonviolent approach that is higher than this and therefore “more blessed” (an approach that is also said to be effective in ending conflict). This effort, however, turns out to be unsuccessful for multiple reasons. Attending to these reasons can be valuable, since doing so can help clarify several important issues about the Book of Mormon and a gospel view of war.*

In an earlier publication, *Even unto Bloodshed: An LDS Perspective on War*¹ (hereafter referred to as *EUB*), I argued that a careful look at the scriptures permits us to create a structure for a comprehensive view of war from a Latter-day Saint perspective. This general framework, stated (for brevity’s sake) in the form of broad principles, is summarized in Table 1.² The framework is derived in part from an examination of classical just-war theory. Initiated by important religious thinkers in centuries past and expanded upon by others (not necessarily religious) in modern times, this theory argues that although war is always to be earnestly and energetically avoided, a given war is just when (a) it is fought for just reasons, and (b) it is conducted in a just way (i.e., the methods of conducting it meet various moral standards). The just-war

1. Duane Boyce, *Even unto Bloodshed: An LDS Perspective on War* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015).

2. This framework appears in *EUB*, 271–73. It is distilled from the analysis conducted in the book’s previous sixteen chapters.

Table 1. A Latter-day Saint Framework Regarding War

A. THE REQUIREMENT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

1. The most important requirement for any society is to be righteous — to be devoted to following God.
2. A society that is not righteous must repent and begin seeking righteousness.
3. As part of this righteousness such a society:
 - (a) must seek to bring its enemies to Christ; and
 - (b) must never provoke or seek conflict, but endeavor vigorously to achieve peace and avoid war.

B. CONDITIONS THAT JUSTIFY WAR AND QUALIFY FOR GOD’S HELP

4. If such a society:
 - (a) is ultimately compelled, as a final resort, to fight in defense of important human values against the aggression of evil leaders;
 - (b) fights only to defend those important human values and not to achieve any unworthy purpose;
 - (c) stands a reasonable chance of success in defending itself; and
 - (d) can reach a reasonable judgment that the benefits of waging a war of defense are proportional to the costs of doing so; then,
 - (e) that society may use military means in its defense, and it will qualify to enjoy God’s help in doing so (in rare cases, He may even fight the necessary battles unilaterally)

C. CONDITIONS THAT GOVERN THE CONDUCT OF WAR AND QUALIFY FOR GOD’S HELP

5. Engaged in such defensive conflict, the society must:
 - (a) foremost, continue to repent and to recognize and embrace its dependence on God and the necessity of faithfulness to Him;
 - (b) maintain a peaceable heart, after the manner of the Sermon on the Mount;
 - (c) spill as little blood as necessary;
 - (d) aim only at legitimate military targets, minimizing civilian suffering and risk — including assuming greater personal risk in order to do so;
 - (e) not use weapons that are intrinsically heinous — that cause mutilation and suffering beyond the need simply to stop the aggressors;
 - (f) engage only in military tactics whose benefits are proportional to their costs;
 - (g) maintain its righteousness of intent in fighting; and
 - (h) end the fighting the minute peace and freedom can be secured without fighting.

framework seeks to identify the broad principles that would satisfy these two moral requirements. The general framework appearing in Table 1 follows this same structure, and indeed adopts several of its provisions from modern academic treatises of just-war theory.³

The framework is also derived from a comprehensive study of the scriptures and the most relevant statements by modern prophets. It also reflects careful consideration of numerous arguments for pacifism — the view that war is never justified⁴ — from both secular and gospel perspectives.

As is evident on even a quick perusal, this framework is constructed specifically for a gospel-based society. Although standard just-war theory provides multiple concepts that, it would seem, many Latter-day Saints would find congenial, the restored gospel supplies additions that are crucial in thinking about Book of Mormon conflicts, for example — and thus that are important for developing a comprehensive LDS perspective on war. *EUB* is an attempt to do just that: to fill out the just-war perspective with essential scriptural principles, and thus to fashion an overall framework regarding war that will resonate with the considered judgments of at least many Latter-day Saint readers.

Because the framework is a distillation of many issues into a few broad moral principles, the principles, by themselves, do not address

3. There are many such treatments, and here I am following Brian Orend, "A Just-War Critique of Realism and Pacifism," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 26 (2001): 437–41. The earliest works on just-war theory include Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), 683, https://archive.org/details/cityofgod0000augu_w6d9/page/682/mode/2up; and St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part II, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1922), <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.188676/page/n1/mode/2up>. Centuries later, Hugo Grotius addressed the topic in much greater detail, in his *On the Law of War and Peace* (Paris: printed by the author, 1625). See Stephen C. Neff, ed., *Hugo Grotius: On the Law of War and Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). A recent classic study is Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 4th ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

4. Pacifism, by definition, is the view that it is always impermissible to either participate in or support war, because war itself is always wrong. See, for example, Martin Ceadel, *Thinking about Peace and War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 5; and Orend, "A Just-War Critique," 455. Providing a definition is important whenever this term is used, since, historically, it has been used to describe multiple different peace-oriented attitudes toward war, including those that do not, in the end, reject all war as a matter of principle. (A discussion of this matter appears in *EUB*, 17–20.)

every question one might want to have answered. Principle B. 4. (a), for example, states that fighting in defense must be a “final resort,” but this should not be taken to entail a prohibition of any and all forms of preemptive action. Chapter 12 in *EUB* addresses the matter of self-defense and preemptive action at some length, specifically treating examples of U.S. involvement in conflict raised by Eugene England. This discussion notes that preemptive action — as a form of necessary and therefore legitimate self-defense — can be appropriate and justified in certain circumstances.⁵ As a general matter, because war entails nearly endless issues of this sort, the just-war framework should not be thought of as a formula that serves to remove all questions. Instead, it is a framework that simply tells us what questions to ask. It identifies the moral considerations that it seems we must account for, analyze, and weigh if we want to reach a thoughtful decision regarding both the justifiability of any given entrance into war, and the conduct of war once it is engaged.

“Another Lens”

One effort toward understanding war, appearing in a recent article by David Pulsipher,⁶ begins by saying there are currently two basic approaches to the Book of Mormon on the topic of violence. One of these, he says, is *EUB* itself, which sees the text as displaying a just-war perspective. The other approach, in contrast, sees the Book of Mormon fundamentally as a pacifist document that condemns all violence.⁷ Both approaches, it is said, are based on their “gravitation” toward certain

5. Morgan Deane argues for the same point about self-defense and preemptive action, specifically in terms of Book of Mormon episodes and the war in Iraq. See his “Offensive Warfare in the Book of Mormon and a Defense of the Bush Doctrine,” in *War and Peace in Our Time: Mormon Perspectives*, eds. Patrick Q. Mason, J. David Pulsipher, and Richard L. Bushman (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), 29–39. Michael Walzer treats the topic at length in Chapter 5, “Anticipations,” of his *Just and Unjust Wars*.

6. J. David Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families and Love Your Enemies: A New Look at the Book of Mormon’s Patterns of Protection,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (2021): 163–83. The same general theme appears in Pulsipher’s earlier article, “The Ammonite Conundrum,” in *War and Peace in Our Time: Mormon*, 1–12.

7. In different places, Pulsipher refers to Joshua Madson, Rick Duran, and Eugene England as representing this type of approach. See Joshua Madson, “A Non-Violent Reading of the Book of Mormon,” in *War and Peace in Our Time*, 13–28; F.R. Rick Duran, “Pax Sanctorum,” in *War and Peace in Our Time*, 57–79; and Eugene England, *Making Peace: Personal Essays* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995). *EUB* addresses all three of these authors (and multiple others) and

passages in the Book of Mormon that support their respective views, a gravitation that leads to competing overall perspectives on the text.

Against these two approaches Pulsipher argues that if we use "another lens" we can see that both approaches to conflict actually appear in the Book of Mormon, and that both are presented as righteous and approved by the Lord. The better way to see the text, therefore, is to recognize that while both responses are presented as righteous, one — the nonviolent response — is presented as *more* righteous: it is "higher" than the alternative. Nonviolent response is higher both because it has "redemptive potential" — it offers "personal sanctifying effects" to the relevant parties — and because it is also more effective in creating long-term peace.⁸ For these reasons, although the just-war approach is justified and "blessed," the nonviolent approach is more than merely justified, and thus is "more blessed." It is the more excellent way.⁹

This way of thinking is unlike most approaches to the Book of Mormon, and the issues Pulsipher raises are important to consider in any attempt to reach conclusions about war. The issues are also the natural ones to emphasize in explicating and defending his "other lens" view. Having a look at them, therefore, is a productive way to gain, and maintain, increased clarity in our own thinking about this topic.¹⁰

shows why their arguments do not succeed. See *EUB*, 131–50, 164–71, and 175–209, respectively.

8. Pulsipher, "Defend Your Families," 178. That nonviolent approaches have redemptive effects and/or potential — indeed, that they possess "transformative power" and the ability to "induce divine blessings that extend down through the generations" — appears in several places in the article (for example, *ibid.*, 169, 170, 175, 177, 178, 179, 183). An upcoming section ("Nonviolent Response: The Issue of Effectiveness") will address the additional claim that nonviolent approaches are also superior in achieving enduring peace.

9. Pulsipher identifies different nonviolent ways of defending against threat, including flight, pacifying one's enemies, and unarmed loving confrontation (variously called "assertive love," "confrontational love," and the like). "Nonviolent" is too passive a term to capture what is involved in actually confronting enemies with love, of course (an approach, it is said, that is characterized by the Ammonites, for instance). Nevertheless, it contrasts with violent approaches to conflict, just as flight and pacification do, so it is naturally included with them under the broad umbrella of "nonviolent" approaches. That is the general category I will use, too, as a way to address them all.

10. In the interest of such clarity in our thinking, it might be useful to point out that the description of *EUB* as gravitating toward a couple of passages (Pulsipher, "Defend Your Families," 166–67), and that it is based fundamentally on "intuition" and "common sense" (*ibid.*, 164n7), is perhaps not the most apt description of

Just-War Theory

Central to Pulsipher's "other lens" approach is the conviction that it is a contrast to just-war theory, both in its secular form and as expressed specifically in *EUB*. He emphasizes this contrast because he understands just-war theory to say that we *should* defend with violence when faced with a threat; we are *supposed to*. Thus, we are told that *EUB* reads the scriptural declaration, "ye shall defend your families even unto bloodshed" (Alma 43:47), to mean that defense "requires" bloodshed — i.e., that "*God requires us to use defensive violence*" when faced with a threat.¹¹ In response to this "just-war" interpretation, the "other lens" approach asserts that such a reading is mistaken because every situation actually presents a choice: God does not *require* that we defend our families with violence; other options are available. Thus, it is claimed, even though defensive violence is a righteous and "blessed" alternative, choosing other, nonviolent options is simply higher and "more blessed."

Clarifying the Just-War Approach

All of this is useful, because it gives occasion to clarify just-war theory, particularly as it appears in *EUB*. The clarification is that, in reality, neither *EUB* nor classical just-war theory says that violent defense is the right response to every threat — that violence is what "should" be pursued. That characterization is completely mistaken. Indeed, an explicit feature of the classical theory is that defensive violence is justified only when the state under attack has "no other reasonable means of defense at its disposal," and "only when other means (such as diplomacy) cannot prevent the conflict." And even all of this applies only when "fundamental human rights" themselves (such as life and liberty) are under violent attack — and when defense is pursued strictly in order to preserve such rights.¹²

Even stricter conditions are outlined in *EUB*, where the concern is specifically with a society (like the Nephites') that is founded on the gospel. Such a society must be righteous, or at least repent and seek righteousness, and must first of all "seek to bring its enemies to Christ." It must also "endeavor vigorously to achieve peace and avoid war," since fighting to preserve important human values is "a *final* resort."

the volume. Most readers, I think, would find its arguments to be both many and detailed, whether they agreed with them or not.

11. Pulsipher, "Defend Your Families," 173.

12. *EUB* identifies the principles of classical just-war theory in Chapter 1. These particular elements appear on p. 8 of that volume.

Moreover, when fighting is actually necessary, a state must make sure to "maintain a peaceable heart," "spill as little blood as necessary" and "end the fighting the minute peace and freedom can be secured without fighting."¹³

EUB, then, does not interpret the command, "ye shall defend your families even unto bloodshed," to mean that the Nephites were *required* to use violence in defending their families whenever they faced a threat. Rather, *EUB* follows the straightforward meaning of the words — namely, that "ye shall defend your families *even if* you must shed blood," or, "ye shall defend your families, even unto bloodshed *if necessary*." That is what "even" means. It is what Mormon explains later, in remarking that the Nephites were to defend themselves "even to the shedding of blood *if it were necessary*" (Alma 48:14).

In other words, neither secular just-war theory nor *EUB* maintains that violent defense is the best option in every threatening situation — and certainly not that it is the *only* option. *EUB* states only that violent defense is *sometimes* the best option, and that when it is, such defense is completely righteous and even commanded by the Lord. Thus, when Pulsipher remarks that this passage (regarding "even unto bloodshed") indicates that violence is "only the most drastic of several options,"¹⁴ he is actually stating the view of *EUB*, not contesting it.¹⁵

Mistaken Examples

This misunderstanding of *EUB*, and of just-war theory generally, leads to a discussion of several scriptural episodes in which Pulsipher says that the parties do the opposite of what just-war theory would direct.¹⁶ Seven of the episodes are:

13. Ibid., 272-73.

14. Pulsipher, "Defend Your Families," 173.

15. Ibid., points to one place in *EUB* that identifies a particular situation in which *EUB* says that "most people" would find a certain killing to be "morally obligatory" (*EUB*, 1). Unfortunately, pointing to this as an assertion that violent defense is required in all situations of threat is a non sequitur. The case being considered is highly specific in its assumptions and conditions, and nothing in its discussion, or anywhere else in *EUB*, generalizes from this specific circumstance, with these specific assumptions, to the conclusion that violent defense is therefore required in all situations of threat. That is a complete mischaracterization of *EUB*.

16. These examples are presented in Pulsipher, "Defend Your Families," 174-78. There is an eighth example — the Ammonites — and this case will be discussed a little later, in its own section.

1. King Limhi's experience in pacifying both the Lamanite king and the Lamanite army when they posed a threat (Mosiah 20).
2. Alma₁'s successful unarmed confrontation of a Lamanite army (Mosiah 23:25–29).
3. The surrender of the priests of Noah to a Lamanite army (Mosiah 23:33–34).
4. Nephi and Lehi, who entered Lamanite territory in order to preach the gospel to them (Helaman 5).
5. The sons of Mosiah, who also entered Lamanite territory in order to preach the gospel to them (Mosiah 28:1–9; Alma 17–27).
6. The conversion of the robbers of Gadianton, through preaching, in two instances (Helaman 6:37; 3 Nephi 5:4–6).
7. The peace that was established due to the Lord's appearance to the Nephites and to His teachings at that time (3 Nephi and 4 Nephi).

Rather than the opposite of what just-war theory would dictate, however, these examples demonstrate instead what it *would* dictate, particularly as formulated in *EUB*. Recall that even when one's cause is just, this framework permits entering conflict only as a final resort, requiring the threatened party to vigorously seek ways to preserve peace instead. And conflict is not even an *option* — in defending the fundamental right to liberty, for example — when (a) there is no reasonable chance of success and (b) the benefits of conflict would not be proportional to its costs. Although examples 1–3 are not identical, they nevertheless all fall under these principles identified in *EUB*. Even more fundamental, of course, is the principle in *EUB* that gospel-based societies are specifically required to seek to bring their enemies to Christ. Examples 4–7 all fall under this principle and exemplify it.

Recognizing all this helps further clarify the *EUB* framework (and just-war theory generally), since these episodes illustrate exactly what that framework would require in their circumstances. They do not fall outside the framework but actually express it. Again, presenting that framework otherwise is a straightforward mistake.

The Central Idea of the “Other Lens” Approach

Clarifying the nature of just-war thinking is valuable, but even more important for gaining increased clarity in our thinking about war is examination of the central idea of Pulsipher's “other lens” approach

itself. Remember, this idea is that violence is never the "more blessed" option in situations of conflict; instead, nonviolent conduct — because it is more effective in achieving peace and because it is redemptive in nature — is always the higher, more blessed choice.

The most fundamental way to begin examining this claim is to ask if it matches the instructions the Lord has actually given to His people. What has He said?

The Lord's Instructions

As previously mentioned, the Lord instructs in the Book of Mormon that "ye shall defend your families even unto bloodshed" (Alma 43:47), which we understand to mean "ye shall defend your families, even unto bloodshed *if necessary*." Indeed, the Nephites were explicitly told this — to defend themselves "even to the shedding of blood *if it were necessary*" (Alma 48:14). This is given as a general command. Such instruction is helpful in our thinking, because it presupposes that there are times when such defense *is* necessary — times when only bloodshed will suffice in protecting the Nephites' lives, families, and way of life. If that were not the case, it is difficult to see how the Lord could have said it. And, at such times — when only violent defense will suffice — the Lord actually prescribes it: "ye *shall*," He says.

We see the same thing when the Lord tells the Nephites they are never to initiate violence, but that they are nevertheless to defend themselves. "Ye shall not suffer yourselves to be slain by the hands of your enemies," He says (Alma 43:46). In context, this statement is referring to active defense, not merely fleeing or hiding, and it too presupposes that there are times when the Nephites *would* be slain by their enemies if they did not actively defend themselves: there are no options *except* such self-defense. As before, if this were not the case, it is difficult to see how the Lord could have said it. And also as before, in such circumstances the Lord actually prescribes self-defense: "ye *shall not* suffer yourselves to be slain," He instructs.

It is in this spirit that Mormon tells us there are occasions when the Lord will actually command His children to enter conflict (Mormon 7:4). Indeed, Captain Moroni explained that it was explicitly because of God's commandments that he took up the sword to defend the cause of his country (Alma 60:28, 34) and that resisting Lamanite invasion was specifically in the interest of "maintaining the cause of our God" (Alma 54:10). We also see that Moroni went to battle against traitors in the government precisely because the Lord instructed him in an explicit

revelation to do so: “ye *shall* go up to battle against them,” the Lord says (Alma 60:33). Not only did the Lord instruct defense in these ways, but the text also indicates that He would *warn* the Nephites “to prepare for war” and that He “would make it known unto them whither they should go to defend themselves against their enemies” (Alma 48:15–16).¹⁷

In this dispensation the Lord has also said that there are times when He will “command” His people to go out to battle (D&C 98:33, 36). All of this is echoed by Joseph Smith. In speaking of the prediction that in the last days it will be “army ... against army,” the Prophet remarked: “It may be that the saints will have to beat their ploughs into swords, for it will not do for men to sit down patiently and see their women and children destroyed.”¹⁸ These statements simply express what the Lord had said earlier: that “ye shall not suffer yourselves to be slain by the hands of your enemies” and “ye shall defend your families even unto bloodshed.”¹⁹

The “other lens” view that nonviolent conduct is always the higher, “more blessed” option maintains that such circumstances never actually

17. Further discussion of this particular passage will appear under “Warnings to Flee” in the later section, “Patterns of Fleeing.”

18. “History, 1838–1856, volume F-1 [1 May 1844–8 August 1844],” 19, *Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-f-1-1-may-1844-8-august-1844/25>. This quotation is taken from Thomas Bullock’s report, which is the most complete firsthand record of the sermon. See also Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center Brigham Young University, 1980), 367. The report of this statement in the Joseph Smith Papers places the word “patiently” at the end of the statement: “[I]t may be that the saints will have to beat their ploughs into swords, for it will not do for men to sit down and see their women and children destroyed patiently.” I have changed placement of the word “patiently” to capture the obvious intent of the statement and thus to improve its clarity. It also might be noted that D&C 134:11 appears to make the same general point about defense. It speaks of persons’ justification in defending themselves against assaults “in times of exigency,” when no other recourse is available to them.

19. One view of the Book of Mormon argues that statements about war made prior to the Lord’s appearance in Third Nephi are no longer normative for us, since there the Lord provides teachings that correct and supersede everything that was said or done before. See Madson, “A Non-Violent Reading of the Book of Mormon.” However, *EUB* examines this claim over the course of two chapters (8 and 9) and shows why it is mistaken. This is useful to note since Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families,” typically refers to Madson’s take as a straightforward alternative to *EUB* — a contrasting but equally valid point of view. I believe *EUB* has already shown this to be mistaken, however.

occur — that “alternatives to violence still exist, even in moments of extremity.”²⁰ However, the Lord’s instructions, as seen here, show that this does not actually appear to be the case. Indeed, the Lord gives them a standing command to defend themselves when necessary. It is true, of course, that even in such aggressive circumstances, nonviolent responses would still be the option to choose if they were available and effective in every circumstance — i.e., if defense were not actually necessary. Unfortunately, the scriptures, including statements from the Lord himself, demonstrate that this is not the case either. This is evident even in the “warning” passage, already mentioned (Alma 48:15–16), where the Lord goes on to say that He will warn the Nephites about what to do (including to prepare for war) “*according to their danger*” (Alma 48:15). This would seem to indicate that the Lord sees that different circumstances call for different responses, and that sometimes the situation will call for active defense.

Such declarations from the Lord and others do not themselves tell us how frequently such circumstances arise, of course, or exactly what form they might take. They do appear to tell us, however, that such circumstances occur — which would seem to indicate that nonviolent conduct is *not* always the higher, more righteous choice. If it were, it is hard to see how the Lord could ever command the opposite — and He does.

In all cases, it is only defensive violence that, when necessary, is commanded by the Lord; aggression is prohibited. This expresses a moral reality that we all recognize, at least tacitly — namely, that a fundamental moral distinction exists between acts of aggression and acts of self-defense, even though both might involve violence. This moral distinction is critical. It means that although all life is precious, it does not follow that all acts that jeopardize life are morally equivalent. No one, for example, would compare the conduct of a victim — who, say, is merely defending himself from being murdered — with the conduct of the aggressor who is attempting to murder him. Both might be acting violently, but morally speaking, their acts are not remotely the same. Aggressors are *violating* the rights of their victims, whereas victims — when all they do is fight back to defend themselves — are only *defending* certain rights. Thus, although both might be committing violent acts, their acts are not morally comparable. As I have pointed out in a different context, it can help to think of all this in terms of simple mistreatment. When aggressors attack their victims, it is obvious that

20. Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families,” 168.

they are mistreating them. But there is no sense in which victims, in merely defending themselves, are mistreating their attackers. How does it *mistreat* a would-be murderer to prevent him from murdering you? In other words, although sanctity exists in all life, and that all, therefore, have a right to be free from violence, those who *seek* violence — who aggressively attack others — forfeit that right. No one does wrong in simply defending themselves from those who are attacking them.²¹

Appreciating that the Lord actually commands active self-defense on occasion is important to our understanding. It also demonstrates why it is no surprise when Helaman, in speaking of Nephites who had been killed in defending against Lamanite aggression, declared that these soldiers had died “*in the cause ... of their God*” (Alma 56:11). According to Helaman, successor to Alma₂ and the Nephites’ prophetic figure at the time, these men had not been lost in military action that was merely justified and approved by God, but in military action that was the very *cause* of God. This statement by Helaman contradicts the point of view expressed in the “other lens” theory of conflict, but it seems to be a direct expression of the repeated and consistent point of view expressed in the Book of Mormon itself.

God’s Choices

In the context of considering what the Lord commands regarding His people’s conduct, it is also useful to consider the Lord’s own behavior. If nonviolent action is always the highest and best option, does this apply to Him as well?

Although Pulsipher wants to restrict his attention to mortals and not to God’s actions,²² he does notice this issue for his theory and addresses it briefly in a footnote — and his conclusion is surprising to say the least. As an instance of the Lord’s violence, he notes that in Third Nephi the Lord “wiped out a significant portion of the population prior to Christ’s visit.” Tying this incident into his reading of particular verses in D&C 98 (a matter that will be discussed shortly), he then adds that “the violence is clearly justified — but not necessarily required or redemptive — and is characterized as a choice for which God takes complete responsibility.”

21. See Duane Boyce, “Captain Moroni and the Sermon on the Mount: Resolving a Scriptural Tension,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (2021): 127–62. Much more on the topic, including the concept of forfeiture, appears in *EUB*, 20–31.

22. See Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families,” 163n2.

He then remarks that "God openly acknowledges this decision and fully accepts its consequences."²³

The upshot, in other words, is that God chose the "justified" option in this situation — not the "redemptive" and more blessed option — and that He takes full responsibility for doing so. And this, of course, is just a longer way of saying that God chose the lesser of the options before Him. This is evident, not only because that choice is identified as merely "justified" — which is Pulsipher's explicit term for referring to the lesser, violent option²⁴ — but also because there would be no reason to say that God "takes complete responsibility" and "fully accepts its consequences" if He were *not* seen as choosing the lesser option.²⁵

On the face of it, this clearly seems to be a problem; and it is compounded by noticing that the episode in Third Nephi is far from the Lord's only recorded act of violence. From the destruction at the time of Noah (Gen. 7:13; Moses 7:34, 43), to the ruin He will visit on the wicked incident to His Second Coming,²⁶ and including multiple episodes in between,²⁷ the scriptures speak of numerous instances of the Lord acting violently. According to the remarks made about Third Nephi, all of these must *also* be examples of the Lord's choosing the lesser of the options before Him. And all of this, then, entails the overall conclusion that *God simply does not always choose what is best*. Moreover, it *also* follows that since we know what is best (because the "other lens" theory tells us), we are in a position to identify where God Himself has not chosen it, and thus where He could have done better.²⁸

23. Ibid., 177–78n24.

24. See the upcoming discussion in the section "Doctrine and Covenants 98:23–31."

25. Although Pulsipher states that the Lord's choice in this situation is "not necessarily" redemptive, this would seem to be an illegitimate qualifier. One of the reasons nonviolent action is purported to be superior to violent action in the first place is precisely because violent action is *not* redemptive in character while nonviolent action is. It seems inconsistent, then, to say that in this particular case it was *not necessarily* redemptive; by definition, as an act of violence, it *could not have been* redemptive. Pulsipher seems to be trying to mitigate the logical conclusion of his argument by saying "not necessarily," but, because of his own definition, it is hard to see how the attempt can succeed.

26. For example: Malachi 4:1; Isaiah 11:4; 66:15–16; 1 Nephi 22:23; 2 Nephi 30:10; Doctrine and Covenants 1:13; 29:17; 45:50; 63:34; 133:50–51.

27. See, for example: Genesis 19:24–29; Exodus 9, 12, 14; John 2:14–17; Matthew 21:12–13; Jacob 7:15–20; Alma 19:21–23; Alma 33:10.

28. It might be argued by some that we cannot be certain of the veracity of every scriptural report, including those regarding the Lord, and thus that we should be

This is an unwelcome outcome, to be sure. Nevertheless, it is what the theory entails when taken to its logical conclusion. A different approach would be to say that the standard is simply different for God than it is for mortals. It is natural to reason that (1) since God, being both holy and omniscient, always chooses what is best, and (2) since He does not always choose the nonviolent option, then (3) the nonviolent option *cannot always be* what is best. Indeed, when God chooses violence, it must be because that is *exactly* the best, most holy response in the situation — otherwise, He simply would not choose it. This is an obvious argument, and Pulsipher could make something like it in the context of his theory about mortals. He does not do this, however. Instead, in his commitment to seeing nonviolence as always the highest and best choice, he is willing to entertain the idea that even God does not always choose what would be best for Him to choose.

The difficulties do not end there, however. To see this, let's suppose Pulsipher reconsidered the matter and decided that God, being both holy and omniscient, does always choose what is best. Although that would seem to make sense, the problem is that this recognition actually undermines his entire “other lens” theory. Indeed, it simply underscores what we saw previously regarding the Lord's instructions: He also always instructs what is best. In other words: (1) since God, being both holy and omniscient, always chooses what is best, this means that (2) He also always instructs what is best; and (3) since, as we saw in the previous section, He does not always instruct mortals to choose the nonviolent option, then (4) the nonviolent option *cannot always be* what is best. Indeed, when God instructs His people to use violence, it must be because that is *exactly* the best, most holy response available — otherwise, He simply would not direct it ... and He does.

Thinking about the central idea of this “other lens” approach, then — i.e., that nonviolent response is always the higher, more blessed option — is a valuable way to clarify our thinking, because doing so seems clearly to demonstrate that the idea cannot be true. Because the Lord actually presupposes that violence is necessary in some situations, and also straightforwardly prescribes it for those times, it seems clear that nonviolence is *not* always the higher, more blessed option. In other words,

careful in applying much weight to these reports of His violence. The demerits of this kind of view, at least in one specific context regarding war in the Book of Mormon, are addressed in *EUB*, 115–25. This matter is not a concern in looking at Pulsipher's theory, however, since he never expresses skepticism about the trustworthiness of scriptural reports. That is not an issue he raises.

sometimes nonviolent response is the highest and best option, while at other times violent response is the highest and best option. Indeed, these latter cases present circumstances in which military defense is the very "*cause*" of the Lord. For both mortals and God, different situations call for different responses. That is what the scriptures clearly seem to show us — which tells us that nonviolent response cannot invariably be the highest and best option.²⁹

Now, if the only concern were to accept or reject this overall "other lens" theory, it would be possible to leave the matter there. The theory can be set aside. Nevertheless, there are additional arguments appearing in Pulsipher's presentation that are said to support the theory — arguments based on: particular verses in Doctrine and Covenants 98; the purported effectiveness of nonviolent action in achieving peace; patterns of flight in the Book of Mormon in situations of threat; and the role of "moral imagination" in the ability to embrace nonviolent approaches to conflict. It is valuable to consider these additional arguments as well because none of them actually succeeds — and seeing why they do not succeed can help clarify our thinking about war even further.

Doctrine and Covenants 98:23–31

In developing his "other lens" theory, Pulsipher sees certain verses in D&C 98 as key in thinking about Book of Mormon wars. Drawing from the section's discussion, in vv. 23–31, of trespasses, smittings, bearing patiently, suffering offense three times, and so forth, Pulsipher concludes that although violent defense is justified, it is never required. Mortals are permitted to choose between a justified and blessed option (such as violent defense) on one hand, and a higher, "more blessed" option (i.e., nonviolent conduct, such as continuing to "bear patiently"), on the other.

29. This recognition is relevant to Pulsipher's assertion that God will grant us the ability to see what we *want* to see in the text: if we want to see a record full of divinely justified violence, God will grant it; and if we want to see a record showing patterns of "more blessed" conduct, he will grant that (Pulsipher, "Defend Your Families," 183). This proposition, though, is based on the assumption that the distinction between "blessed" and "more blessed" options exists in the first place. We have seen, though, that the record actually seems to show that it doesn't: different responses are right for different circumstances. If we see something contrary to this in the text, therefore, it is difficult to see how God can be the one granting it.

“A Commandment”

However, appealing to Section 98 creates a number of challenges for this “other lens” view. For example, after specifying certain conditions that must be met, the Lord says He will actually give His people “a commandment, and justify them in going out to battle” (v. 36). An earlier verse also presupposes that there are times when the Lord will actually “command” going to battle (v. 33). This appears to indicate what we saw earlier — namely, that going to battle is not necessarily something lesser: it is difficult to understand how it can really be the less-blessed option when the Lord is *commanding* it.

Questionable Application to Book of Mormon Wars

A more general difficulty arises when trying to apply Pulsipher’s interpretation of vv. 23–31 to Book of Mormon wars. He begins by quoting vv. 28–31, where the Lord’s comments are based on the concept of “smiting” that He introduced in vv. 23–26. The idea is that if we patiently bear a smiting three times, without reviling or seeking revenge, the Lord will greatly reward us; these three testimonies, however, will nevertheless stand against that enemy. Then, if our enemy escapes God’s vengeance for these smittings — so that “he be not brought into judgment before me” — the enemy is to be warned in the name of the Lord “that he come no more upon you, neither upon your family ... unto the third and fourth generation” (v. 28). At that point, if this enemy does come upon our family at any time unto the third and fourth generation, then, the Lord says: “I have delivered thine enemy into thine hands.” If we spare him, we will be blessed, but we are nevertheless “justified” if we do not (v. 31).

This set of verses is said to teach that we face a choice in situations of violence: we can either respond with violence of our own (which is “justified”), or we can respond without violence and spare our enemy (which is “rewarded”). One act is approved, whereas the other is actually rewarded; nevertheless, we get to choose. This framework is then applied to all situations of threat and violence in the Book of Mormon. The conclusion is that Nephite leaders were certainly righteous and justified when they chose to respond to aggression with violent defense (such acts were “blessed”), but that when they chose to respond without violence their actions were “more blessed.” Nevertheless, the choice was theirs.

Now the first thing we might notice about this presentation is that this emphasis on mortals’ choice is not easy to square with the Lord’s statements elsewhere in this section (and mentioned previously) that

there are times when He will actually command going to battle. Such language works against the idea that going to battle is always mortals' choice.

The difficulty continues when we try to apply Pulsipher's approach specifically to Book of Mormon wars — an application that he explicitly wants to make. Note, for instance, that these verses in Section 98 describe the offense that one suffers as a "smiting." Now, we do not know exactly what that means, but we do know it is something that we can "bear patiently," and that a wrong response to it would simply be to "revile" against our enemy. But this does not sound like the kind of attacks we observe in Book of Mormon conflicts. The Lamanites' large-scale invasions, which were meant to murder the Nephites and to overthrow their society, do not seem best described as a "smiting." They were attacks that included the massacre of Nephites, including the killing of women and children. (The nature and extent of Lamanite aggression is discussed in the upcoming section, "The Sons of Mosiah.") Nor does it seem likely — if the Lord actually had such large-scale, lethal aggression in mind — that He would specifically prohibit *reviling* as a response to it. That is not the reaction people would have to being killed, or to seeing their loved ones being killed, so why would the Lord prohibit a response that people would not even have? Such considerations clearly seem to indicate that, contrary to what the "other lens" approach assumes, the Lord was not actually contemplating these large-scale Book of Mormon conflicts when speaking in vv. 23–31.

This problem is amplified by the Lord's command in these verses that a "smiting" is also to be borne patiently three separate times. If we think this applies straightforwardly to Book of Mormon wars, then a "smiting" would likely indicate something like an actual attack — which, if so, would seem to mean that the Nephites were required to bear such assaults (including, again, the killing of women and children at times) three separate times (and without reviling along the way) before responding — either by defending themselves against their attackers, or by sparing them. But if that were the case, it is hard to see how the Lamanites could *fail* to murder and overthrow the Nephites. Indeed, if the Nephites could not defend themselves until after at least three attacks, it is hard to see why three attacks would even be necessary: a single sustained assault would suffice to murder many and to take over the society — all while the Nephites waited patiently for a second and third attack.³⁰

30. We might be tempted to think that the Lamanites would have simply abandoned their aggression in the face of such non-response from the Nephites.

This, too, would seem to indicate that the verses Pulsipher focuses on in Section 98 are not, as he thinks, actually speaking about what we see in Book of Mormon wars. On the face of it, at least, it appears that if they were, they would essentially be describing how Nephite society should respond after it has been effectively liquidated and no longer even exists.³¹

In multiple ways, then, this particular appeal to Section 98, based on vv. 23–31, does not appear to support the “other lens” approach to Book of Mormon conflicts. Not only do other statements in that section (regarding the Lord’s commands) appear to contradict the claims of the approach, but these verses also appear to presuppose circumstances that are different from those found in Book of Mormon conflicts in the first place.

In light of all this, it is worth noting that D&C 98, in general, poses challenges in trying to understand and apply its various statements to any and all conflict situations. This seems apparent from this discussion of vv. 23–31 — and it is actually compounded in vv. 32–36. Here the terms and context seem to shift dramatically. Unlike in vv. 23–31, for

However, although the Ammonite episode, for example, seems to demonstrate exactly that kind of outcome, the matter is actually not this simple. As will be seen in an upcoming section, and in Appendix A, not only was the Ammonites’ attitude toward aggression far more nuanced than simply a commitment to bear such assault patiently, but their approach also did not bring aggression to an end.

31. These verses do, of course, appear to apply to offenses that occur on a smaller scale. For example, in v. 32 the Lord states that what He has just described in vv. 23–31 is the law He had given to Nephi (and other ancient leaders), and, indeed, these verses seem to apply quite naturally to Nephi’s experiences with Laman and Lemuel. The passage locates the idea of offense or mistreatment (“smiting”) specifically at the individual or family level, for example, and it also identifies the mistreatment as something that can, and should, be borne patiently three times. Consistent with such conditions, we observe Laman and Lemuel beating Nephi with a rod, tying him in the wilderness (intending to leave him to die), stating their desire to kill him, threatening to throw him into the sea, binding him on the ship, and seeking, again, to kill him (see 1 Nephi 3:28–29; 7:16–21; 16:37–39; 17:48–55; 18:11–21; 2 Nephi 5:1–4, 19). The Lord protected Nephi throughout — he was never in any imminent jeopardy of losing his life — but Nephi suffered from their mistreatment nonetheless. Yet in none of these episodes did Nephi revile against his brothers or seek revenge; instead, he forgave them and moved forward. Pulsipher’s focus on vv. 23–31 would therefore seem appropriate if he were talking about Nephi and his brothers. Unfortunately, he is not. Instead, he assumes that these verses apply seamlessly to the large-scale wars that are reported in the Book of Mormon, and, as the discussion in this section indicates, that assumption seems to encounter serious textual and logical obstacles.

example, the text here does not speak in terms of “you” or “your family,” but instead of whole *nations*. And there is no mention of a people actually needing to be smitten three times in some way by an aggressor nation (and needing to bear it patiently each time), but instead of that nation simply “*proclaiming*” war and of the aggressed people lifting a standard of peace three times in response. That seems to be very different in context and scale, and even in detail, from what we see outlined in vv. 23–31 (and that, as seen in note 31, appears to apply so neatly to Nephi and his brothers). And because of this shift in context, scale, and detail, it is difficult to tell if the various elements in all of these verses (23–31 and 32–36) are to be combined into a single standard that applies to all situations and scales, or if they actually identify different standards that apply to *different* situations and scales. The second interpretation seems convincing to me, but it is difficult to imagine achieving anything like universal agreement on this. In any event, similar shifts in meaning and context continue throughout the section. As a result, D&C 98, in general, poses challenges in determining how best to understand and apply its various statements.³²

Nonviolent Response: The Issue of Effectiveness

A pervasive theme in Pulsipher’s “other lens” approach is the purported *effectiveness* of nonviolent options in dealing with aggression. We are told, for instance, that while armed defense can produce “periodic peace,” nonviolent options have the capacity “to protect families and communities in the long term,” and that they are “more effective.”³³ It is said that such effectiveness is evident in the case of the Ammonites, the Sons of Mosiah, Nephi and Lehi (of Helaman 5), two instances with the Gadianton robbers, and the widespread peace following the Lord’s appearance and teaching in Third Nephi.³⁴ Through these historical episodes, “the narrative extols the long-term peace” that such methods achieve.³⁵ Expressions of the “higher law,” such nonviolent approaches are thus described as “more efficacious,”³⁶ and as “effective in achieving enduring peace.”³⁷

32. Some of these challenges are identified and discussed in *EUB*, 250–55. Related matters also appear there on pages 156–64.

33. Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families,” 178, 179, 183.

34. For discussions of these episodes, see *ibid.*, 175–78.

35. *Ibid.*, 178.

36. *Ibid.*, 177, 179.

37. *Ibid.*, 177.

All of this is highly appealing, of course, and I imagine that those who think seriously about these issues would certainly like it to be true. Considering these cases serves to sharpen our thinking — which is important — but, unfortunately, doing so also seems to show the claim to be mistaken. Let's look at the examples to see why.

The Ammonites

In addition to the seven examples addressed earlier,³⁸ the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, or Ammonites, of Alma 24 are also included as an example of the “more blessed” way.³⁹ Their self-sacrifice in submitting to their Lamanite attackers is emphasized as an example of such nonviolent methods. It is also said that their conduct illustrates the effectiveness of a peaceful approach to conflict in contrast to a resort to arms. As mentioned earlier, the “other lens” theory sees nonviolent approaches as universally more effective than active self-defense, and the Ammonites are presented as a prime example of this. Through episodes like theirs, again, “the narrative extols the long-term peace” that such strategies achieve.⁴⁰

In approaching this topic, it is important to understand at the outset that the Ammonites did not, as a matter of course, actually choose the higher, “more blessed” option of nonviolence in all of their approaches to conflict. This might seem surprising, but they were not, as is sometimes thought, actually opposed to all violence as a matter of principle. (They actively provided material support to the Nephites' military actions, for example (Alma 43:13; 56:27).) However, for those who are accustomed to thinking of the Ammonites differently, and who are interested in the issue, a more detailed discussion of this subject appears in Appendix A. For present purposes, I will take the Ammonites' non-pacifist attitude as understood and focus specifically on the issue of the effectiveness of nonviolent response as it appears in their case.

On the surface, of course, it actually seems obvious that the account we have of the Ammonites demonstrates the effectiveness of nonviolence — and in their case, of complete self-sacrifice — in ending conflict. The well-known outcome of the Lamanites' first attack on them (Alma 24:20–27) clearly seems to display this.

The difficulty, though, is that subsequent elements of the text undermine this conclusion. For example, the text shows us that after abandoning their assault on the Ammonites in Alma 24, the Lamanites

38. See “Mistaken Examples” in the section, “Another Lens.”

39. Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families,” 175–76.

40. *Ibid.*, 178.

simply turned their attention to other targets: destroying the city of Ammonihah and, under the governance of a Nephite dissenter, killing other Lamanite believers (Alma 25:1–7). Thus, although the conflict ended for the Ammonites themselves in prostrating themselves before their enemies, the aggression did not *actually* end but merely turned in another direction.⁴¹

Now, in light of this outcome, it might be tempting to think that if only these others had behaved the same way the Ammonites did, then all conflict *would* have ended — and it is merely because they did not behave that way that the aggression continued.

The problem with this idea, however, is that the Ammonite story itself tells us that this is not the case. Remember that after the second attack upon the Ammonites (Alma 27:2–3), the Lord Himself instructed the Ammonites to leave their lands for safety, observing that they would face further assault and “perish” if they remained (Alma 27:11–12). This makes it clear that the Lord knew the Ammonites would not end aggression by prostrating themselves in front of their enemies. Indeed, He instructed them not to do so precisely because He foresaw that such conduct would *not* end the aggression against them.

The record shows quite clearly that this was the case. The Lamanites sought to attack the Ammonites on a third occasion, for example, and they turned away only because of the presence of a well-equipped Nephite army (Alma 43:11–22). Thwarted in this effort, the Lamanites then simply turned their aggression toward other targets (v. 22), just as they had after their first attack. In addition, along with the Nephites generally, the Ammonites were then protected throughout the long war both by the Nephite army in general and by their own sons in that army.

The story of the Ammonites, then, does not actually support the claim that nonviolent response is effective in ending conflict, much less that it is more effective than active defense. And the Ammonites themselves knew this. Keep in mind that after they emigrated to the land of Jershon, they never again followed the strategy of self-sacrifice, even though they had further opportunities to do so. In the third attack mentioned previously, for instance, the Lamanites were turned away because the Ammonites were protected by a Nephite army. We have no report that the Ammonites even considered a course of self-sacrifice

41. That this aggression did not actually end, but was “redirected” toward others, is mentioned in a footnote (ibid., 176n21). The body of the paper itself, however, overlooks this and says that the aggressors were convinced “to abandon their deadly designs” (ibid., 176) — which they did not actually do.

at this time — although that is exactly what we would expect if they believed that doing so was really the most effective way to end conflict.

Perhaps most revealingly, the Ammonites did not pursue a strategy of self-sacrifice even when their own sons went to war to assist the Nephites' defense (Alma 53). If the Ammonites had considered this strategy to be so effective in ending conflict, surely the chance to spare their sons' entrance into war would have been the time to use it. If they felt they could bring the war to an end — thereby saving their sons' lives — why wouldn't they? Yet they did nothing like this.

On multiple occasions, then, even when they had the opportunity to do so, the Ammonites did not follow a strategy of self-sacrifice. They patterned themselves after what the Lord had told them following the second attack — namely, that doing so would actually *not* cease the aggression against them.

The Ammonite story, then, does not lend support to the “other lens” theory. The record shows (as seen in Appendix A) that the Ammonites did not, as a matter of course, actually choose the “higher, more blessed” option (which indicates that they, at least, did not believe it necessarily *was* the higher, more blessed option.)

Their story also does not support the claim that nonviolent response is effective in bringing conflict to an end. If that were true, then: their attackers (in Alma 24) would not have simply turned their aggression toward others, as they did; the Lamanites would not have attacked the Ammonites a second time, as they did (in Alma 27); they would not have attempted to attack the Ammonites a third time, as they did (in Alma 43); the Ammonites would not have needed protection throughout the long war, both by the Nephite army and by their own sons, as they did; and, most tellingly, if it were true that nonviolent response is effective in bringing conflict to an end, the Lord would not have said that it would *not* do so for the Ammonites, as He did.

In the end, not only does the Ammonite story in general disconfirm the claim that nonviolent response is effective in ending aggression, but the Lord Himself straightforwardly disconfirms it as well.

Nephi and Lehi, the Gadianton Robbers, and Third Nephi

Pulsipher also appeals to additional episodes that are thought to demonstrate the effectiveness of non-violent approaches. They are: (1) the miraculous events surrounding the missionary efforts of Nephi and Lehi — a success in conversion that actually led to the return of captured Nephite lands that the Nephites had been unable to retake by force

(Helaman 5); (2) the similarly miraculous conversion of the Gadianton robbers in Helaman (Helaman 6:37); (3) the similar instance with the Gadianton robbers in Third Nephi (3 Nephi 5:4–6); and (4) the universal conversion and lasting peace that followed the Lord's appearance to the Nephites and His teachings on that occasion (3 Nephi and 4 Nephi).

These four missionary successes in establishing peace are presented as a contrast to the merely partial successes that had been achieved through armed conflict and are therefore taken as evidence of the greater effectiveness of the nonviolent approach.

These episodes are miraculous spiritual triumphs that should be celebrated, to be sure, but, in the end, they do not actually justify drawing this conclusion. There are two reasons for this.

Inaccurate Examples

In the first place, two of the examples do not actually reflect what they might appear to reflect. Think of the conversion of the Gadianton robbers appearing in Third Nephi (3 Nephi 5:4–6). This conversion occurred among particular robbers who, after much war (described in 3 Nephi 4), had actually been taken as prisoners of war. That was the setting in which they were taught the gospel. Their account is not an example of missionary work in which aggressors were converted in their own habitat by intrepid missionaries who had trudged there to teach them. As the record spells out, it is actually an example of missionary work among aggressors: (1) whose fellow aggressors had been killed in a series of wars by the thousands (one of these wars constituted the greatest number of dead in Lehiite history; see 3 Nephi 4:11); (2) whose leader had been executed by hanging following their eventual defeat; (3) who themselves had been defeated in war and imprisoned; and (4) whose fellow prisoners — persisting in their evil desires and refusing to enter a covenant of peace — were also killed (the record says "punished," but that likely meant "executed").

This episode of missionary work, then, is not the straightforward example of the nonviolent, peaceful approach that it might appear to be on the surface. Not only were many of the aggressors killed to begin with, but even many who were taken as prisoners were still not converted by the preaching they received, and they too were killed. It cannot really be said of this episode, then, that peace was achieved through the means of simply teaching the gospel.

The experience of the Lord's appearance to the Nephites is no different. It is useful to remember that that appearance, and the Savior's teachings

on this occasion, were preceded by the Lord's destruction of thousands of the wicked (3 Nephi 9:1-12). This included not only Nephites, but also Lamanites and followers of Gadianton (the cities mentioned in vv. 9 and 10 would seem to make this clear) — and, obviously, such clearing of the field dramatically improved the prospects for missionary success. So even this episode of teaching is not divorced from preceding acts — this time, divine acts — of violence toward the wicked. It is misleading, therefore, to be told that in the wake of this teaching experience, the disciples “eliminate all human violence” and that “there is no violence in the land — not even justified violence.”⁴² The reality is that the Lord actually committed a lot of violence to help make this possible.

It cannot really be said of this episode, either, then, that peace was achieved through the means of simply teaching the gospel. The Lord's widespread violence toward the wicked was actually central to the missionary success and peace that followed.

Invalid Generalization

But there is a second difficulty. The difficulty is that all of these episodes are actually anomalies as missionary experiences go; and, as anomalies, we cannot simply generalize from them to conclude that all missionary efforts would achieve such results. Even the sons of Mosiah did not achieve the level of success we see in these cases, for example — much less anyone else. It is hardly the norm, after all, for the Lord (as He did in Third Nephi) to drastically thin the field — destroying thousands of the wicked ahead of time — as a prelude to the launching of a major missionary effort.

Moreover, missionary success is far from guaranteed even when attended by significant miraculous events. The voice of the Lord, visitation by an angel, and multiple significant miracles were not enough to convert Laman and Lemuel, for example. Nor were the numerous miracles and signs prior to the Lord's birth — and concurrent with it — enough to convert, and to keep converted, many of the Nephites living at that time (Helaman 16:14–23; 3 Nephi 2:1–3). And even the Lord's own earthly ministry — performed “in power and great glory” and filled with miracles⁴³ — was not enough to convert the scribes and Pharisees and the mob that called out for His death. All of these situations exemplified sustained, powerful, and miraculous teaching of the gospel, and yet

42. Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families,” 178.

43. “In power and great glory” is how Nephi describes the Savior's ministry (1 Nephi 11:28).

none of them succeeded in sustained conversion and the end of conflict. Aggression occurred anyway.

What the episodes of Nephi and Lehi, the Gadianton robbers, and Third Nephi actually seem to demonstrate is simply what *EUB* emphasizes — namely, that the first duty of a gospel-based society is to attempt to bring its enemies to Christ. That is first. But it does not follow from this that it is always, or even often, sufficient. It was sufficient in a couple of dramatic episodes in Book of Mormon history, but that is exactly why they are anomalous: it was *not* sufficient in far more historical cases. Even one case regarding the Gadianton robbers, and the success following the Lord's visit in Third Nephi — though still anomalous — still do not show that teaching the gospel is *sufficient*. What the text actually appears to show — and quite clearly — is that it is not.

The Sons of Mosiah

The sons of Mosiah are also offered as an example of the effectiveness of peaceful approaches, in general, to ending conflict. Their story seems a natural one to raise, and it is important to consider because, on the surface at least, it appears to support the idea (1) that there is a clear-cut distinction between a nonviolent approach, like doing missionary work, and the violent approach of engaging in active self-defense; and (2) that the nonviolent approach is the more effective of the two ways.

What their story actually shows, however, is that it is not this simple.

Lamanite Aggression and Hatred

To see this, remember that the Lamanites launched wars against the Nephites during the entire time the sons of Mosiah were laboring among them⁴⁴ — and in at least some of these wars, these assailants included those who had actually been taught by the sons of Mosiah.⁴⁵ Thus, while

44. The sons of Mosiah embarked on their mission in the first year of the reign of the judges and continued for fourteen years (Alma 17:4, 6). The first war during that fourteen-year period occurred in the fifth year (Alma 2) and the second, "not many days after" (Alma 3:20). The third war occurred six years later (Alma 16:1), and we are told of another attack "in the fourteenth year of the reign of the judges" (Alma 16:12). The text thus reports four wars launched by the Lamanites during the missionary labors of the sons of Mosiah.

45. That those who became converted were involved in at least some of these attacks is certain. The text tells us that many Lamanites, after having suffered the losses and tribulations of war, began to remember what they had been taught by Aaron and other missionaries, and this led to their conversion (Alma 25:6). In addition, King Lamoni's father — who became converted — held a position of

it is true that these sons' missionary labors were successful, it is also true that their loved ones back home were simultaneously suffering attack and death from those very Lamanites. The Nephites had to defend their lives and their society *despite* these sons' missionary labors.

Note also that the missionary success of the sons of Mosiah — while significant and even miraculous — was still only partial. While they converted thousands, there were also thousands they did not convert — and such belligerents continued unabated in their aggression against the Nephites and the new converts (see Alma 24, 25, 27, 28).

Such features of the record demonstrate that it was not merely an idle command when the Lord instructed the Nephites to defend themselves when necessary; the Nephites *needed* to defend themselves from Lamanite attack — and this appears to have been true regardless of missionary efforts to convert them. This is a crucial point. The record speaks of Nephite efforts to “restore the Lamanites to the knowledge of the truth” and reports that they did so “diligently” (see Jacob 7:24; Enos 1:11–14, 20). Enos describes his own “many long strugglings” in prayer for the Lamanites and of his desire that “they might be brought unto salvation” (Enos 1:11–13). He also speaks of “*our* strugglings” to restore them “to the true faith” (Enos 1:14), indicating that he was not alone in his efforts to reach the Lamanites. Indeed, he reports that the people of Nephi *in general* sought “diligently” to restore the Lamanites to faith in God (Enos 1:20). And one group of Nephites found themselves “filled with pain and anguish” for the welfare of the Lamanites' souls (Mosiah 25:11).

The problem is that reaching the Lamanites always appears to have been an uphill battle. Keep in mind that they were prone to attack and to wage war against the Nephites from the very beginning. Jacob tells us that Nephi himself had to fight to defend his people from Lamanite assault (Jacob 1:10; also 2 Ne. 5:14), and aggressive wars are also reported by Jacob (Jacob 7:24), Enos (Enos 1:20), Jarom (Jarom 1:6), Abinadom (Omni 1:10), Amaleki (Omni 1:24), Zeniff (Mosiah 9, 10, 19–21), and Mormon (Words of Mormon 1:13–14). This is a record of aggression starting centuries before the detailed reports we get in Alma₂'s time and spanning the first four hundred and sixty years or so of Book of Mormon history.

preeminence among the Lamanites during at least part of the time the Lamanites were launching these wars (Alma 20:8; 22:1). His position would obviously have guaranteed involvement in the aggression.

We also know that Lamanite aggression was fueled by their hatred of the Nephites. Jacob, for example, writes in the earliest days of Lamanite "hatred" and also reports that the Lamanites "delighted in wars and bloodshed," that they "had an eternal hatred against us," and sought "by the power of their arms to destroy us continually" (Jacob 7:24). Later, Enos speaks of the Lamanites' "wrath" and of their desire to "destroy our records and us" (Enos 1:14). He also reports that "their hatred was fixed" and that they "were continually seeking to destroy us" (Enos 1:20).

Years later Jarom reports that the Lamanites "loved murder" (Jarom 1:6), and a hundred and twenty years after that Zeniff describes the Lamanites as having an "eternal hatred towards the children of Nephi," and reports that they "taught their children that they should hate" the Nephites and "do all they could to destroy them" (Mosiah 10:17). King Benjamin also speaks of the Lamanites' "hatred" toward the Nephites (Mosiah 1:14), and Mormon corroborates the account, reporting that "the Lamanites were taught to hate the children of Nephi from the beginning" (4 Ne. 1:39). Indeed, the record tells us that one of the explicit purposes of the sons of Mosiah in laboring among the Lamanites was "to cure them of their hatred toward the Nephites" (Mosiah 28:2). Ammon himself tells us that the Lamanites, prior to their conversion, were "racked with hatred against us" and were "in the darkest abyss" and in "the pains of hell" (Alma 26:9, 3, 13). And he reports this *after* he had lived with them for fourteen years and thus was intimately acquainted with their attitudes and cultural practices.

Such hatred of the Nephites led to extreme aggression. Mormon reports of one sustained Lamanite assault that it resulted in a "great slaughter" of the Nephites — a slaughter that included "women, and children" (Helaman 1:27). Captain Moroni also reports at one point that the Lamanites "are murdering our people with the sword," including "our women and our children" (Alma 60:17). Indeed, we learn that Moroni, and the Nephites generally, fought to prevent "their *wives* and their *children*" from being "massacred by the barbarous cruelty" of those who would destroy them (Alma 48:24). Indeed, this was one of the Lamanites' explicit aims — to "slay and massacre" the Nephites (Alma 49:7). One Lamanite leader (a Nephite dissenter who joined the Lamanites and fueled their anger against the Nephites) declared that the Lamanites' aggression would be "eternal" — it would continue either to the complete subjugation of the Nephites or to their "eternal extinction" (Alma 54:20).

All of this would appear to make clear that the Nephites did not face a simple choice between teaching the gospel and taking up arms to defend themselves. They tried to teach the gospel and *still* had to take up arms to defend themselves. Both Jacob and Enos observed that efforts in their day to teach the Lamanites were “vain” (Jacob 7:24; Enos 1:20), and nothing in the record suggests that the Lamanites became easier to teach as time went on.

Ammon

This combination of missionary work and violence is evident even in the personal story of Ammon. Although, with the other sons of Mosiah, Ammon embarked on his mission with a desire to share the gospel, that did not stop him from wielding a sword and killing enemies when circumstances became threatening, and defense was required. He did nothing close to teaching the gospel at the waters of Sebus, for example, but instead killed some of the plunderers and permanently maimed others — and would have caused even greater damage had they not begun “to flee before him” (Alma 17:26–39). And Ammon later threatened to kill the father of King Lamoni *twice*, first in self-defense and then in order to extract a promise from him (Alma 20:7–28).

Such features of the record caution us against thinking that life with aggressive neighbors offers us two simple and discrete alternatives: either engage in violent self-defense or pursue a nonviolent path, such as missionary work (a path that will also be more effective). Pulsipher treats the sons of Mosiah as if that is what they show, but the reality appears to be far more complex. Not only did the Nephites have to defend themselves during the whole time the sons of Mosiah were on their mission (which Ammon also had to do — and also while he was *on* his mission), but they had to do so afterward as well. Though miraculously successful, the sons of Mosiah did not convert everyone, and they did not actually bring aggression to an end. At the time of the sons of Mosiah (and at other times throughout their history, evidently) the Nephites did both simultaneously. And the same was true of Ammon personally. He was on a mission, but that mission included both teaching the gospel *and* taking up the sword when necessary.

The record thus seems to belie any notion that if, rather than defending themselves (the “blessed” option), the Nephites had only done missionary work like the sons of Mosiah did (a “more blessed,” nonviolent option), they could have converted their enemies and eliminated the need for self-defense altogether. The record demonstrates that this was

not the case and that there was actually an important place for both. In the end, the sons of Mosiah do not appear to support the "other lens" theory.

A Final Consideration: Teaching the Gospel

The episodes we have looked at, then — from the Ammonites to the sons of Mosiah — do *not* appear, in reality, to demonstrate that nonviolent approaches to conflict are effective in ending aggression.

To amplify this point, consider just the matter of teaching the gospel as a way of stopping conflict. If such teaching were sufficient to do so — to bring about general conversion and peace — then it is difficult to see why the Lord would *ever* destroy populations. He did this both at the time of Noah and in the aftermath of His crucifixion, and He will do so again at His Second Coming. But if mere teaching were sufficient to bring about conversion and peace, it seems that He would simply do more of *that*, not destroy people. Moreover, if such teaching were sufficient, it is also difficult to see why there was ever a war in heaven, or why the Savior's teaching resulted in mob action against Him. And on and on. The list is lengthy.

It is true that if missionary work could, in fact, always achieve such success, then preaching the gospel would not just be our first obligation toward our enemies but would indeed be our *only* obligation. No other type of defense would ever be necessary. Unfortunately, preaching the gospel rarely *is* sufficient. And this means that while doing so still remains our first duty, unfortunately it is seldom our last or only duty.

This would appear to be why the Nephites were taught never to raise the sword "except it were necessary to preserve their lives" (Alma 48:14) — a contingency that presupposes there *would* be occasions when raising the sword would be necessary to preserve their lives. As seen earlier, that seems to be the consistent message of the Book of Mormon. Regrettably, nonviolent strategies, including teaching the gospel, do not automatically bring conflict to an end. Everyone would no doubt like that to be true, but the scriptural verdict, unfortunately, is that it is not.

Patterns of Fleeing

In discussing nonviolent response to conflict, Pulsipher also, understandably, emphasizes "fleeing" as a valuable and effective option in the face of threat. We are told that the record includes multiple instances of this strategy: Lehi's departure from Jerusalem at the very beginning of the record (1 Nephi 2:1–4); Nephi's fleeing from Laman

and Lemuel once they arrive in the new land (2 Nephi 5:5–8); Omer, from the Book of Ether, who departed with his family when his kingdom faced overthrow (Ether 9:1–3); Mosiah₁'s leaving the land of Nephi with those who would follow him (Omni 1:12); Alma₁, with his small band of believers, who fled the land of Nephi (the part occupied by the Nephites and ruled over by King Noah) (Mosiah 18; 23:1–3); and Alma₁, again, who fled with his band after their settlement had been occupied by a Lamanite army (Mosiah 24:16–25).

Each of these actions was directed by the Lord and, in each case, fleeing proved to be an effective strategy.⁴⁶ The examples are thus presented as contrasts to just-war theory, including as it is formulated in *EUB*. This application is useful because it permits clarification, again, that this proposed contrast is actually a mistake. In reality, rather than contradicting the principles outlined in *EUB*, all of these parties did exactly what that framework would direct. The situation is the same as with the seven episodes discussed earlier.⁴⁷

A Faulty Comparison

More importantly, these examples also do not contradict what other Book of Mormon figures did when they engaged in large-scale defensive war. We might think of King Benjamin and Alma₂, to name two. On the “other lens” view, the examples listed previously — Nephi fleeing from Laman and Lemuel, Alma₁ escaping occupation by a Lamanite army, etc. — are examples of choosing the “more blessed,” nonviolent option in their circumstances. This entails, then, that we must see figures like King Benjamin and Alma₂ as examples of choosing the lesser, violent option in their circumstances.⁴⁸ Moreover, we are told that the success of these “flight” examples “clearly demonstrates that this standard [of preserving lives] can be achieved without shedding blood.”⁴⁹ The two sets of leaders thus serve as a contrast: one set preserves lives by simply leaving the situation (an action that sheds no blood), the other by engaging in defense (which ends up shedding a lot of blood). This, according to Pulsipher’s

46. This is presumably true in Mosiah’s case, even though the record is brief and does not tell us exactly why he left. That he was “warned” suggests threat of some kind, however.

47. See “Mistaken Examples” in the section, “‘Another Lens.’”

48. King Benjamin’s wartime involvement is described briefly in Words of Mormon 1:13–14. The direct involvement of Alma₂ in war is chronicled in Alma 2 and mentioned in Alma 3. His involvement in helping the Nephites wage defensive war is also clear in Alma 16:5–8 and 43:23–24.

49. Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families,” 173.

view, would thus seem to present a clear contrast between leaders who choose the higher, nonviolent path, and leaders who choose the lesser, violent path.

The difficulty with this kind of comparison, though, is that these two sets of leaders faced importantly different circumstances — which makes any kind of direct comparison between them dubious.

To see this, consider, first, the matter of logistics. In the episodes regarding Lehi, Nephi, Omer, and Alma₁ (twice), the numbers involved were exceedingly small: Lehi and his family, Omer and his family, Alma₁ and his small band, and so on. And it would seem to be precisely these small numbers that made flight a possibility for them: such small groups can move quickly, and they do not face insurmountable logistical issues in doing so. But this was not the case for other Nephite leaders, like King Benjamin and Alma₂, who led *exponentially* larger populations. They could not move without being noticed, much less move quickly — or even *organize* a move quickly. Because they would have had to move tens of thousands, flight was not even a possibility for them. It would seem a mistake, then, to compare them to groups that *could* flee, and to conclude from this that they just chose the lesser option.⁵⁰

Second, because of their small numbers, in most of these cases the parties were also vastly outnumbered by their antagonists.⁵¹ They would

50. This is why even Mosiah₁'s flight from the land of Nephi does not serve as an apt comparison to these later populations. We know less about the size of this group than we do about Lehi's, Nephi's, Omer's, and Alma₁'s (twice), but we do know that they were a small enough minority that they were under serious threat from the larger population of Nephites and were therefore warned to flee from them. We also know that they later joined the people of Zarahemla, a population that was "exceedingly numerous" (Omni 1:17). It was only after this, and a generation later, that we get our first report of "many thousands" of Lamanites being slain in battle (Words of Mormon 1:14). When we reach Alma₂'s time, we begin to get reports that the total number of those slain in battle numbered in the "tens of thousands," and also as too numerous to count (Alma 28:2; 3:1; 44:21); and by Mormon's time, the text speaks of the slain in the hundreds of thousands (Mormon 6:10–15). All of this tells us that Mosiah₁'s group — whatever its actual size — was certainly small in comparison to these later populations. And *this* tells us that just as with the examples of Lehi, Nephi, Omer, and Alma₁, it seems a mistake to compare episodes regarding these exponentially larger populations to Mosiah₁'s case, and to conclude from this that those populations just chose the lesser option.

51. The only possible exception, because we have no idea of the numbers, is the case of Nephi fleeing from Laman and Lemuel with his family and others who would follow him. Although we cannot be certain, this might have been due wholly to the logistical possibility of doing so, unrelated to relative numbers.

have had no chance of surviving, much less winning, if they had tried to preserve their rights to life and their way of life by military means. This is completely different from other cases in the Book of Mormon, however. In addition to being physically unable to simply flee the situation, these populations, being much larger, also enjoyed much better chances of prevailing in defense of their lives and their way of life. Indeed, they actually did succeed in ultimately repelling repeated Lamanite invasions — a type of success that was impossible for figures like Lehi and Alma₁.

Finally, in the case of Lehi and of the two episodes with Alma₁, the parties were already embedded within a much larger enemy population, and, for all practical purposes, escape was the *only* possible strategy for them. They could do nothing else. This was far from the case in other Book of Mormon examples, however. In these numerous cases every conflict occurred on *Nephite* lands. The Nephites were settled in their homes, and on their own lands, and it was there that the Lamanites attacked them. Far from taking initiative to escape from an enemy that held them in its own territory, the Nephites found themselves merely trying to prevent the Lamanites from coming into *Nephite* lands and killing them.

In the end, then, it seems unjustified to compare the flight strategies of Lehi, Nephi, Alma₁, and so forth, to the military strategies of other leaders in the Book of Mormon — leaders like King Benjamin and Alma₂. There are significant reasons to conclude that their actions were not the same simply because, in relevant and important ways, their circumstances were not the same.⁵²

52. It is worth noting that the “other lens” article briefly acknowledges logistical issues with flight, remarking in one place: “Even when flight is logistically impractical — as it would be with an extensive and settled population — there are other nonviolent strategies for self-preservation that effectively draw upon the powers of heaven” (Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families,” 174). This seems to be a reference to something like the self-sacrificial strategy of the Ammonites — the problems with which have already been noted. It could also be a reference to something like the pacifying strategy of King Limhi, who, after initially succeeding against a Lamanite attack, learned *why* the Lamanites were attacking. This led to new information and, armed with this intelligence, Limhi was able to pacify the captured Lamanite king, who was then able to pacify his army (Mosiah 20). But this is not comparable to the circumstances of the large-scale wars we see elsewhere in the Book of Mormon. In those cases, the Lamanites were not attacking because some subset of the Nephites had seriously aggressed against them — a situation that could be settled by both sides recognizing this and the Lamanites being pacified as a result. Rather, as seen earlier, these wars were motivated by a generalized hatred of the Nephites, often instigated by Nephite-hating dissidents. In these situations,

Warnings to Flee

Pulsipher also draws attention to the statement that God would “warn [the Nephites] to flee, or to prepare for war; and also, that God would make it known unto them whither they should go to defend themselves against their enemies” (Alma 48:15–16). He points out, however, that while the text shows the Lord warning people to flee five times, there is no instance of His warning them to prepare for war.⁵³ This is then taken as evidence that going to war is strictly a human decision: God never actually directs preparation for war, but only helps mortals in their fight after they have already decided on that path. Building on the reading of D&C 98:23–31 discussed earlier, the idea is that there are two acceptable responses in the face of violence — violent, and nonviolent (“blessed,” and “more blessed”) — and that the Lord lets mortals decide between them. God will give His people what they desire: He will help them fight if that is what they choose, but it is their choice, not His.⁵⁴ That, it is said, is why we see multiple examples of warning to flee, but no examples of warning to prepare for war. Thus, God “directs only nonviolent options, such as flight ... at least when given a chance to weigh in beforehand.”⁵⁵ This, then, is evidence that nonviolence is always the higher, more blessed option: it is what the Lord always chooses when mortals give Him the chance to weigh in.

Although this direction could seem promising at first glance, there are difficulties that appear to make it untenable. The most important of these is that we have already seen that nonviolence is *not* always the higher, more blessed option. As described previously (in the section, “The Central Idea of the ‘Other Lens’ Approach”), other features of the scriptural record clearly seem to demonstrate this. Indeed, the text actually appears to show that the highest and best option in any given circumstance depends on the *nature* of the circumstances.⁵⁶ Whatever we see in the text about the ratio of different types of warnings, therefore,

there were no aggressive subsets and no new information that could thus pacify the Lamanites’ anger toward the Nephites as a whole. Such situations thus seem completely different from a case like Limhi’s, and trying to draw a contrast between these leaders’ actions and Limhi’s would thus seem to be mistaken.

53. Pulsipher, “Defend Your Families,” 172 (also 171).

54. Ibid., 179.

55. Ibid., 172.

56. This, as seen earlier, is evident even in the passage about warning itself, where the Lord says that he will warn the Nephites in different ways (including to prepare for war) “*according to their danger*” (Alma 48:15). Even here it seems clear that the Lord sees that different circumstances call for different responses.

is actually extraneous to the larger claim about nonviolence always being the higher, more blessed option — because we already know this larger claim is mistaken.

But even if we did not already know this, the claim that the Lord — when given the chance to weigh in — always gives warnings to flee (or something like it), seems to be inaccurate anyway.

In the first place, it is useful to remember the Lord's explicit revelation to Captain Moroni that if the Nephite governors (who were aligning themselves with the Lamanite invaders) did not repent, "ye shall go up to battle against them" (Alma 60:33). This would seem to be a clear instance of exactly what the "other lens" approach tells us never happens.

But this is far from the only difficulty. After all, this assertion about the text means that the Lord would have warned the Nephites in this way *if only they had let Him weigh in*. When they engaged in defensive war instead, then — because, according to Pulsipher, the Lord *would always give such direction if He could* — it follows that they did so either because (1) the Lord was just not quick enough with His warnings — the Nephites beat Him to the punch every time, and thus He was not given a chance to weigh in; or (2) they were simply not *open* to His warnings, and that's why He was not given a chance to weigh in.

The first option seems to be ruled out on the face of it; it is difficult to imagine that the Lord could be slow in giving warnings He wanted to give. And the second option also seems to be ruled out, at least in multiple obvious cases. Think of Alma₂, for example, who had seen God and angels and who was specifically described as "holy" by an angel (Mosiah 27:10–17; Alma 36:5–22; Alma 10:8–9), and of King Benjamin who was similarly described as "holy" by Mormon (Words of Mormon 1:17). Holy men are open, not closed, to hearing the messages of the Lord — their very *nature* is to "give the Lord a chance to weigh in" — which means that when King Benjamin and Alma₂ went to war (and they did⁵⁷) it could not have been because they were not open to the Lord's direction. They were *supremely* open to His direction. And this means that the Lord clearly did not warn them to flee (or something like it) when they faced danger. According to Pulsipher, that is what the Lord would always direct if He could — and with King Benjamin and Alma₂ He clearly could. When these leaders actively defended against Lamanite

57. As mentioned earlier (in note 48), Alma₂ actively led war efforts, as seen in Alma 2 and 3, and later materially helped the Nephite defense even though he had by this time largely confined himself to spiritual teaching (Alma 16:5–8; 43:23–24). King Benjamin's leadership in war is made clear in Words of Mormon 1:13–14.

aggression *instead*, therefore, it seems that it had to be because the Lord did *not* give them such direction. King Benjamin and Alma₂ thus appear to be clear counterinstances to Pulsipher's claim.

The same seems true of Nephi. He is listed by Pulsipher as someone who was warned to flee, and who did (2 Nephi 5:1–7). The problem, though, is that this was a single incident. *Following* that episode, Nephi subsequently made "many swords" to defend against aggression (2 Nephi 5:14), and he actually "wielded the sword of Laban" in such defense (Jacob 1:9). Like King Benjamin and Alma₂, Nephi was also preeminently refined in his spiritual devotion and capacity — his very *nature* was to "give the Lord a chance to weigh in." And this means that in his case, too, the Lord clearly did not warn him to flee when he faced danger in these later circumstances. Again, according to the "other lens" view, that is what the Lord would always direct if he could — and with Nephi it seems obvious that he could. When Nephi defended his people militarily instead, therefore, it seems that it had to be because the Lord simply did not give him such direction. Just as with King Benjamin and Alma₂, Nephi thus appears to be a straightforward counterinstance to the "other lens" claim about what direction the Lord would "only" give to His people.

All three of these examples, then, appear to illustrate the same reality: since, according to Pulsipher, the Lord would always give direction to flee if mortals let Him, it follows that if the Lord *had* told these prophetic leaders to flee, they would have; therefore, since they did *not* flee, it follows that He did not *tell* them to flee.⁵⁸ And the same, so it would seem, could be said of later prophetic figures like Lachoneus, Gidgiddoni, Mormon, and Moroni.⁵⁹

It appears to be a mistake, then, to say that the Lord would always have directed nonviolent options if He had only been given the chance. It is difficult to see how that could be true. If it were, then, just as with Omer and Alma₁, that is what He would have directed King Benjamin,

58. Those acquainted with logic as a discipline will recognize this reasoning as a straightforward instance of the inferential rule in propositional logic known as *modus tollens*: If p, then q; not-q; therefore, not-p. It is thus a clear demonstration (i.e., in logical terms, it is both valid and sound) that the claim about the Lord's warnings — namely, that he would always have directed nonviolent options if he had only been given the chance — is mistaken.

59. That Lachoneus and Gidgiddoni were prophetic figures is made clear in 3 Nephi 3:16, 19.

Alma₂, Nephi, and other prophets to do — and it seems clear that He didn't.⁶⁰

This is also evident from the fact (as seen earlier) that the Lord had already given the Nephites a general, standing command to defend themselves.⁶¹ It seems inconsistent to imagine that God would never give a command to the Nephites to defend themselves when He had already given them a *general* command to do exactly that. Indeed, in the cases of King Benjamin, Alma₂, and Nephi it seems clear that the Lord either gave them direct instruction to defend themselves or that they acted under this general command to do so. What seems evident He did *not* do, however, was instruct them to flee (or execute some other non-violent option). That is what Pulsipher's claim requires, but it appears clear from the text that that is not what happened.

It also seems worth noting that it is actually insignificant, in any event, that the Lord warned the people in these episodes (those regarding Lehi, Omer, Mosiah₁, etc.) to flee from their enemies. Flight was the only genuine option for them, after all, so it does not seem surprising that that is what the Lord directed. It is exactly what just-war theory in general, and *EUB* in particular, would direct as well. Nor are these warnings to flee significant when compared to other actions in the Book of Mormon. Since, as already seen, their situations are dissimilar in relevant and important ways, no significance can really be attached to the difference between the "flight" actions of some leaders and the "fight" actions of others. Upon examination, that turns out to be an unsound comparison.⁶²

60. The same could plausibly be said (to name only two other instances) of the supremely righteous Lamanites of Third Nephi who, combined with the Nephites, faced dire threat from the Gadianton robbers (3 Nephi 2:11–16), and of the two thousand stripling warriors who followed Helaman in waging defensive war against the invading Lamanites (Alma 53, 56–58). In both cases they were guided by prophetic leaders who were open to the Lord's direction (those in Third Nephi by Lachoneus, in all likelihood, and the Ammonite sons by Helaman, high priest over the Church), and yet in both cases they, too, engaged in war. These incidents, therefore (just as with the cases of King Benjamin, Alma₂, and Nephi), indicate, contrary to Pulsipher's claim, that the Lord did *not* instruct them to flee when given the chance.

61. See "The Lord's Instructions" in the section, "The Central Idea of the 'Other Lens' Approach."

62. An additional problem with the observation that the text contains no explicit directions to engage in war is that no attempt is made to understand *why* this might be so. Instead, it is simply concluded that the Lord must never have done this. But, even aside from the matters we have already discussed, this is too hasty

The Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount is mentioned only briefly in Pulsipher's article, with the remark that its teachings "can be interpreted as a straightforward prohibition against engaging in defensive violence."⁶³ In this spirit, reference is also made to another author who, in contrast to *EUB*, argues that the Savior's teachings in Third Nephi are "corrective teachings" that denounce "all sacrificial violence, including war," and that portray the "abandonment of war as the quintessential Christian act."⁶⁴

The Sermon on the Mount (as found both in the New Testament and in Third Nephi) is a critical document in any discussion of war, of course. It does not seem obvious, though, that a treatment as cursory as Pulsipher's is sufficient to support the idea that the Sermon can be seen as a straightforward prohibition of defensive violence. More in-depth examination (including in *EUB*) would appear to show that this is not the case.⁶⁵ Such analysis is too lengthy to simply repeat here, but central elements of the inquiry can nevertheless be summarized as follows.

First, the Sermon cannot be reduced to a set of prescriptions about our outward behavior (e.g., turning the other cheek, going a second mile, etc.); the Sermon actually appears to be about a certain *state of heart*.

Second, toward the Lord, this state of heart seems to be characterized by a responsiveness to His Spirit and a humility and earnestness in trying to follow Him. Toward others, it seems to be characterized by charity and unselfishness — by an attitude of patience and longsuffering rather than of spitefulness and vengeance.

Third, we can have, and are expected to have, this state of heart even in situations of violence.

a conclusion. Reasonable explanations for this feature of the record are discussed briefly in Appendix B.

63. Pulsipher, "Defend Your Families," 167.

64. Madson, "A Non-Violent Reading of the Book of Mormon," 15, 24–26, quoted in Pulsipher, "Defend Your Families," 167. Madson does not base his anti-violence theory of the Book of Mormon on the Sermon on the Mount, but uses another passage in Third Nephi to see the Lord as condemning all violence, including war. *EUB* devotes two chapters (8–9) to showing why Madson's views are mistaken.

65. *EUB* devotes a full chapter to examining the Sermon on the Mount (Chapter 14). A more recent article covers the matter somewhat differently, and specifically with regard to Captain Moroni. See Duane Boyce, "Captain Moroni and the Sermon on the Mount: Resolving a Scriptural Tension," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (2021): 127–62. The summary here is derived from the latter source.

Fourth, in its perfection, this state of heart was possessed by the Lord when he: caused the flood in Noah's day; overthrew tables and drove money changers from the temple in His own day; destroyed whole cities in the Americas following His crucifixion; slew a Lamanite who was intending to kill Ammon; and so forth.⁶⁶

Fifth, with less perfection, but still highly impressive, this state of heart was possessed by King Benjamin, Alma₂, Mormon, and others when defending their people's lives from attack. Possessing this state of heart, they conducted their defense in surprising ways — ways that, given their circumstances, were completely consistent with the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, and that even displayed them.

In sum, when combined with the complete perspective of all other scriptures, the Sermon on the Mount seems to teach that people can, and should, love their enemies even when defending themselves against such enemies' efforts to destroy them. The message, it seems to show, is not that defense is prohibited, as the "other lens" view postulates; instead, the message appears to be that when such defense is necessary, it still must be conducted with the condition of heart required by the Sermon on the Mount.

"Lack of Moral Imagination"

Along the way, the "other lens" article also poses the question: "Why do some of the text's best individuals and societies not choose the 'more blessed' nonviolent protective options more often?" Put differently: "If nonviolent confrontational love is really more effective and more redemptive, why do these notable figures seem to not choose it?"⁶⁷

That is the natural question for Pulsipher to ask, of course. He believes he has shown that nonviolence is always the highest and best option (*and* that it is effective in ending aggression), and, since all that is so, it is puzzling that prophetic leaders such as Nephi, Alma₂, King Benjamin, and Mormon would so often choose military defense instead. What can explain their choosing the lesser option so frequently?

A Moot Question

It seems evident by now, however, that this is actually a faulty question. The military actions of these prophetic leaders present a puzzle only on the assumption that nonviolent methods *are* always morally higher and

66. For more examples of the Lord exercising violence, including in the future, see notes 26 and 27.

67. Pulsipher, "Defend Your Families," 179.

more effective. But an earlier section ("The Central Idea of the 'Other Lens' Approach") has already shown that nonviolence is *not* always the highest and best option, and another section ("Nonviolent Response: The Issue of Effectiveness") has shown that it is also not always the more effective path. The assumption behind the question clearly appears to be mistaken, therefore, and once we recognize this — i.e., that nonviolent methods are *not* always higher and more effective — the question of why leaders did not always choose such methods does not even arise. There is really no puzzle to solve, and thus the question simply seems to be moot.

However, because Pulsipher does not see that his central assumption is mistaken, and therefore that his question is actually moot, he follows the question through and tries to offer answers for why prophetic leaders would choose what he believes is the "lesser" option. One of these is that such leaders actually lacked the "moral imagination" to conceive new ways of responding to aggression. Implementing such strategies "requires a significantly higher degree of faith and fearlessness," and what is needed is "the capacity of individuals and communities to imagine themselves in a web of relationship even with their enemies."⁶⁸

Now, even putting aside that the question is moot to begin with, the difficulty is that, even if it *weren't* moot, the Book of Mormon still would not seem to support this answer. The text reports one group of Nephites, for example, who found themselves "filled with pain and anguish" for the welfare of the Lamanites' souls (Mosiah 25:11). And later we are told that the Nephites were "sorry" to battle the Lamanites, not only because they regretted having to shed blood at all but also because they worried for the Lamanites' souls (Alma 48:23). The Nephites also provided land for the converted Lamanites (the Anti-Nephi-Lehies) to settle on, in order to protect them (Alma 27:22–23), and thereafter defended them from attack over the war's long duration. Later, as they conquered armies of the invading Lamanites, the Nephites also allowed those who would enter a covenant of peace to depart the battlefield in peace and simply join the Ammonites (Alma 62:14–17, 19–28). We have also seen reports of the Nephites "diligently" seeking to restore the Lamanites to faith in God.⁶⁹ And Enos, Mormon, and Moroni — all of whom experienced repeated aggression from the Lamanites — were nevertheless motivated

68. John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), ix, quoted in Pulsipher, "Defend Your Families," 180.

69. See "Lamanite Aggression and Hatred" in the section, "The Sons of Mosiah."

to make and preserve sacred records *specifically in order to bless them*.⁷⁰ Moroni's situation is particularly poignant. The text reports that following the final destruction at Cumorah, the surviving Nephites were hunted by the Lamanites until they were all destroyed (Mormon. 8:2) and that Moroni wandered where he could in order to preserve his life (Moroni 1:1–3). And yet, despite the Lamanites' destruction of his whole people, their killing of his father, and their ongoing threat to kill Moroni if they found him, Moroni's last words were written to "*my brethren, the Lamanites,*" imploring them to "come unto Christ" and to be "sanctified in Christ by the grace of God" (Moroni 10:1, 32–33). Indeed, Moroni reports that preservation of the records and the desire for the Lamanites to learn of Christ was "according to the prayers of *all* the saints" who had dwelt in the land (Mormon 9:36).

Such a record makes it difficult to argue that Nephite prophetic leaders, and others, would have trouble imagining themselves "in a web of relationship even with their enemies."

The same is true regarding the idea that nonviolent options require "a significantly higher degree of faith and fearlessness" — qualities that, according to the "other lens" view, it must be supposed that Nephite leaders did not possess. But we need look no further than Nephi to see the enormous implausibility of this claim. Although Nephi clearly engaged in violent defense of his people, few matters in the scriptural record are more evident than his immense spiritual stature.⁷¹ It would

70. See Enos 1:11–17; Words of Mormon 1:6–8; Moroni 1:4; 10:1; and the Title Page.

71. To fully appreciate this, remember that Nephi's manifestations (that we know about) included unprecedented personal interaction with the "Spirit of the Lord" (which presumably was the Holy Ghost), seeing in vision the future events of the Savior's birth, life, and death (1 Ne. 11:1–33), the future of Nephite, Lamanite, and Gentile peoples on the promised land (1 Ne. 12–14; 2 Ne. 26:2–22), and the numerous matters pertaining both to this earth and to celestial life seen by John the Revelator (1 Ne. 14:18–30; 2 Ne. 4:23, 25). In addition, the Lord appeared to him personally (2 Ne. 11:3); he was taken to high mountains and shown things "too great for man" (2 Ne. 4:25); he entertained angels (2 Ne. 4:24); he held conversation with the Father and the Son (2 Ne. 31:10–15); and he both prophesied at length and spoke the words of the Lord (2 Ne. 25–26, 28–30). And the record displays his suffering all manner of hardship and persecution throughout, risking death more than once, and fulfilling his charge faithfully and to the letter. We share in his laboring through a desert wilderness, crossing the sea in a ship he constructed in accordance with visions from the Lord, and establishing a new civilization. And we also see him penning a record of it all that brims with the Spirit and that bears a witness of the Lord and of His divinity that is unsurpassed in all scripture.

seem implausible on its face that, in order to choose the higher, more righteous option, Nephi just needed "a significantly higher degree of faith and fearlessness."

(And notice, too, that since (according to this theory) God also at times chooses the lesser option, this line of thinking would seem to force the conclusion that even He does not have the moral imagination or the faith and fearlessness necessary to choose the nonviolent option. We are thus left with a situation in which not only does Nephi lack sufficient faith and moral imagination, but so does God.)

As mentioned earlier, then, even if the question were not moot to begin with, appealing to insufficient moral imagination and insufficient faith to explain leaders' actions would still seem to fail on scriptural and logical grounds alone.

Conclusion

A recent effort to think about war from an LDS perspective proposes "another lens" through which to see the Book of Mormon. It concludes that the text displays two righteous approaches to conflict: a violent approach that is justified and therefore "blessed;" and a nonviolent approach that is higher than this and therefore "more blessed" — and that, in addition, is actually effective in ending conflict.

Although any voice that emphasizes peaceful efforts to resolve conflict is always to be happily received — particularly in a world that so often resorts to violence — this "other lens" approach ultimately does not succeed. It attempts in many ways to support its claim regarding nonviolent response to conflict, but examination shows all of them, ultimately, to fall short. The view does not appear to match what the scriptural record shows us.⁷² Examining its various strands, however,

72. This is the place to point out that this "other lens" approach derives the language of "blessed" and "more blessed" from the incident in Third Nephi where nine of the disciples desire to return to the Lord "speedily" at the time of their deaths, and three desire to remain on earth. The Lord tells the former that they are "blessed" and the latter that they are "more blessed" (3 Nephi 28:1–7). That such concepts applied to these disciples does not mean they apply anywhere else, however. The concepts provide a nice way of capturing the central idea of this theory — namely, that violent methods of dealing with aggression are clearly justified, but that nonviolent methods are always better — but they do not constitute anything like evidence that this central idea is *true*. In fact, the record seems clearly to show that it is not. Thus, while the descriptions "blessed" and "more blessed" applied to the twelve Nephite disciples, it appears evident that they do not apply in a blanket way to these two ways of responding to aggression. What the record actually seems

still permits readers to clarify and refine their thinking on a vital topic, and that is important in its own right.

In the end, it seems evident that the scriptural record does not condemn all violence, as pacifists are prone to think. And, despite what the “other lens” theory earnestly tries to show, neither does it appear to identify nonviolent approaches as always *better* than violent approaches. It is true that our highest duty is to teach the gospel to those who might be our enemies, and to vigorously seek peace in all situations of conflict; but it also seems clear that that will not always be sufficient. Thus, while the scriptures seem to show that sometimes nonviolent response is the right answer to aggression, sometimes (although it must always be a final resort) violent response is the right answer to aggression — and when it is, according to Helaman and the Lord’s own words, it is actually the “cause” of God. The right course of action in situations of aggression, then, appears to vary, depending on the totality of the circumstances. There are important principles that guide all this (all of which are essential and cannot be overlooked), but that, in essence, is what the scriptural record, and the Book of Mormon in particular, seems to show us.

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Appendix A: The Ammonites’ Attitude⁷³

A number of elements of the Ammonite story are often overlooked, yet they are crucial in understanding this people’s attitude toward war.

to show is that sometimes nonviolence is the best way to respond, and sometimes defensive violence is the best way to respond. Neither is best all the time, and neither, so it would appear, can therefore be simply labeled, invariably, as “blessed” or “more blessed.”

73. The discussion that follows is a highly condensed version of much more detailed presentations on this topic in other publications. The longest discussion

Acceptance and Support of Violent Defense

It is commonly thought that the Ammonites were opposed to violence as a matter of principle. Four features of the record show this conclusion to be a mistake, however.

First, recall that although the Ammonites refused to enter war to defend themselves, they were perfectly willing to have the Nephites take up arms to defend them. They were not personally willing to kill, but they were willing to have the Nephites kill for them (Alma 27:22–24; 43:15–22; 53:10, 12). Second, not only did the Ammonites willingly permit the Nephites to kill for them, but they also provided material support to the Nephite armies in these very military efforts (Alma 43:13; 56:27; see also Alma 27:24). Third, the Ammonites reached a point at which they actually *wanted* to take up arms and assist the Nephites in active defense of their liberty and their lives, and only the concerted efforts of Helaman and his brethren prevented them from fulfilling this desire (Alma 53:10–15). (Ammon reports that the Ammonites were motivated by love of their brethren in refusing to take up arms against them (Alma 26:31–32), but that did not keep them from wanting to do so when circumstances seemed to require it.) Finally, the text also has no record of the Ammonite elders objecting to the younger generation of Ammonites entering the war at this time (Alma 53:13–22) — which indicates that the Ammonites were not only willing to permit the Nephites to kill in their stead but were willing to permit their sons to kill in their stead as well. This is indicated not only by the absence of any objection in the text, but also by the fact that in materially supporting the Nephite armies in their military efforts (the second point above), the Ammonites were simultaneously providing the same support to their sons.

Such features of the text are significant because none of them represents how people opposed to violence in principle would actually behave. Indeed, their behavior in actively supporting others' war efforts,

appears in *EUB*, Chapters 4–5 and Appendix 1. Other presentations, each from a somewhat different angle, are Duane Boyce, "The Ammonites Were not Pacifists," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 20 (2016): 293–313, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-ammonites-were-not-pacifists/>; and Duane Boyce, "Were the Ammonites Pacifists?" *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture*, 18, no.1 (2009): 32–47. These sources, particularly *EUB*, should be consulted for a full presentation of the argument. It is also worth mentioning that this "other lens" approach is not the only one that appears to be mistaken in its treatment of the Ammonites. The best-known examples are Hugh Nibley and Eugene England, whose claims about pacifism in general, and the Ammonites in particular, are treated in *EUB*, chapters 4–7, and 11–12, respectively.

including their own sons', explicitly contradicts the idea that they considered unarmed confrontation the only, or even best way to approach others' aggression in every circumstance. This means the Ammonites did not, as the "other lens" theory claims, actually choose what it calls the higher, more blessed option. They actually did the opposite, willingly supporting the war effort, including their own sons' involvement in it.

Holes in the Text

It is also important to recognize that seeing the Ammonites as opposed to all violence in principle also creates large holes in the text. Note, for instance, that when Helaman urged the Ammonites not to take up arms, he did not appeal to such a principle to persuade them, but merely reminded them of the covenant they had made (Alma 53:10–15). This is surprising if the Ammonites actually held anti-violence principles, since, if so, it seems likely that Helaman would have appealed to such principles prominently — or at least *once* — in trying to persuade them; but there is no record that he ever did.

It also seems significant that in hearing Helaman's appeal, the Ammonites did not turn the tables on him and discourage *him* from continuing to take up arms. After all, if they believed that all killing in war was morally wrong, then they had to believe it was morally wrong for him — so, if that is the case, it is surprising that there is no report of the Ammonites explaining this to Helaman and urging him to put down his *own* weapons of war. What we see instead is their actual support of Helaman — and the Nephites generally — in waging war.

Third, and related to these two points, it seems significant that there is no record of the Ammonites ever actually expressing an anti-violence explanation for their rejection of war. They never state the general proposition that all killing in war is morally wrong and that all war is therefore impermissible. Of course, the Ammonite king voiced his worry that "perhaps, if we should stain our swords again they can no more be washed bright through the blood of the Son of our great God" (Alma 24:13), but, other than referring to their past conduct as "murder," there is no record of him stating *why* this should be the case. It is common for readers to supply their own explanation and to suppose that the reason is anti-violence in character (i.e., the Ammonites simply considered *all* killing, even in war, to be morally wrong), but the Ammonites themselves never say this. This is an absence from the record that is both conspicuous and surprising: if anti-violence principles had

been the actual reason for their rejection of war, we would expect at least some mention of this — but we never get it.

All of these absences from the record are surprising if the Ammonites actually held anti-violence principles. Once we recognize that they did not hold such principles, however (as seems clear from the previous section), then these absences are exactly what we would expect. In other words, the reason there is no account of Helaman appealing to anti-violence principles to persuade the Ammonites, or of the Ammonites trying to persuade Helaman himself to stop fighting on the basis of such principles — and so forth — appears to be precisely because they did not *hold* such principles. This is why we cannot say that such absences are simply editorial omissions from the record (i.e., that it was impossible for Mormon to include everything, and that's why they are missing). Once we recognize that the Ammonites did not hold these principles in the first place, it seems clear that these elements fail to appear in the record, not because they were omitted, but because they simply didn't happen.

The Ammonites' Motivation

The natural next question, of course, is why, if they were not actually opposed to violence in principle, the Ammonites refused to take up arms and personally enter war. The best explanation for this is that their covenant with God was an act of penance for the aggressive killings they had committed in the past. They had participated in the Lamanites' repeated aggression against the Nephites — resulting in the deaths of many thousands — and, far from innocent or benign in any way, those assaults had been explicitly motivated by hatred of the Nephites. Indeed, we are told that the Lamanites at this time “delighted in murdering the Nephites” and that they even sought to rob the Nephites of their possessions by “murdering and plundering” them (Alma 17:14). Despite such aggressive conduct, however, through their deep repentance the Ammonites had managed to obtain forgiveness. It is not surprising, therefore, that they would feel the need to maintain this divine absolution — and distance themselves from their aggressive and hate-filled history — by repudiating killing altogether. All things considered, it seems clear that doing so was an act of penance *for* that history.

Appendix B: The Relative Absence of Directions to Engage in War

One reasonable explanation for why we do not see explicit warnings to prepare for war in the Book of Mormon is that this absence is simply

an artifact of record-keeping in general and of abridgments in particular: *most* historical occurrences are not recorded. It is evident, for example — because the text explicitly tells us — that the Nephites *believed* the Lord would warn them to prepare for defense, just as they believed He would both warn them to flee and direct them where to go to conduct their defense. The record tells us of experiences with the last two, of course — which makes it implausible to imagine that they would believe the first if they did not also have experience with *it*. That they believed all three, and that the three are mingled together as they are, makes it likely that they actually had experience with all three, whether the record spells it out explicitly or not.

Another likelihood is that this relative absence also reflects the nature of the wars experienced by the Nephites. Keep in mind that the most lengthy and detailed description of war in the Book of Mormon appears over the course of sixteen chapters (Alma 47–62). Given such detail, it might seem peculiar that we do not see warnings — even multiple warnings — to prepare for war over this large section. The problem, though, is that these chapters are actually describing a single war — one that lasted more than a decade. (It began toward the end of the nineteenth year of the reign of the judges (Alma 48: 21) and continued until the end of the thirty-first year (Alma 62:39).) During that time the Nephites were under constant threat from the Lamanites, and they knew it: in a general sense, at least, they were in a defensive posture the whole time. This, of course, made multiple specific warnings from the Lord unnecessary, so it is not surprising that we do not see them: their absence is exactly what we would expect. Indeed, from the very beginning, based on his personal experience with Amalickiah, Captain Moroni “knew that he would stir up the Lamanites to anger against them, and cause them to come to battle against them” (Alms 46:30) — which, of course, is exactly what happened. Indeed, we are told that Moroni did not *stop* preparing to defend his people against the Lamanites (Alma 50:1). In short, in the circumstances of this long war, at least, the Nephites apparently did not need multiple warnings from the Lord to tell them something they already knew.

There could be other reasons for the absence of such warnings, as well, of course. What already appears evident at this point, though, is that whatever the reason, the absence of such warnings is not evidence that nonviolent response is simply the higher, more blessed option; we know this because (as seen in the section, “The Central Idea of the ‘Other Lens’ Approach”) we already appreciate that nonviolence is *not* always the higher, more blessed option.

UNDERSTANDING THE LAMANITE MARK

Clifford P. Jones

Abstract: *The Book of Mormon describes a dark mark on the skin that distinguished people who rebelled against God and his laws from those who obeyed God. The Old Testament refers to a mark that fits this description and has nothing to do with natural skin color. The law of Moses prohibited the Lord's covenant people from cutting sacrilegious marks (ancient tattoos) into their skin. The Bible simply calls these prohibited tattoos "marks" (Leviticus 19:28). This biblical meaning of the word mark, together with biblical meanings of other related words, helps us understand all Book of Mormon passages associated with the Lamanite mark.*

In this paper, I seek to identify the most plausible intended meaning of all terms used in the Book of Mormon that relate to a "mark" that was set upon Laman, Lemuel, the sons of Ishmael, and their followers (see Alma 3:6–7). Descriptions of this mark use the words *mark* and *skin* and always mention a *curse* (see 2 Nephi 5:20–24, Jacob 3:3–10, Alma 3:4–19, and 3 Nephi 2:15–16). The mark made skin *black* (see 2 Nephi 5:21) or *dark* (see Jacob 3:9 and Alma 3:6), and skin was *white* in its absence (see 2 Nephi 5:21 and 3 Nephi 2:15). A detailed review of these words and their cultural and linguistic context can help clarify the nature of this mark.

As explained below, Nephites preserved their written language by reusing, in their own records, words from biblical (and non-biblical) passages found on the brass plates. Also, the translated text of the Book of Mormon shows heavy influence of Early Modern English. It uses words in ways unique to Early Modern English texts, including Early Modern English translations of the Old Testament. These ancient and modern lexical ties suggest that English words in the Book of Mormon may often have the same meanings they have in those early English Bibles. A careful review of the words *mark*, *curse*, *skin*, *black*, and *white* as used in the

Book of Mormon indicates that Early Modern English biblical meanings do, in fact, apply. Indeed, these meanings can be applied consistently across the Book of Mormon — not just in selected passages.

With these meanings, these words appear to identify the Lamanite mark as a specific type of mark prohibited by the law of Moses (see Leviticus 19:28). It was a sacrilegious, permanent mark made by incision (an ancient tattoo) which, under the law of Moses, represented rebellion against God and his laws. This doesn't mean that all tattoos indicate rebellion against God. In our day, tattoos are adopted for a wide variety of reasons. Even in the Book of Mormon, while the first Lamanites and some of their successors adopted this mark to rebel against God and his laws, others adopted it to continue traditions established by their fathers.¹

As explained in detail below, Mesoamerican art and archaeological studies confirm the presence of profane tattoos (and scarification) in the ancient Americas. These ancient tattoos support the proposal of this paper, though it, like any proposal on the meaning of the controversial mark of the Lamanites, admittedly involves a degree of speculation.

The analysis in this paper is guided by the following general principles:

1. The intended meaning of each Book of Mormon passage must align well with the stated intent of the Book of Mormon and with correct principles taught in the Book of Mormon and by today's living prophets.
2. The most plausible meaning of the text of the Book of Mormon is found in standard definitions of its revealed words, which are principally Early Modern English.
3. The most likely meaning of a Book of Mormon word doesn't always make for an easy read — it isn't always the meaning that comes readily to the mind of a modern reader. Like the Old Testament, the Book of Mormon was written by prophets who lived in an ancient culture. Their words were written from the perspective of their culture and must be understood from that perspective.
4. The intended meaning of each passage must harmonize with all passages and not just a few isolated verses.

1. See 2 Nephi 4:3–9; Jacob 3:5–9; Alma 17:15, 21:17, 23:3, 26:24, 37:9, 60:32; Helaman 5:19 and 51; 15:4–5 and 7–15. See also Galatians 1:14 and D&C 93:39.

A recent article by Jan J. Martin explains that Nephi's "Lamanite descriptors in 2 Nephi 5 — *cut off*, *cursed*, *skin of blackness*, and *loathsome* — are best understood from within a covenant perspective, specifically from within the ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal covenant relationship that God made with Lehi's family."² She concludes that Nephi's "skin of blackness was a self-inflicted mark (most likely a tattoo)."³ She doesn't allow, however, that profane tattoos violated the law of Moses as found on the brass plates and doesn't acknowledge their adoption as a violation of the suzerainty covenant. I further explain these differences below. The meanings I offer for Nephi's "Lamanite descriptors" aren't all identical to hers, but they likewise fit well within the suzerainty covenant perspective that she sets forth.

An earlier paper by Gerrit M. Steenblik,⁴ also discussed herein, suggests a mark temporarily painted on the skin — another practice well-represented in Mesoamerican art and archaeological studies. This valuable paper advances the scholarly discourse about the Lamanite mark, but some gaps in his proposal are resolved when sacrilegious tattoos that violate the law of Moses are considered.

An addendum to this paper examines alternative views of the Lamanite mark that have been offered by others.

The Specific English Words We Received From God

A growing body of evidence indicates that Joseph Smith didn't compose the text of the Book of Mormon in his own mind. Its text reflects neither his vocabulary nor his sentence structure. The evidence indicates that he received fully composed words, phrases, and sentences, which he read

2. Jan J. Martin, "The Prophet Nephi and the Covenantal Nature of *Cut Off*, *Cursed*, *Skin of Blackness*, and *Loathsome*," in *They Shall Grow Together: The Bible in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Charles Swift and Nicholas J. Frederick (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2022), 108. Martin explains that a suzerain-vassal covenant is "a type of covenant that was then common in the Middle East where a dominant party, the suzerain (God/Jehovah), set the terms of an agreement with a subordinate party, the vassal (Israel). As the weaker member, vassals had no power to negotiate or change the terms of the treaty. They could only agree to accept or reject whatever the suzerain offered." Ibid., 110.

3. Ibid., 127.

4. Gerrit M. Steenblik, "Demythicalizing the Lamanites' 'Skin of Blackness'," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 49 (2021): 167–258, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/demythicalizing-the-lamanites-skin-of-blackness/>.

aloud to scribes, who wrote them down in the original manuscript. Royal Skousen says, “All of this evidence (from the witnesses’ statements, the original manuscript, the printer’s manuscript, and from the text itself) is thus consistent with the hypothesis that Joseph Smith could actually see (whether in the interpreters themselves or in his mind’s eye) the translated English text — word for word and letter for letter — and that he read off this revealed text to his scribe.”⁵ Jeff Lindsay adds

We now know there were numerous witnesses and remarkably consistent testimony showing that Joseph dictated [the text of the Book of Mormon] ... without notes, without manuscripts, and apparently without a Bible even when quoting Isaiah or other parts of the Bible. (Indeed, it appears that Joseph did not even have a Bible of his own until after completion of the Book of Mormon translation.)⁶

This evidence indicates that Joseph Smith humbly prepared himself to receive the words of the Book of Mormon by revelation, but seldom, if ever, puzzled over any specific word or phrase. It is consistent with a “gift from God” by which he could “look in” the interpreters and “translate” (Mosiah 8:13) by reading a text that he had little, if any, hand in composing. Marilynne Todd Linford explains that both Joseph Smith and King Mosiah translated “by acting in the office of seer, to *look*, meaning to *read*.”⁷ This process reflects a prophecy in which the Lord commands an unlearned man (Joseph Smith) saying “thou shalt *read the words* which I shall give unto thee” (2 Nephi 27:20). Later, the Lord gives instructions that apply after “*thou hast read the words which I have commanded thee*” (2 Nephi 27:22). Finally, the Lord again refers to Joseph Smith as “him that *shall read the words* that shall be delivered him” (2 Nephi 27:24). Stanford Carmack submits that these passages

5. Royal Skousen, “How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 (1998): 31, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1186&context=jbms>.

6. Jeff Lindsay, “Orson Scott Card’s ‘Artifact or Artifice’: Where It Stands After Twenty-five Years,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 30 (2018): 260–61, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/orson-scott-cards-artiftoddact-or-artifice-where-it-stands-after-twenty-five-years/#sdfootnote24anc>.

7. Marilynne Todd Linford, *The Book of Mormon is True: Evidences and Insights to Strengthen Your Testimony* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2015), 24.

indicate that the Lord “gave” or “delivered” specific words to Joseph Smith, who read them.⁸

Skousen and Carmack, who have analyzed the text that Joseph Smith dictated to his scribes (the earliest text), have concluded that it is primarily Early Modern English.⁹ The meanings that apply to its words and the rules it follows for arranging words into phrases and sentences have much more in common with texts written before the King James Bible than with Joseph Smith’s native dialect. Carmack’s comparison of certain syntactical structures in the Book of Mormon with those found “in the King James Bible and pseudo-archaic texts” finds that “Joseph Smith would not have produced this ... syntax ... in a pseudo-archaic effort.”¹⁰ Carmack adds:

The linguistic fingerprint of the Book of Mormon, in hundreds of different ways, is Early Modern English. Smith himself

8. See Stanford Carmack, “Joseph Smith Read the Words,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 18 (2016): 41–64. <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/joseph-smith-read-the-words/>. Also, compare the usage of the words *read* and *words* in Joshua 8:34; 2 Kings 22:8 and 23:3; and Jeremiah 36:6, 8, 10, and 15–16.

9. See, for example, Royal Skousen, “The Original Text of the Book of Mormon and its Publication by Yale University Press,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 7 (2013): 57–96, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-original-text-of-the-book-of-mormon-and-its-publication-by-yale-university-press/>; Stanford Carmack, “The More Part of the Book of Mormon Is Early Modern English,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 18 (2016): 33–40, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-more-part-of-the-book-of-mormon-is-early-modern-english/>; Stanford Carmack, “The Implications of Past-Tense Syntax in the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015): 119–86, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-implications-of-past-tense-syntax-in-the-book-of-mormon/>; Stanford Carmack, “The Case of the {-th} Plural in the Earliest Text,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 18 (2016): 79–108, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-case-of-the-th-plural-in-the-earliest-text/>; Stanford Carmack, “The Case of Plural *Was* in the Earliest Text,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 18 (2016): 109–37, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-case-of-plural-was-in-the-earliest-text/>; and Stanford Carmack, “How Joseph Smith’s Grammar Differed from Book of Mormon Grammar: Evidence from the 1832 History,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 25 (2017): 239–59, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/how-joseph-smiths-grammar-differed-from-book-of-mormon-grammar-evidence-from-the-1832-history/>.

10. Stanford Carmack, “The Book of Mormon’s Complex Finite Cause Syntax,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 49 (2021): 113, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-book-of-mormons-complex-finite-cause-syntax/>.

— out of a presumed idiosyncratic, quasi-biblical style — would not have translated and could not have translated the text into the **form** of the earliest text. Had his own language often found its way into the wording of the earliest text, its form would be very different from what we encounter.¹¹

This linguistic evidence is consistent with Nephi's prophecy. For reasons perhaps only known to God, these words appear to show heavy influence from Early Modern English beyond what might be expected from an effort attempting to imitate biblical language. The linguistic data is not consistent with claims that Joseph fabricated the text, but it is consistent with the claim that the words themselves were revealed to Joseph.¹² The Lord said, "*I am able to do mine own work; wherefore thou shalt read the words which I shall give unto thee*" (2 Nephi 27:20).

Because this text came to Joseph Smith by revelation, one might expect it to be recognized as a beautiful, well-written text. This, however, was not the case. Carmack explains, "Early assessments of the quality of the English language of the Book of Mormon were largely dismissive. Many criticisms were merely unsubstantiated, derisive comments lacking in analysis, sometimes made for comic effect, while others were more substantive but still without an awareness of older English beyond that found in the King James Bible."¹³ The text of the Book of Mormon can appear to be poorly formed until it is recognized as a primarily Early Modern English text whose vocabulary and syntax tend to predate the King James Version of the Bible by a century or so. Carmack explains:

A close syntactic examination of the language of the [Book of Mormon], however, reveals that the quality of English in the book is excellent and even sophisticated. But because in many cases it is English that we don't use today, it seems to the casual observer to be deficient in many ways. The English certainly is very frequently different from and foreign to current

11. Stanford Carmack, "Joseph Smith Read the Words," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-Day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 18, (2016): 41, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/joseph-smith-read-the-words/>.

12. See Royal Skousen, "The Language of the Original Text of the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 57, no. 3 (2018): 107–108, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/article/the-language-of-the-original-text-of-the-book-of-mormon/>.

13. Stanford Carmack, "A Look at Some 'Nonstandard' Book of Mormon Grammar," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 11 (2014): 210, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/a-look-at-some-nonstandard-book-of-mormon-grammar/>.

modes of expression. But it turns out to be nonstandard only sporadically. When we consider more advanced syntax ... we find the [Book of Mormon] to be quite elaborate in its patterns of use.¹⁴

The earliest text of the Book of Mormon has been described by friend and foe alike as ungrammatical, but Skousen explains, “The so-called bad grammar of the original text of the Book of Mormon turns out to be acceptable usage during the 1500s and 1600s, in the period that we call Early Modern English.”¹⁵ Carmack has called it “a well-formed Early Modern English text.”¹⁶ Skousen points out four specific aspects of the text that differ from a traditional Early Modern English text, then concludes that the text of the Book of Mormon is “a very complex and interesting mixture of specific language usage, but definitely not an ignorant mishmash of language imitative of the biblical style.”¹⁷

The Lord delivered to Joseph Smith — not just the general gist of concepts — but specific words, which he read by the gift and power of God. The meanings of these words and the syntactical rules they follow tend to match texts written in the 1500s and 1600s much more than they match texts authored by Joseph Smith or by others living in the 1800s — even those trying to mimic the English of the Bible. This paper acknowledges these facts, so all Book of Mormon quotations in this paper are from *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*¹⁸ (the Yale edition), and all definitions of Book of Mormon words cited herein are consistent with Early Modern English.

The Ancient Cultural and Linguistic Meaning of These Words

The revealed text of the Book of Mormon conveys thoughts originally written in an ancient language. Nephi’s prophecy explains that its words are “the words of them which have slumbered” (2 Nephi 27:6) or “slumbered in the dust” (2 Nephi 27:9), “for the Lord God hath said that the words of the faithful should speak as if it were from the dead” (2 Nephi 27:13). Unfortunately, it’s easy to misunderstand words written from the viewpoint of an ancient culture. If we apply contemporary meanings to ancient words, we can distort the clear picture they were

14. Ibid., 210–11.

15. Skousen, “Language of the Original Text,” 83.

16. Carmack, “Joseph Smith Read the Words,” 61.

17. See Skousen, “Language of the Original Text,” 106.

18. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022).

intended to present. This distortion is minimized as we learn more about the ancient culture (and the relatively modern source of some elements of our own culture).

As we seek to define any Book of Mormon word, we should compare how that word is used in other passages with similar cultural and linguistic context. While the most comparable passages will likely be found in the Book of Mormon, culturally and linguistically similar passages may also be found in Early Modern English translations of the Old Testament.

The words on the brass plates were a primary source for the ancient cultural and linguistic content of Nephite records. The brass plates contained a large pre-exilic collection of scripture, including ancient versions of many of the books in our Old Testament (see 1 Nephi 4:16, 5:11–13, and 13:23). This large ancient record was a lexicon of sorts from which Nephites learned to read and write. They studied it and wrote using its words, thus preserving their written language (see Omni 1:17). Familiarity with these words also helped them keep the law of Moses (see Mosiah 1:3–5). The writings of Nephi’s successors, including Amaleki (see Omni 1:14) and King Benjamin (see Mosiah 1:3) show that they remained familiar with the brass-plate record. Even Mormon, who lived about 1,000 years after Nephi, knew the brass plate record and referred to details of brass-plate prophecies (see, for example, 3 Nephi 10:15–17). Of course, we don’t have access to the brass plates or the gold plates for a direct comparison, but it’s likely that the gold plates used many ancient words and phrases that were preserved on the brass plates.

Providentially, the English in the Book of Mormon is mainly Early Modern English and there are several Early Modern English translations of the Old Testament. These Early Modern English translations of the Old Testament, including the King James Version, have both ancient roots and Early Modern English vocabulary in common with the Book of Mormon. These early English Bibles may translate some concepts with ancient roots into the same Early Modern English words as the Book of Mormon. So, the Oxford English Dictionary needn’t be our sole resource for understanding the Early Modern English words in the Book of Mormon. The English words in these early Bibles, if translated correctly, can also provide historical and cultural context. And the original Hebrew for these biblical words can help to clarify the intended meaning.¹⁹

19. This lexical connection between the Bible and Book of Mormon may be one way in which the two records can be “one in thine hand” (Ezekiel 37:17) and can

Usage of the Noun *Mark* in the Old Testament and Book of Mormon

Without context, the English noun *mark* can be relatively vague, but in Early Modern English versions of the Old Testament, this noun renders Hebrew nouns with very specific meanings.²⁰ Consequently, Paul Y. Hoskisson reasons that in the phrase *looking beyond the mark* (Jacob 4:14), the noun *mark* means target.²¹ This is based on the Hebrew noun *miphga*²² or *mattara*.²³ This same reasoning may apply to the same noun in Alma 3:4–19, where it refers repeatedly to darkened skin associated with a curse. The apparent dictionary definition is “a sign, badge, brand, etc., assumed by or imposed on a person.”²⁴ There are three Hebrew nouns translated as *mark* in Early Modern English versions of the Old Testament that might be deemed consistent with this definition, but a careful review suggests only one that fits well in this specific context.

“grow together unto the confounding of false doctrines” (2 Nephi 3:12).

20. A full text search of the 1611 King James Version and of the Geneva Bible of 1599 found nine verses that use the English noun *mark*. Only these specific verses were then reviewed in the Geneva Bible of 1587, the Bishops’ Bible of 1568, and the Coverdale Bible of 1535. Most reviewed verses use the English word *mark*. However, the King James Version uses the word *landmark* rather than *mark* in Deuteronomy 19:14 and 27:17, and the Coverdale Bible uses the word *letters* rather than *mark* in Leviticus 19:28 and the phrase *made me to stand in thy way* rather than *set me as a mark* in Job 7:20.

21. See Paul Y. Hoskisson, “Looking Beyond the Mark,” in *A Witness for the Restoration: Essays in Honor of Robert J. Matthews*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Andrew C. Skinner (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2007), 149–64, <https://rsc.byu.edu/witness-restoration/looking-beyond-mark>; and Paul Y. Hoskisson, “Missing the Mark,” *Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship* 29, no. 2 (2009), <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/insights/vol29/iss2/2/>.

22. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Enhanced Brown–Driver–Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), s.v. “מִפְּגָע.” *Miphga* means *thing hit* or *mark*. Rendered as *mark* in Job 7:20. Hereafter cited as “BDB.”

23. BDB, s.v. “מַטָּרָה.” *Mattara* means *target* or *mark*; can also mean *guard*, *ward*, or *prison*. Rendered as *mark* in Job 16:12, Lamentations 3:12, and 1 Samuel 20:20.

24. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “mark, n.1,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/114169?rskey=S0zDbe&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>. See sense IV.12.a. Includes Early Modern English examples.

Genesis 4:15: (Oth) A Protective Token or Sign That May Not Have Affected the Skin

Genesis 4:15 says, “The Lord set a *mark* upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.” In Early Modern English Bibles, including the King James Version, the Hebrew noun *oth* is rendered as *mark* in this verse. This may be a translation error.²⁵ In all verses except Genesis 4:15, the King James Version renders *oth* as *sign*, *pledge*, or *token*. Some later translations of this verse render *oth* as *sign* or *token*. The English Revised Version says, “The LORD appointed a sign for Cain.” God’s Word Translation says, “The LORD gave Cain a sign.” Young’s Literal Translation says, “Jehovah setteth to Cain a token.” The Hebrew wording suggests a token of God’s promise to protect Cain from murder. Nothing in the Hebrew links this token with Cain’s skin. The token’s protective nature clearly distinguishes it from the Lamanite mark, which is associated — not with protection, but with a curse (see 2 Nephi 5:20–24, Jacob 3:3–10, Alma 3:4–19, and 3 Nephi 2:15–16).

From at least the 1600s through the 1900s, some Christians, eventually including some members and leaders²⁶ of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, taught that the mark set upon Cain was dark skin color imposed by God and that it was linked with a curse. It is now clear that these teachings were wrong. The Hebrew wording of Genesis 4:15 mentions neither a dark skin nor a curse.²⁷ The wording is specific to Cain with no indication that it might apply in any way to his seed.²⁸

25. *BDB*, s.v. “*תָּוֶן*.” Although rendered as *mark* in Early Modern English versions of Genesis 4:15, including the King James Bible, the Geneva Bible of 1587, the Bishop’s Bible of 1568, the Coverdale Bible of 1535, and the Tindale Bible of 1526, *oth* is rendered as *sign*, *pledge*, or *token* in this well-considered authority, including in Genesis 4:15.

26. See, for example, Brigham Young, “Brigham Young Address,” Ms d 1234, Box 48, folder 3, February 5, 1852, Church Historical Department, Salt Lake City, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Slavery,_Blacks,_and_the_priesthood; George Albert Smith, “Statement of the First Presidency” August 17, 1949, as cited on FAIR (website), https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/answers/Mormonism_and_racial_issues/Blacks_and_the_priesthood/Statements#1949; and Bruce R. McConkie, “Cain,” in *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 108–109. See also Bruce R. McConkie, “All Are Alike unto God,” (discourse, CES Religious Educators Symposium, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, August 18, 1978), <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/bruce-r-mcconkie/alike-unto-god/>.

27. A curse mentioned nearby (Genesis 4:11–12) separates Cain from the fruits of the earth—he will have no harvest.

28. See Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, “Moses 5; Genesis 4: The Two Ways” in *Genesis, Old Testament Minute Commentary Series*, ed. Taylor Halverson (Springville, UT:

An essay on the official website of the Church now counters the idea that God curses anyone by changing their skin color. “The Church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse ... or that blacks or people of any other race or ethnicity are inferior in any way to anyone else.”²⁹ This suggests that no scripture, including Genesis 4:15 and any Book of Mormon passage, describes any curse from God that altered anyone’s skin color. There is simply no legitimate connection between the Book of Mormon’s cursed Lamanite mark and the protective token that the Lord gave to Cain.

Ezekiel 9:3–6: (Taw) A Protective Mark on the Forehead in the Intangible Context of a Vision

In Ezekiel 9:3–11, the noun *mark* is used in the context of a symbolic vision. In this vision, a man who is “clothed with linen, which had the writer’s inkhorn [writing equipment] by his side” (Ezekiel 9:3), is told to “set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for [are dismayed by] all the abominations [of Jerusalem]” (Ezekiel 9:3). Then, others are commanded to slay the people “but come not near any man upon whom is the mark” (Ezekiel 9:6). In this passage, the word *mark* translates the Hebrew noun *taw*, the name of a written letter (anciently shaped like an X) that could serve as a simple signature.³⁰ It appears that the man clothed in linen writes this mark on the foreheads of certain people to attest to (certify) their righteousness. In the nonphysical context of a vision, the mark visibly distinguishes those thus certified as righteous. This mark, like the token given to Cain, protects people from destruction. Both the intangible context of a vision and the protective nature of this mark distinguish it from the cursed physical mark that identified rebellious Lamanites.

This mark in Ezekiel 9:3 is placed on the skin (the forehead), but only in the symbolic context of a vision. Alma invokes similar symbolism

Book of Mormon Central, 2021), <https://biblecentral.info/library/commentary/moses-5-genesis-4/>, and Stephen O. Smoot, “The Book of Moses Introduction,” *The Pearl of Great Price: A Study Edition for Latter-day Saints* (Springville, UT: Book of Mormon Central, 2022), 24–29 [at 5:40], <https://biblecentral.info/library/chapter/commentary-on-moses-5/>.

29. “Race and the Priesthood,” Gospel Topic Essays, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, (website), December 2013, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/race-and-the-priesthood>.

30. BDB, s.v. “תָּו.” *Taw* means *mark*. In Ezekiel 9:4 and 9:6, it is a mark on the forehead, a sign of exemption from judgment. In Job 31:35, the related word תָּוִי (*tawi*, literally *my mark*) means *my* (written) *mark* (in attestation).

as he urges Nephites to have the “image of God engraven upon [their] countenances” (Alma 5:19). He uses this symbolism shortly after the Amlicite rebellion in which Amlici and his followers had marked themselves on the forehead “after the manner of the Lamanites” (Alma 3:4) to distinguish themselves from the Nephites. This Lamanite-like mark brought a curse from God upon the Amlicites (see Alma 3:13–19). In contrast, Alma teaches that we can be saved in the kingdom of heaven only if our spiritual countenance and moral cleanliness certify that we are redeemed by God (see Alma 5:19–25).

Leviticus 19:28: (Qaaqa) A Mark Imprinted on the Skin by Incision

Leviticus 19:28, which is part of the law of Moses, includes a prohibition against profane tattoos. Before discussing the nature of this prohibition, we should establish the likelihood that it was part of the law of Moses as recorded on the brass plates and obeyed by righteous children of Lehi. Jan Martin suggests that this prohibition originated “around 400 B.C.E.,”³¹ but Documentary Hypothesis literature indicates that it’s much older — old enough to be on the brass plates.

Scholars have differing opinions as to just when the Holiness Code — the part of the law of Moses found in Leviticus 17–26 (including Leviticus 19:28) — was composed in its present form, “ranging from a pre-Deuteronomic composition to a post-exilic one.”³² However, many scholars agree that “the writing of H [the Holiness Code in its present form] was not original, and ... several literary compilations of legal material preceded it and were incorporated into it. ... However, this legal material did not necessarily originate even in those literary compilations which preceded H. Sometimes these literary compilations were preceded by oral traditions, by means of which legal materials were transmitted from an early period. ... The legal material is not equally ancient, but, like the rest of the pentateuchal law codes, it has very early elements, some of which go back even to remote periods.”³³ Recent analysis suggests that the “kernel” of the Holiness Code “preceded the destruction of the first

31. Martin, “Covenantal Nature,” 123.

32. Kerry Muhlestein, “Prospering in the Land: A Comparison of Covenant Promises in Leviticus and First Nephi 2,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 32 (2019): 289n9, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/prospering-in-the-land-a-comparison-of-covenant-promises-in-leviticus-and-first-nephi-2/>.

33. Menahem Haran and David S. Sperling, “The Holiness Code,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed., vol. 9, (Jerusalem: Keter, 2007), 320.

Temple.”³⁴ But the Holiness Code “preserves only fragments of a[n earlier] more comprehensive legislation.”³⁵ “From a historical perspective, ... the earliest recoverable literary layer of [the laws in Leviticus 18 and 19] may be relatively old [compared with other parts of the Holiness Code].”³⁶ This literature is consistent with an origination of the laws in Leviticus 19, including Leviticus 19:28, long before Lehi left Jerusalem. The Lord commanded Nephi to obtain the brass plates, which contained these ancient laws, so the Nephites could “observe to keep the judgments, and the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord in all things, according to the law of Moses” (2 Nephi 5:10).

Leviticus 19:28 says, “Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any *marks* upon you: I am the Lord.” This statute prohibits two different “unholy” practices (Leviticus 19:2). The first was a pagan practice of cutting gashes in one’s own body to mourn for the dead. The second practice, described with the English word *mark*, isn’t about mourning for the dead.³⁷ It involves cutting permanent, sacrilegious marks (ancient tattoos) into the skin.³⁸ The Hebrew word translated here as *marks* (*qaaqa*) is used only this once in the Old Testament. This passage forbids any *incision*, *imprintment*, or *tattoo*³⁹ that honors pagan gods (and some believe it forbids other tattoos).⁴⁰ Bearing such a mark

34. Ibid.

35. Henry T. C. Sun, “Holiness Code,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:256, https://archive.org/details/anchorbibledicti0003unse_b2a9/page/254/mode/2up.

36. Ibid.

37. The Hebrew doesn’t apply the term *for the dead* to the practice of imprinting permanent marks into the skin by incision. See Rabbi Anthony Manning, “Tattoos and Body Piercing,” RabbiManning.com, Issues in Contemporary Jewish Society, #133, May 2021, <http://rabbimanning.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Tattoos-and-Body-Piercing.pdf>. See also Gilad J. Gevaryahu, “Ketovet Ka’aka (Leviticus 19:28): Tattooing or Branding?,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 13–21, https://jbnqnew.jewishbible.org/assets/Uploads/381/381_ketovet.pdf. The syntax of virtually all English translations (including the KJV and the other Early Modern English translations) preserves this distinction, applying the term *for the dead* only to the first clause in the passage.

38. See also discussion of curses and cutting in Steenblik, “Demythicalizing,” 192.

39. *BDB*, s.v. “טָטַעַ.”

40. Among Jews, discussions about the scope of this second prohibition date back centuries. Ancient sages and modern scholars both tend to divide into two camps on this question. Some see this passage as a prohibition against almost all marks made by cutting the skin. This view has prevailed among Jews for the past 1,000 years (until recently). Others cite Old Testament passages that portray certain marks in a positive light (see Genesis 4:15, Isaiah 44:5, Isaiah 49:14–16, and Ezekiel

violated the law of Moses, so the mark itself was a curse — a cursed thing cut into the skin in violation of God’s law. As such, it fits the description of the Lamanite mark in Alma 3:4–19.

Consistently Literal References to Skin

Both the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon refer to some body parts as metaphors for spiritual realities. These include metaphorical references to stiff necks, hard hearts, and clean hands (see Exodus 32:9, Ezekiel 3:7, 2 Samuel 22:21, 2 Nephi 25:16, and Alma 15:15). On the other hand, all 100 uses of the word *skin* in the Old Testament refer to literal, physical skin — the word *skin* is never used purely as a metaphor. Even the term “I am escaped with the *skin* of my teeth” (Job 19:20), the source of an English idiom for a narrow escape, is seen often by commentators as a reference to actual skin (with differing views about specifics) but may refer to the gums or the bones in which the teeth are set (here a wordplay involving an Arabic word may be involved).⁴¹ This consistently literal or physical meaning of the word *skin* across the Old Testament appears to apply in the Book of Mormon as well.

Blessings, Cursings, and God’s Covenant with the Children of Israel

The words *curse* and *cursing* aren’t common topics of discussion in our day. Nevertheless, curses that come from God, like blessings that come from God, are governed by the principles of agency, obedience, and repentance. Keeping covenants brings connection with God and

9:4, 6). They believe that this law only prohibits sacrilegious marks that represent or honor pagan deities or accompany apostate practices. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica* s.v. “Tattoo;” 2d ed. vol. 19, 526; Rabbi Alan Lucas, “Tattooing in Jewish Law: A Conservative ruling on body ink,” *My Jewish Learning*, (website,) <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/tattooing-in-jewish-law/>; Nili S. Fox, “The Biblical Body as Canvas,” *Reform Judaism Magazine*, Summer 2014, 34–35, https://issuu.com/reformjudaism/docs/rj_summer2014_reduced; and Dierdra Rutherford Fein, “Living with Leviticus: On Tattoos,” Arts & Culture, *TC Jewfolk*, (website), August 10, 2011, <https://tcjewfolk.com/living-leviticus-tattoos/>. The Lamanite mark reflected rebellion against God himself, so it may have either blasphemed the Lord or honored pagan gods. The archaeological record confirms profane tattoos in ancient America, so it supports the more restrictive view.

41. See David R. Blumenthal, “A Play on Words in the Nineteenth Chapter of Job,” *Vetus Testamentum* 16 (1966): 497–501, davidblumenthal.org/images/Play%20on%20Words%20in%20Job.pdf. Also see the commentaries at “Job 19:20,” BibleHub, (website), <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/job/19-20.htm>.

access to many blessings. Breaking covenants separates us from God — bringing curses upon us. The separation inherent in each curse, however, is conditioned on repentance.

Usage of the Words Curse and Cursing in the Old Testament and Book of Mormon

Forms of the word *curse* appear 184 times in the Old Testament and 80 times in the Book of Mormon. If we are to understand the passages that use these words, we should explore their meanings. In Early Modern English versions of the Old Testament and in the Book of Mormon, three different meanings can apply to the words *curse* and *cursing*. Often, they indicate a prophecy of an affliction or negative consequence that will come upon unrepentant people.⁴² For instance, Jeremiah declared, “Thus saith the Lord; Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the Lord” (Jeremiah 17:5). Similarly, Nephi declared, “Cursed is he that putteth his trust in man or maketh flesh his arm, or shall hearken unto the precepts of men” (2 Nephi 28:31). This meaning applies to the curses set forth in Leviticus 26. They were consequences that were prophesied to afflict the children of Israel who strayed from the covenant path.

The words *curse* and *cursing* can also refer to a thing, a place, or even a people that is at odds with God’s law — a forbidden or cursed thing.⁴³ This meaning may be less common, but it’s well represented in the Old Testament. The Lord tells Jeremiah that wickedness has caused the children of Israel themselves to become *a curse*. He says, “I will deliver them to be removed into all the kingdoms of the earth for their hurt, to be a reproach and a proverb, a taunt and a curse, in all places whither I shall drive them” (Jeremiah 24:9). The Lord later tells Zechariah that those who were once a curse would become a blessing. He says, “And it shall come to pass, that as ye were a curse among the heathen, O house of Judah, and house of Israel; so will I save you, and ye shall be a blessing” (Zechariah 8:13).

Moses taught the children of Israel, “The graven images of their gods shall ye burn with fire: thou shalt not desire the silver or gold

42. See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “curse, n.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/46132?rskey=AOAwPL&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>. See sense 1.a. Includes Early Modern English examples.

43. See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “curse, n.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/46132?rskey=AOAwPL&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>. See sense 3.a. Includes Early Modern English examples.

that is on them, nor take it unto thee, lest thou be snared therein: for it is an abomination to the Lord thy God. Neither shalt thou bring an abomination into thine house, *lest thou be a cursed thing like it*: but thou shalt utterly detest it, and thou shalt utterly abhor it; for it is a *cursed thing*” (Deuteronomy 7:25–26). The spoil of idolatrous cities was to be burned and abandoned as a “cursed thing” (Deuteronomy 13:17).

So, something at odds with God’s law can be called a curse or cursed thing. It appears that the Lamanite mark, which was cut into the skin in violation of God’s law, was this type of cursing — a cursed thing on their skins. Jacob refers to it as “*the cursing which hath come upon their skins*” (Jacob 3:5). Similarly, Mormon explains that “the skins of the Lamanites were dark, according to the mark which was set upon their fathers, *which was a curse upon them*” (Alma 3:6). In these passages and others, the words *cursing* and *curse* refer to a forbidden or cursed thing — something at odds with God’s law.⁴⁴

In other settings, the words *curse* and *cursing* have one other meaning. They can refer to curses uttered by men. The Old Testament sometimes uses the word *cursing* to refer to such curses.⁴⁵ The Book of Mormon always uses the word *curse* for this purpose.⁴⁶

Blessings and Cursings of the Law of Moses

The blessings and cursings that the Lord promised to Nephi in the second chapter of the Book of Mormon (see 1 Nephi 2:20–23) reflect blessings and cursings that the Lord promised to the children of Israel centuries earlier, which are recorded in Leviticus 26.

After the Lord redeemed the children of Israel from bondage in Egypt, he entered into a covenant with them at Mount Sinai. He gave them the law of Moses, “a law of performances and of ordinances, a law which they were to observe strictly from day to day to keep them in remembrance of God and their duty towards him” (Mosiah 13:30). Leviticus 26 records the blessings (positive consequences) that would apply “if ye walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments, and do

44. This sense of the words *curse* and *cursing* may be fairly prominent in the Book of Mormon. Consider 1 Nephi 2:23; 2 Nephi 1:18, 1:22, 4:6, 5:21–24; Jacob 3:3; Alma 3:9, 18–19, Alma 17:15, Alma 23:18; and 3 Nephi 2:15.

45. See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “curse, n.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/46132?rskey=AOAwPL&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>. See sense 2.a. Includes Early Modern English examples. See also Genesis 12:3, Leviticus 19:14, and Leviticus 20:9.

46. See, for example, 2 Nephi 18:21, 2 Nephi 29:5, and Alma 49:27.

them” (see Leviticus 26:1–13) and the cursings (negative consequences) that would apply “if ye will not hearken unto me, and will not do *all these commandments*; And if ye shall despise my statutes, or if your soul abhor my judgments, so that ye will not do *all my commandments*, but that ye *break my covenant*” (see Leviticus 26:14–39).

Kerry Muhlestein notes the covenant inherent in these blessings and cursings: “The Abrahamic Covenant is most fully outlined for Israel when it was reestablished with them during their journey from Egypt. This is presented in Leviticus 26.”⁴⁷ Muhlestein explains further:

Leviticus 26 represents the end of what scholars refer to as the “Holiness Code,” which is comprised of chapters 17–26 and which outlines a series of laws regarding rituals, sexual conduct, family relations, priestly conduct, regulations of religious festivals and the tabernacle, blasphemy, and redemption. The statutes and commandments that Israel is told to keep as part of the covenant most directly apply to the laws found in this section of scripture.

As is typical of covenant pericopes in the Old Testament, the promise of blessings for keeping the covenant was immediately followed by a presentation of the cursings that would follow if Israel did not remain faithful.⁴⁸

As children of Israel, Lehi’s family were under covenant to keep the law of Moses. In 1 Nephi 2:20–23, the Lord renews this covenant with Nephi, including the application of its blessings and cursings upon him and his brethren. Muhlestein explains the correlation between the blessings and cursings recorded in Leviticus 26 and those promised to Nephi as he begins his ministry. Muhlestein says, “There is a striking similarity between this Leviticus 26 covenant explication and the much more succinct version recorded by Nephi as he and his family left Jerusalem.”⁴⁹

Muhlestein notes that Nephi’s language “mirrors the Leviticus emphasis on how breaking the covenant would lead to punishment that would force Israel to return to God.”⁵⁰ Thus, Muhlestein conceptually links these blessings and cursings revealed to Nephi with those given by the Lord centuries earlier as the children of Israel covenanted to keep

47. Muhlestein, “Prospering in the Land,” 289.

48. Ibid., 289–90.

49. Ibid., 290.

50. Ibid., 291.

the law of Moses. Because the provisions of the covenant described in Leviticus 26 *most directly apply to the laws found in Leviticus 17–26*, the many laws to which these blessings and cursings apply most directly include Leviticus 19:28, which prohibits profane *marks* on the skin (tattoos).

Two Types of Lamanite Rebellion and Two Resulting Curses

An important pattern is revealed through a careful comparison of three passages: 1 Nephi 2:19–24, in which the Lord sets forth blessings and cursings for Lehi’s posterity; 2 Nephi 1:13–29, in which Lehi admonishes his sons; and 2 Nephi 5:19–25, in which Nephi describes how some of these blessings and cursings have already come to pass. Each of these passages mentions two different types of rebellion by Nephi’s brethren and two different negative consequences or curses — one for each type of rebellion.

In 1 Nephi 2:22, the Lord promises that inasmuch as Nephi is righteous, he will “be made a ruler and a teacher over [his] brethren.” In 1 Nephi 2:21, the Lord promises that inasmuch as Nephi’s brethren “shall rebel against thee, they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord.” So, the first type of rebellion is rebellion against Nephi (and his teachings), and the consequence (curse) for doing so is to be cut off from the presence of the Lord.⁵¹

In 1 Nephi 2:23, the Lord promises that “in the day that [thy brethren] shall rebel against me [the Lord himself], I will curse them even with a sore curse, and they shall have no power over thy seed except they

51. Martin sees being *cut off* as different from being *cursed* (Martin, “Covenantal Nature,” 118), but this distinction isn’t ironclad. Being *cut off* appears to be the stated covenantal penalty or curse for rebellion against Nephi (see 1 Nephi 2:21 where the Lord states the penalty and 2 Nephi 5:20 where Nephi confirms that this specific penalty had been imposed). To be cut off is a common penalty for violating a covenant with God. When God established the covenant of circumcision with Abram (Abraham), God said, “And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant” (Genesis 17:14). Jared T. Parker describes this as “a severe ‘cutting’ *penalty*” for breaking the covenant of circumcision, “Cutting Covenants,” in *The Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament*, ed. D. Kelly Ogden, Jared W. Ludlow, and Kerry Muhlestein (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), 120, <https://rsc.byu.edu/gospel-jesus-christ-old-testament/cutting-covenants>. The Lord repeatedly declares similar cutting off penalties (either being cut off from God’s people or from his presence) in the law of Moses. In the Book of Mormon, the term *curse of Adam* (Moroni 8:8) means to be *cut off from the presence of the Lord* (Alma 42:9).

[thy seed] shall rebel against me also.” So, the second type of rebellion is rebellion against the Lord himself (and his laws) and the consequence for doing so includes “a sore curse” and a lack of power over Nephi’s righteous seed. Martin notes that this lack of power was the result of forfeiting “the protection and other spiritual blessings that Jehovah offered.”⁵²

Martin considers it significant that “there is no mention of a mark or a skin of blackness among the many curses,” suggesting that “the mark’s absence from the covenant cursings section is strong evidence that the mark, or skin of blackness, did not come as a direct consequence for breaking the suzerainty covenant.”⁵³ However, the covenant cursings section for rebellion against the Lord includes both a “sore curse” and a lack of power over righteous Nephites (see 1 Nephi 2:23). The *sore curse* on the Lamanites appears to have been the Lamanite mark, which was a *curse* upon their skins (see 2 Nephi 5:21 and Jacob 3:3–5; see also 2 Nephi 1:22 and Alma 3:6). The Lord’s explanation that others will be marked “that they may be cursed also” (Alma 3:15) similarly suggests that the mark itself was the sore curse mentioned earlier. Thus, the concept of the mark is not absent from the covenant cursings section.⁵⁴

In Lehi’s admonition to his sons, he mentions these two different types of rebellion and resulting curses, but he does so within the context of his greater concern for their eternal welfare, which he mentions three times. He fears lest “the Lord your God should come out in *the fullness of his wrath* upon you, that ye be cut off and destroyed *forever*” (2 Nephi 1:17). He is concerned “that ye may not incur the displeasure of a just God upon you unto the destruction — yea, *the eternal destruction — of both soul and body*” (2 Nephi 1:22); and he has “none other object save it be *the everlasting welfare of your souls*” (2 Nephi 2:30).

Lehi’s words *or* and *also* separate his words about the more-limited curses mentioned earlier from his words about eternal consequences. He urges his sons not to rebel *against the Lord himself*, saying, “I desire

52. Martin, “Covenantal Nature,” 121.

53. Ibid.

54. The cursings section may also contain, or at least allude to, a separate *sore curse* upon the Nephites. First Nephi 2:23–24 indicates that the Lamanites will not have power to destroy the Nephites unless the Nephites also rebel against the Lord, in which case, the Lamanites will be “a scourge” to them. Nephi and Jacob both later elaborate on this concept, indicating that this scourge could become a sore curse “even unto destruction” (2 Nephi 5:25, and Jacob 2:33 and 3:3; see also Alma 3:8 and Isaiah 28:14–18). This Nephite *sore curse* did not apply to the Lamanites. Their society, though cursed with a *sore curse*, was not destroyed.

that ye should remember to observe the statutes and the judgments of *the Lord*” (2 Nephi 1:16). He emphasizes eternal consequences, then says, “... or that *a cursing* should come upon you for the space of many generations and ye are visited by sword and by famine and are hated and are led according to the will and captivity of the devil” (2 Nephi 1:17–18). He later uses an inverted structure to reiterate “that ye may not be *cursed with a sore cursing*” (2 Nephi 1:22) before using the words “and also” to return to weightier eternal consequences.

Next, Lehi admonishes his sons not to rebel against their brother Nephi (see 2 Nephi 1:24–29). He says, “Rebel no more against *your brother*, whose views have been glorious, and who hath kept the commandments from the time we left Jerusalem, and who hath been an instrument in the hands of God in bringing us forth into the land of promise” (2 Nephi 1:24). He explains that if they “hearken unto *the voice of Nephi*, ye shall *not perish*. And if ye will hearken unto *him*, I leave unto you a blessing, yea, even my first blessing. But if ye will not hearken unto him, I *take away my first blessing* — yea, even my blessing — and it shall rest upon him” (2 Nephi 1:28–29). In other words, they will be blessed for obeying Nephi but will lose that blessing (be cursed) and *perish* (be *cut off* from the Lord; see 1 Nephi 22:19 and 2 Nephi 2:5) for rebelling against him.

Years later, Nephi describes the rebellion, curses, and blessings that have taken place, recounting both types of rebellion and the curses applicable to each. He first mentions the rebellion of his brethren against him and the application of the first curse:

And behold, the words of the Lord had been fulfilled unto my brethren which he spake concerning them, that I should be their ruler and their teacher. Wherefore I had been their ruler and their teacher according to the commandments of the Lord until the time that they sought to take away my life. Wherefore the word of the Lord was fulfilled which he spake unto me, saying that inasmuch as they *will not hearken unto thy words*, they shall be *cut off from the presence of the Lord*. And behold, *they were cut off from his presence*. (2 Nephi 5:19–20)

Note that Nephi ends this description of the first rebellion and curse with some finality. He then proceeds to describe the second rebellion and curse, which he ends with similar finality.

And he had caused *the cursing* to come upon them, yea, even *a sore cursing* because of their iniquity. For behold, *they*

had hardened their hearts against him [the Lord], that they had become like unto a flint. Wherefore as they were white and exceeding fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people, therefore the Lord God did cause *a skin of blackness* to come upon them. And thus saith the Lord God: I will cause that they shall be loathsome unto thy people save they shall repent of their iniquities. And cursed shall be the seed of him that mixeth with their seed, for they shall be *cursed even with the same cursing*. And the Lord spake it, and it was done. (2 Nephi 5:21–23)

As we've seen, each of these three passages mentions two kinds of rebellion by Nephi's brethren and two resulting curses — one for each type of rebellion. The first rebellion was against Nephi and his teachings, for which Nephi's brethren were cursed (cut off from the presence of the Lord). The second rebellion was directly against the Lord himself. For this rebellion, they were cursed with *a sore curse* (or *sore cursing*) — a cursed thing that Nephi calls *a skin of blackness*.⁵⁵ This cursing on their skins made them loathsome⁵⁶ to Nephi's people, subject to repentance.

These two rebellions and cursings didn't take place simultaneously. When Nephi's brethren rebelled against him and his teachings, he and his followers fled to the land of Nephi. Later, his brethren rebelled again, this time against the Lord himself and his laws, and received the *sore cursing*, or *skin of blackness*. This order of events identifies the approximate time when the Lord gave Nephi a revelation that isn't mentioned in Nephi's small-plate account but is quoted later by Mormon. In this revelation, the Lord says, "Behold, the Lamanites have I [already] cursed; and I will [later] set a mark upon them, that they and their seed may be separated from thee and thy seed from this time henceforth and forever except they repent of their wickedness and turn to me, that I may have mercy upon them" (Alma 3:14). It would appear that Nephi received this revelation

55. Martin suggests, "Perhaps the Lamanites created the skin of blackness by 'inlaying the Colour of Black under their skins' through the process of tattooing," "Covenantal Nature," 122.

56. Martin explains that "Nephite feelings of loathsomeness would be the natural consequences of the Lamanites' engagement in sinful behavior." When the word *loathsome* is perceived through the Lehitic suzerainty treaty, it refers to a people who are "outside the covenant because they had not kept the commandments." This word "is used only three times in the Book of Mormon," and each time "was exclusively used to describe people who chose to be outside the covenant relationship." "Covenantal Nature," 125–26.

sometime after his brethren were already cursed for rebelling against him, but before their rebellion against the Lord, for which they were later cursed with a sore curse, or skin of blackness. In this revelation, the Lord calls this skin of blackness “a mark” that will separate the Lamanites from the Nephites until the Lamanites repent of their wickedness.⁵⁷

Mormon equates this “mark” with the sore curse or skin of blackness when he says, “The skins of the Lamanites were dark, according to the mark which was set upon their fathers, which was a curse upon them” (Alma 3:6). He continues, explaining that “the Lord God set a mark upon them, yea, upon Laman and Lemuel, and also the sons of Ishmael and the Ishmaelitish women. And this was done that their seed might be distinguished from the seed of their brethren, that thereby the Lord God might preserve his people, that they might not mix and believe in incorrect traditions, which would prove their destruction” (Alma 3:7–8).

It may be that Mormon’s words in Alma 3:6–7 are structured as a simple A, B, B, A chiasm that delineates the two rebellions and curses: “[A] And the skins of the Lamanites were dark, according to the mark which was set upon their fathers, which was a curse upon them because of their transgression [against the Lord] and [B] their rebellion against their brethren, which consisted of Nephi, Jacob, and Joseph, and Sam, which were just and holy men; [B] and their brethren sought to destroy them. Therefore they were cursed, [A] and the Lord God set a mark upon them, yea, upon Laman and Lemuel, and also the sons of Ishmael and the Ishmaelitish women.”

Mormon later notes that the Amlicite mark was also due to rebellion against God himself. He says, “Now the Amlicites knew not that they were fulfilling the words of God *when they began to mark themselves in their foreheads*. Nevertheless as they had come out *in open rebellion against God*, therefore it was expedient that *the curse should fall upon them*” (Alma 3:18).

A Self-Imposed Mark of Rebellion

As mentioned above, Nephi’s description of the sore curse as “a skin of blackness” (2 Nephi 5:21) may link it conceptually with Leviticus 19:28, the statute prohibiting sacrilegious tattoos.⁵⁸ Because this cursing was

57. Martin suggests that “Laman and Lemuel’s flinty hearts, hearts full of a consuming desire for separation and autonomy, created the need for the mark.” “Covenantal Nature,” 121.

58. An anonymous peer reviewer of this paper notes that the claim that a curse applies to Leviticus 19:28 may be “even better than may first appear.” The reviewer

due to rebellion against the Lord himself, the term *skin of blackness* may refer to a permanent black mark on the skin (tattoo) that was blasphemous against the Lord or honored other gods.⁵⁹ Nephi's description of this *skin of blackness* doesn't clearly state that it was self-imposed, but Mormon's words, if read carefully, tend to clarify this point.

Alma 3:1–3, the three verses that precede Mormon's discussion of the Amlicite and Lamanite marks in Alma 3:4–19, may explain why the topic of marks on the skin appears at this point in the account. These verses explain that after the battle with the Lamanites and Amlicites, "the Nephites which were not *slain* by the weapons of war" (Alma 3:1) buried all the slain Nephites, who were too numerous to be counted (see Alma 3:1). They didn't, however, bury all the slain Lamanites and Amlicites. Instead, their bodies were cast "into the *waters of Sidon*" (Alma 3:3). It appears that marks on the skin helped these survivors distinguish the bodies of the Amlicites "from the Nephites" (Alma 3:4).⁶⁰

The Lamanites were easier to distinguish because their heads were shorn and they were mostly naked. In addition, Mormon tells us that "the skins of the Lamanites were dark, according to the *mark* which

explains, "The penalty 'that soul shall be cut off from among his people' (analogous to being 'cut off from the presence of the Lord' — i.e., excommunication) is attached to the statute in Leviticus 19:8." The reviewer cites William Brownlee, who has argued that the later term "I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:28) is the equivalent of saying "I am the one who brings it to pass" or "I am the one who makes it happen." William H. Brownlee, "The Ineffable Name of God," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 226 (1977): 45. The reviewer concludes, "In other words, when the statute says 'I am the Lord' in Leviticus 19:28, that is a promise that the Lord will bring to pass the excommunication penalty mentioned earlier in Leviticus 19:8." Review correspondence to author, June 25, 2022. See also Matthew L. Bowen, "'Creator of the First Day': The Glossing of the Lord of Sabaoth in D&C 95:7," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 22 (2016): 55–56, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/creator-of-the-first-day-the-glossing-of-lord-of-sabaoth-in-dc-957/>.

59. The adoption of this mark diminished or opposed the role of circumcision, God's token of his covenant with Israel. God told his people, "This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you" (Genesis 17:10–11). For those who had accepted this covenant, a second and counterfeit cutting in the skin, especially one that blasphemed God or implied allegiance to false gods, would have been an obvious, visible sign of rebellion against God himself.

60. See Brant A. Gardner, "Labor Diligently to Write: The Ancient Making of a Modern Scripture Chapters 14 & 15," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 35 (2020): 273–74, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/labor-diligently-to-write-the-ancient-making-of-a-modern-scripture-6/>.

was set upon their fathers, which was a *curse* upon them because of their transgression” (Alma 3:6). If the mark that darkened their skins was a forbidden mark cut into their skin contrary to the law of Moses, then it served as a visible sign of their rebellion and their cursed state. Because the Lamanite mark was once incorrectly associated with their natural skin color, it has been assumed to cover all skin from head to toe. The Book of Mormon, however, never expressly supports such a mark, and the word *mark* is never used in the Old Testament with any such meaning. Mormon’s statement may refer to a more limited mark — one that covered only part of the skin, like the mark mentioned in Leviticus 19:28. His phrase *according to* can be read to mean “corresponding to something; agreeing, matching”⁶¹ and may indicate that the skins of the Lamanites were dark only where they were marked.⁶²

A permanent mark that covered only a relatively small part of the skin is consistent with another Book of Mormon account. Captain Moroni planned a nighttime operation that required a Nephite soldier who could pass as a Lamanite. To find such a soldier, he “caused that a search should be made among his men that perhaps he might find a man which was a descendant of Laman’s among them” (Alma 55:4). The need for a search to identify a descendant of Laman suggests a permanent characteristic that wasn’t obvious. It may have been a more-limited permanent mark. Gardner suggests that it may have been an accent or a peculiarly Lamanite manner of speaking.⁶³ It may have been both. In any event, they found a descendant of Laman who had recently lived

61. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “according, adj. and adv.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/1177?rskey=VZbjyc&result=3&isAdvanced=false#eid>. Sense A.1; see also sense B.1.b. Both include Early Modern English examples. Cf. Martin, who suggests that the phrase *according to the mark* may indicate that “it was the Nephites who identified the dark skin as the fulfillment of the prophesied mark, not Jehovah.” “Covenantal Nature,” 122.

62. The phrase *according to* has similar meaning in Mosiah 4:26, where King Benjamin teaches his people to “impart of [their] substance to the poor, every man *according to* that which he hath.” See also Enos 1:10 (his brethren to be blessed “*according to* their diligence”) and Alma 11:1 (judges received wages “*according to* the time which they labored”). In Alma 3:6, the adverbial phrase *according to* modifies the English term *were dark*, which may render a verb like the Hebrew verb *shachar*, which means to be or turn black or dark (BDB, s.v. “שָׁחַר”).

63. See Brant Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, vol. 4, Alma (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 696–97, as cited by Steenblik, who suggests that temporary body paint could quickly make any Nephite soldier appear to be a Lamanite but the very ease of such deception shows the very real dangers facing any Lamanite or Nephite

among the Lamanites. The point is that this account is easily reconciled with a self-imposed permanent mark on the skin and may suggest that a descendant of Laman, even one who retained such a mark, was treated as a Nephite by his comrades in arms.

The Amlicites “had not shorn their heads like unto the Lamanites,” but “*they had marked themselves with red in their foreheads after the manner of the Lamanites*” (Alma 3:4). So, both Lamanites and Amlicites bore marks on their skin. The Amlicite mark was a self-imposed red (reddish) mark placed on the forehead. The Lamanite mark was dark (probably black).⁶⁴ The text places the Lamanite mark on the skin, but doesn’t limit it to the forehead, so it may have been placed elsewhere on the skin or perhaps in multiple locations.

Mormon later says, “Now we will return again to the Amlicites, for they also *had a mark set upon them*; yea, *they set the mark upon themselves*, yea, even a mark of red upon their foreheads” (Alma 3:13). Thus, Mormon equates the fact that the Amlicites “set the mark upon themselves” with having “a mark set upon them.” This second description of the Amlicite mark helps Mormon explain how “the word of God [was] fulfilled” (Alma 3:14). The word of God to which Mormon refers is the prophecy mentioned earlier that was recorded by Nephi, but not on the small plates. In it, the Lord specifies three groups who will be cursed and marked — the Lamanites, dissenters who will mingle with the Lamanites, and traitors who will fight against the Nephites. The Amlicites clearly belonged to the third group. This word of God reads as follows:

Behold, the Lamanites have I cursed; and *I will set a mark upon them*, that they and their seed may be separated from thee and thy seed from this time henceforth and forever except they repent of their wickedness and turn to me, that I may have mercy upon them. And again, *I will set a mark upon him* that mingleth his seed with thy brethren, that they

who might attempt to rely on such paint for battlefield identification. Steenblik, “Demythicizing,” 216.

64. See J. Eric S. Thompson, “Tattooing and Scarification among the Maya,” *Notes on Middle American Archaeology and Ethnology* 3, no. 63 (1946): 18–25, reprinted in *The Carnegie Maya III: Carnegie Institution of Washington Notes on Middle American Archaeology and Ethnology, 1940–1957*, comp. John M. Weeks (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2011), 253, where black is the prominent color mentioned with Mayan tattooing, but red is also suggested in iconographic evidence.

may be cursed also. And again, *I will set a mark upon him* that fighteth against thee and thy seed. (Alma 3:14–16)

After quoting this prophecy, Mormon again states that it was fulfilled by the self-imposed Amlicite mark. “Now the Amlicites knew not that *they were fulfilling the words of God when they began to mark themselves in their foreheads*. Nevertheless as they had come out in open rebellion against God, therefore it was expedient that the curse should fall upon them” (Alma 3:18). But how, one might ask, could Mormon equate a self-imposed mark with one that the Lord himself will “set upon” rebellious people? Curses from the Lord, including those stated in the first person, are often fulfilled in the natural course of events as people on the earth exercise their agency (see, for example, Mosiah 12:5 and Helaman 15:17). Mormon explains, “Now I would that ye should see that they brought upon themselves the curse. And even so doeth every man that is cursed[, he]⁶⁵ bringeth upon himself his own condemnation” (Alma 3:19). So, after the Lord had promised to “set a mark upon him that fighteth against” the Nephites (Alma 3:16), he fulfilled that promise as the Amlicites “set the mark upon themselves, yea, even a mark of red upon their foreheads” (Alma 3:13) and “brought upon themselves the curse” (Alma 3:19).

Just as the word of God was fulfilled by a self-imposed Amlicite mark, it appears that it was likewise fulfilled, beginning centuries earlier, by a self-imposed Lamanite mark. In the prophecy, the entire phrase *I will set a mark upon* is used three times, suggesting consistent meaning. The Lord repeatedly associates the mark with a curse — clearly the same curse each time.

65. Early Modern English syntax helps us understand the earliest text of Alma 3:19. Stanford Carmack identified this similar early modern passage:

Lastly, the terrene plow **makes** the earth more fit for the seede; **Euen so doeth** the tearing of the heart by true repentance, **makes** it the more apt to embrace the mercie of God.

(1616, William Jackson, *The celestiall husbandrie: or, The tillage of the soule*, *Early English Books*, University of Michigan, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?cc=eebo;c=eebo;idno=a04199.0001.001;seq=82;vid=7913;page=root;view=text>)

Based on this passage, Carmack suggests that the earliest text of Alma 3:19 should have a comma after *cursed* and an understood *he* right after that comma. (Personal correspondence to author, March 29, 2020.) This reading helps clarify that the curse, like the Amlicite and Lamanite marks, was, in essence, self-imposed (as all curses are).

If it can be said, as Mormon says, that it was God who “set a mark upon” the Amlicites when the red mark on their foreheads was obviously self-imposed, it stands to reason that God could also have “set a mark upon” the Lamanites in the same self-imposed manner. Indeed, Mormon tells us that the Amlicites marked themselves “*after the manner of the Lamanites*” (Alma 3:4). Then, after talking at length about the Lamanite curse and mark, Mormon returns to the Amlicites, telling us that they “*also* had a mark set upon them” (Alma 3:13). The Early Modern English meaning of the word *also*, like the term *after the manner of the Lamanites*, indicates that, in Mormon’s eyes, even though the self-imposed Amlicite mark was red and the Lamanite mark was black, the Amlicite mark was similar to or “in the very manner of”⁶⁶ the Lamanite mark. Color was clearly not the attribute that made the two marks similar, so it would appear that they were similar because both were adopted in the manner associated with the curse.⁶⁷

The most plausible Old Testament meaning for the word *mark* in this context is the meaning in Leviticus 19:28 — a permanent, visible mark cut into the skin in defiance of the law of Moses. With this meaning, the prophecy in this passage indicates that Lamanites, Amlicites, and other dissenters would all distinguish themselves from Nephites by adopting such a mark. Martin suggests that Laman, Lemuel, and their followers adopted such a mark “in pursuit of their desires, desires that dictated what would ‘be done unto [them]’ (D&C 11:17) by a just and trustworthy suzerain who honored both the treaty and their agency.”⁶⁸

Appropriately Measured Blessings and Cursings

Neither the blessings and cursings described by the Lord in Leviticus 26 nor the related blessings and cursings mentioned by him in 1 Nephi 2:20–23 are unjust. “Curses [from God] are a manifestation of God’s divine love and justice.”⁶⁹ The Lord’s words in Leviticus 26 don’t require or state

66. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “also, adv. and n.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/5740>. Sense A.2. Includes Early Modern English examples.: “Expressing likeness: in the very manner of something else; in like manner, in the same way, likewise, similarly. *Obs.*”

67. See Martin, “Covenantal Nature,” 138n93. The text never suggests a reason for the difference in color. One might speculate that each color had cultural significance to the society adopting it.

68. Martin, “Covenantal Nature,” 121.

69. Guide to the Scriptures s.v. “Curse, Curses,” Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (website), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/gs/curse-curses>.

that the entire set of curses applies to each individual act of disobedience any more than they require or state that the entire set of blessings applies to each individual act of obedience. Similarly, the Lord's words to Nephi describe blessings and cursings that apply "inasmuch as" the people are obedient or disobedient. President Ezra Taft Benson explains: "God gives us commandments to bless us. The devil would have us break these commandments to curse us. Daily, constantly, we choose by our desires, our thoughts, and our actions whether we want to be blessed or cursed, happy or miserable."⁷⁰ Elder Carlos E Asay explains further:

No commandment or requirement of the gospel is nonessential. Each has its place, and all are to be respected. Not one is to be trifled with or placed aside as inconvenient. ... Let us remember that with every commandment, God has promised a blessing. If we expect to claim the blessing, we must keep the commandment. Otherwise, if we ignore or break the commandment, we are cursed by losing the blessing.⁷¹

God, who irrevocably predicates each blessing on our obedience to the applicable law (see D&C 130:20–21) correspondingly predicates each cursing on our disobedience to the applicable law. The Lord's promises to Nephi confirm that we are blessed and cursed "inasmuch as" we obey or disobey the Lord (see 1 Nephi 2:20–23). The extent of either our prosperity (blessings) or our separation from the Lord (cursings) depends on the extent of our obedience or disobedience.

Thus, if I obey one of God's laws, I will eventually receive the blessings for my obedience. Should I choose to obey a second law, I will eventually receive even more blessings. Similarly, if I choose to disobey one of God's laws, I will eventually lose the blessings for obeying that law. Stated another way, I will eventually be cursed (separated from God) by that disobedience. Should I choose to disobey a second law, I will eventually lose even more blessings — I will be cursed again for that additional act of disobedience. Of course, all of this is conditional on the thoughts and intents of my heart and on my repentance, but if I act willingly and don't repent, I will eventually suffer the just consequences (curses) applicable to each law I choose to disobey. Elder Boyd K. Packer

70. Ezra Taft Benson, "The Great Commandment—Love the Lord," *Ensign* 18, no. 5 (May 1988), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1988/05/the-great-commandment-love-the-lord>.

71. Carlos E. Asay, "The Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood," *Ensign* 15, no. 11 (November 1985), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1985/11/the-oath-and-covenant-of-the-priesthood>.

taught, “Often, very often, we are punished as much by our sins as we are for them.”⁷² This principle applied as the Lord brought curses upon the Lamanites. In reality, the Lamanites brought curses upon themselves by their own disobedience. Each curse, though imposed by the Lord, was in large measure a natural consequence of their disobedience.

Further Rebellion

After cutting themselves off from the presence of the Lord, the Lamanites not only adopted a forbidden mark on the skin, but they were led by Satan from one bad act to another. Nephi tells us, “And *because of their cursing* which was upon them, they did become an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety, and did seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey” (2 Nephi 5:24). In other words, when they rebelled against the Lord, they no longer had his Spirit to guide them, so they were soon mired in more sin. Martin indicates that the covenant breakers (Laman and his followers) “lost the Spirit (see Mormon 1:14; 5:16) and became increasingly captive to the devil (see Mosiah 10:17; Enos 1:14; Omni 1:10).”⁷³ The specific words in this passage clarify this growing rebellion.

The first item, becoming “an idle people” (2 Nephi 5:24; see also Alma 17:15), doesn’t seem too grievous, but it disregards one of the first commandments God gave to Adam (see Genesis 3:19), and an important aspect of the law of the Sabbath, which says, “six days shalt thou labour” (Exodus 20:9). In contrast to the Lamanites, Nephi taught his followers to be industrious (see 2 Nephi 5:17). As we might expect, the repentant Lamanites who became the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi “began to be a very industrious people” (Alma 23:18).

The cursed Lamanites also became “full of mischief and subtlety” (2 Nephi 5:24). In the Old Testament, the word *mischief* often connotes significant evil, harm, and injury (see, for example, Genesis 42:38, Esther 8:3). As used in Early Modern English, it can mean “evildoing, wickedness”⁷⁴ (see also 3 Nephi 16:10). Similarly, the word *subtlety* may be used here to mean “Craftiness, cunning, [especially] of a treacherous

72. Boyd K. Packer, “Why Stay Morally Clean,” (discourse, General Conference, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, April 1972), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1972/04/why-stay-morally-clean>.

73. Martin, “Covenantal Nature,” 119.

74. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “mischief, n.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/119293?rskey=aQrRV6&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>. Sense III.5. Includes Early Modern English examples.

or underhanded nature.”⁷⁵ This sense fits here and in the other Book of Mormon verses that use the words *subtle* and *subtlety* (see Alma 12:4 and Alma 47:4; see also Genesis 3:1 and 27:35 and Psalm 105:25).

Modern readers may not recognize a problem with Lamanites who “did seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey” (2 Nephi 5:24). However, one generation later, Lamanites are described as worshiping idols, “feeding upon beasts of prey,” (Enos 1:20) and later, “drink[ing] the blood of beasts” (Jarom 1:6), all of which violated the law of Moses (see Leviticus 11; 19:4, 26; and 26:1). The provision in 2 Nephi 5:24 appears to allude to similar behavior. After the Lamanites were cut off from the presence of the Lord, their rebellion against the Lord eventually grew to include several violations of the law of Moses.⁷⁶

Curses Subject to Repentance

As explained earlier, curses, like blessings, reflect God’s divine love and justice. Each curse is lifted upon repentance. For instance, The Lord refers to the fall, by which Adam and Eve were cut off from his presence, as “the *curse* of Adam” (Moroni 8:8). This curse has fallen upon all mankind, but it can be overcome through the Atonement as we repent and come unto Christ. Indeed, repentance is all about replacing cursings with blessings. Mormon explains, “repentance is unto them that are under condemnation and under *the curse of a broken law*” (Moroni 8:24). If we have broken God’s law, our curse and condemnation are overcome only on the condition of repentance (see Alma 17:15 and 42:12–15 and Helaman 5:11 and 14:11–19).

In Leviticus 26, after the Lord lists curses that apply to disobedience to the law of Moses, he offers restored blessings through repentance (see Leviticus 26:40–45). Near the end of the Old Testament, the Lord reminds his people, “Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them. Return unto me, and

75. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “subtlety, n.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/193191?redirectedFrom=subtlety#eid>, See sense 3.b. Includes Early Modern English examples.

76. Centuries later, the Nephites followed a similar path to cursedness and affliction. They, however, rejected the higher law of the gospel. Mormon describes their downfall in words that are reminiscent of Nephi’s words about the earliest Lamanites: “They were once a delightsome people. And they had Christ for their shepherd; yea, they were led even by God the Father. But now behold, they are led about by Satan, even as chaff is driven before the wind, or as a vessel is tossed about upon the waves without sail or anchor or without any thing wherewith to steer her; and even as she is, so are they” (Mormon 5:17–18).

I will return unto you” (Malachi 3:7). He follows this invitation with a specific example, reminding them that they are cursed for not paying tithes and offerings. He says, “Ye are *cursed with a curse*: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation” (Malachi 3:9). Immediately after this reminder, he explains that the withheld blessings can be restored through repentance (see Malachi 3:10–12).

Similarly, the Book of Mormon repeatedly mentions curses upon the land. In each case, the land is cursed only with respect to the wicked. It is always blessed with respect to the righteous. All curses upon the land end with sincere repentance.⁷⁷

The Lamanite curses also ended with sincere repentance. “And [the Lord] had caused the cursing to come upon them, yea, even a sore cursing because of their iniquity. For behold, they had hardened their hearts against him, ... Wherefore ... the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them. And thus saith the Lord God: I will cause that they shall be loathsome unto thy people *save they shall repent of their iniquities*” (2 Nephi 5:21–22). The Lord also said: “Behold, the Lamanites have I cursed; and I will set a mark upon them, that they and their seed may be separated from thee and thy seed from this time henceforth and forever *except they repent of their wickedness and turn to me*, that I may have mercy upon them” (Alma 3:14).

Mormon taught that individual Lamanites could repent and become Nephites: “And it came to pass that whosoever would not believe in the tradition of the Lamanites, but believed those records which were brought out of the land of Jerusalem, and also in the tradition of their [righteous] fathers, which were correct, which believed in the commandments of God and kept them, were called the Nephites or the people of Nephi from that time forth” (Alma 3:11). God’s promises “were extended unto them *on the conditions of repentance*” (Alma 17:15).

These promises are verified by two Book of Mormon accounts of repentant Lamanites. The people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi repented and kept the commandments. After their conversion, “the curse of God did no more follow them” (Alma 23:18) and “they were numbered among the people of Nephi, and also numbered among the people which were of the church of God” (Alma 27:27). Later, other Lamanites repented.

77. See, for example, 1 Nephi 17:35; 2 Nephi 1:7–8; Jacob 2:29; 3:3–4; Alma 37:28, 31; 45:16; Helaman 13:17–19, 23, 30, 35–36; Mormon 1:17–18; and Ether 7:23; 9:16, 28; 11:6; and 14:1.

About 42 years⁷⁸ after “the more part of the Lamanites” (Helaman 5:50) were converted, “all the Lamanites which had become converted unto the Lord did unite with their brethren the Nephites” (3 Nephi 2:12) and they “were numbered among the Nephites. And their curse was taken from them, and their skin became white like unto the Nephites. And their young men and their daughters became exceeding fair; and they were numbered among the Nephites and were called Nephites” (3 Nephi 2:14–16).⁷⁹

Citing Alma 3:13, 14, and 18, Hugh Nibley taught, “While the fallen people [the Lamanites and Amlicites] ‘set the mark upon *themselves*,’ it was none the less God who was marking them. ... Here God places his mark on people *as a curse*, yet it is an artificial mark which they actually place upon themselves.”⁸⁰ Nibley also taught that this mark and the associated curse could eventually be overcome through true repentance. He cited Alma 3:14 to explain that the Lamanite mark was a consequence of wickedness that could end with repentance. He says, “A permanent mark forever and ever? No, [God] puts a limit on it here, ‘except they *repent of their wickedness and turn to me* that I may have mercy upon them.’” It is a reversible process. It’s their choice; they control it.”⁸¹

Although Nibley never offered an opinion on profane tattoos as the Lamanite or Amlicite mark, such tattoos fit quite comfortably with his reasoning. He saw their mark as an artificial, self-imposed mark. Their own actions subjected them to a curse from God. He speculated that the mark might represent a change that occurs over the course of a generation or so.⁸² He taught that the mark was subject to Lamanite agency and would end after repentance. This paper agrees with each of these ideas taught by Nibley.

78. The conversion took place in the 62nd year of the reign of the judges (see Helaman 4:18 and 5:1). The righteous Lamanites were numbered among the Nephites in the 13th year from the sign of Christ’s birth (see 3 Nephi 2:13–14), which was the 104th year of the reign of the judges (see 3 Nephi 2:5–8). 104 – 62 = 42 years.

79. The meanings of the words *white*, *fair*, and *became*, as used in this and other passages, are discussed in greater detail later in this paper.

80. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988) 74.

81. Hugh Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon*, Pt. 2, (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1993), 249.

82. *Ibid.*, 195–97.

Correlations Between the Marks of Leviticus 19:28 and the Marks of Alma 3:4–19

The marks prohibited in Leviticus 19:28 have much in common with the Lamanite and Amlicite marks described in Alma 3:4–19. In each case, the mark indicates rebellion against God and is tied to a curse from God. In each case, individuals can choose whether to mark themselves and whether to teach the tradition of marking the skin to their children.

An Amlicite Mark Adopted Long Before the Amlicite Battles

Some readers of the Book of Mormon may assume that when Lamanite allies arrived to help the Amlicites fight the Nephites, the Amlicites hastily painted red marks on their foreheads so the Lamanites could distinguish their new allies from the Nephite enemy. However, the limited scriptural account doesn't pinpoint the time when the Amlicite mark began to distinguish Amlicites from Nephites. Mormon tells us that, "the Amlicites knew not that they were fulfilling the words of God *when they began to mark themselves* in their foreheads" (Alma 3:18). The term *began to mark themselves* is suggestive of an effort that continued for a long time. It may suggest that the Amlicite mark, like the Lamanite mark, began among a core group before it eventually spread throughout a rebellious people. As we consider the realities faced by Amlici as he slowly garnered political and then military support, it's plausible that, as his power grew, he either mandated or encouraged his people to begin marking themselves with a red tattoo on the forehead as an indelible sign of loyalty and group identity. A thesis written by PhD candidate Alice Claire Gorman notes that "permanent modifications [including tattoos] ... are all are common ways of marking membership in a distinct group," adding that "the irreversible modifications indicate a life-long commitment."⁸³ Martin notes that "tattoos were often used to mark both men and women as belonging to a specific group, such as to a tribe or genealogical line."⁸⁴

Several scholars posit that the Amlicite movement grew for years before the Amlicite battles began, eventually garnering the support of

83. Alice Claire Gorman, "The Archaeology of Body Modification: The Identification of Symbolic Behavior through Usewear and Residues on Flaked Stone Tools," (thesis submitted for PhD candidacy, University of New England, 2000), 33, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/34237169_The_archaeology_of_body_modification_the_identification_of_symbolic_behaviour_through_usewear_and_residues_on_flaked_stone_tools.

84. Martin, "Covenantal Nature," 124.

a numerous people. The Amlicites eventually became powerful enough to pose a threat to the Nephites. These scholars don't discuss the nature of the Amlicite mark, but they describe a timeline during which such a mark could have begun and spread among the Amlicites.

J. Christopher Conkling explains his view of the rise of the Amlicites:

It is highly unlikely that Amlici could rise to prominence with almost half the population's support, undertake a lively national election, receive an illegitimate coronation, raise a huge army, move major parts of the Nephite population, form alliances with the Lamanites, and manage three major battles all in one year (see Alma 2:2–3:25). Even modern dictators with advanced transportation and mass communications have not accomplished all that in a single year. Alma tells us specifically that much of it did indeed happen in a single year — at least “all these wars and contentions” (Alma 3:25). But the slow building up of a power base and the forging of foreign alliances may have been going on for years before. This is how real people and movements in history work.

Another example from secular history makes this point: modern disruptive groups such as Communists and Nazis have a tendency to continue to linger, regroup, transform themselves, or reappear in various forms. So too in the Book of Mormon.⁸⁵

Benjamin McMurtry disagrees with much of Conkling's analysis, but as to Conkling's description of a lengthy period for the rise of the Amlicite movement, McMurtry says, “In this, Conkling is surely correct.”⁸⁶

A. Keith Thompson shares a similar, but even longer timeline for the growth of the Amlicite movement. He says, “Like Conkling, I believe the conflicts at the beginning of Alma's reign as chief judge had been building

85. J. Christopher Conkling, “Alma's Enemies: The Case of the Lamanites, Amlicites, and Mysterious Amalekites,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 114, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1395&context=jbms>.

86. Benjamin McMurtry, “The Amlicites and Amalekites: Are They the Same People?” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 25 (2017): 273, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-amlicites-and-amalekites-are-they-the-same-people/>.

for some time.”⁸⁷ Thompson, however, sees the Amlicite movement as a continuation of a conflict that began even earlier: “The incidents with Nehor and Amlici did not happen instantly or in isolation. It is likely that there had been conflict in Zarahemla for a long time before the judicial republic was created.”⁸⁸ These scholars describe a sequence of events during which Amlici might have slowly gained the firm support of many of the people of Zarahemla. At some point in this process, his people may have adopted a permanent mark on the forehead as an irrevocable sign of loyalty and group identity.

Such a permanent mark may also explain why, after the battles, surviving Amlicites didn’t remove a little paint and sneak home, unmarked, to Nephite lands. They were permanently marked as enemies of the Nephites, so they “were scattered on the west and on the north, until they had reached the wilderness, which was called Hermounts; and it was that part of the wilderness which was infested by wild and ravenous beasts. And it came to pass that many died in the wilderness of their wounds and were devoured by those beasts and also the vultures of the air. And their bones have been found and have been heaped up on the earth” (Alma 2:37–38).

This analysis doesn’t, of course, prove that the Amlicite mark was a permanent tattoo, but it supports a plausible scenario in which a permanent mark on the skin could have identified Amlicites and distinguished them from Nephites long before they went to battle (and long after).

Righteous Nephites Who Knew and Honored the Specific Prohibitions of the Law of Moses

The term *law of Moses* appears only 15 times in the Old Testament and 7 times in the New Testament, but it appears 43 times in the Book of Mormon. This abundant usage suggests that this law was particularly significant among righteous children of Lehi. They knew the details of

87. A. Keith Thompson, “Apostate Religion in the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 25 (2017): 196, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/apostate-religion-in-the-book-of-mormon/>.

88. Ibid. Val Larson speculates that the Amlicite movement was a continuation of Nephite contentions dating back to Mulekite dissatisfaction with the appointment of the first king Mosiah, and that these contentions may have come to a head when the second king Mosiah chose to form a judicial republic rather than conferring the kingdom upon a descendant of Mulek. See Val Larsen, “In His Footsteps: Ammon₁ and Ammon₂,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 3 (2013): 89–91, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/in-his-footsteps-ammon-and-ammon/>.

this law and obeyed it until it was replaced by a higher law.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, most prohibitions of this law, including the prohibition in Leviticus 19:28, are not directly repeated in the Book of Mormon. Their prophets sometimes refer to prohibited acts without expressly mentioning the prohibition. For example, it was against the law of Moses to worship idols, to eat beasts of prey, and to drink the blood of beasts (see Leviticus 11; 19:4, 26; and 26:1), but Book of Mormon authors discuss these practices without noting that they are prohibited by the law (see Enos 1:20 and Jarom 1:6). Perhaps these prophets assumed that their readers would know the specific prohibitions of this important law as well as they did.

Tattooing (and Scarification) in the Ancient Americas

Tattooing and scarification are well represented in archaeological writings about the ancient Americas.⁹⁰ J. Eric S. Thompson reported in 1946 that “There is a considerable body of material, both in the literature and in archaeological collections, on the practices of tattooing and scarification among the Maya.”⁹¹ Some of this literature was written shortly after the European conquest. Thompson cites Bishop Landa’s report “that the young men tattooed themselves only to a slight degree before marriage, and that the women tattooed their bodies from the waist up, except for the breasts, and that the designs were more delicate and beautiful than those of the men.”⁹² Thompson also quotes Landa’s account of tattooing:

89. See 1 Nephi 4:14–18; 2 Nephi 5:10; 25:24, 30; Jacob 4:5; Jarom 1:5, 11; Omni 1:14; Mosiah 1:3, 2:3, 3:14–15; Alma 25:15–16, 30:3, 34:13, 37:3; Helaman 13:1, 15:5; and 3 Nephi 1:2, 24, 9:17.

90. Martin notes that “Tattooed mummies and tattooing tools have ... been found among Pre-Columbian American cultures across North and South America,” “Covenantal Nature,” 123. “Although the [children of Lehi] cannot be equated with the Maya, Maya culture was already widespread in Mesoamerica in the Preclassic period (400 BC — AD 250) and appears to have exerted great influence on surrounding cultures. We have the best data for this culture, thanks to the preponderance of carved stone monuments and ceramic vessels painted with historical and mythological scenes and texts that have been preserved archaeologically. As plausibly influential neighbors of the [children of Lehi], the Maya exemplify the kind of religious ideas to which some [children of Lehi] accommodated.” Mark Alan Wright and Brant A. Gardner, “The Cultural Context of Nephite Apostasy,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 1 (2012): 34, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-cultural-context-of-nephite-apostasy/>.

91. Thompson, “Tattooing and Scarification among the Maya,” 250.

92. Ibid. See also Michael D. Coe and Stephen Houston, *The Maya*, 9th ed. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 234; and Steve Gilbert, *Tattoo History: a Source Book* (New York: Juno Books, 2000): 98–101.

“The professional workers first painted the part which they wished with color, and afterwards they delicately cut in the paintings, and so with the blood and coloring matter the marks remained in the body. This work is done a little at a time on account of the extreme pain, and afterwards, also, they were quite sick with it, since the designs festered and matter formed. On account of all this they mocked those who were not tattooed.”⁹³ Other accounts are similar, but not identical. One says that “tattooing ...of men took place at the age of twenty-five or over. The men were decorated on the arms, legs, and face; the women, on the breasts and arms.”⁹⁴

Direct archaeological evidence for these practices in ancient times is scant, “in part because human remains do not survive well in the tropical climate of [Mesoamerica], [but] there is iconographic evidence.”⁹⁵ Thompson suggests that tattooing may have been a privilege of persons of noble blood, but evidence from “an increase in excavations of commoner residences” since Thompson’s time tends to counter that idea.⁹⁶ Thompson notes that depictions of tattoos and scarification on stelae, stone figures, pottery figurines, and the like “show abundant evidence of tattooing or scarification.”⁹⁷ He describes a variety of such objects. One prevalent design is “a line of dots along the side of the chin.”⁹⁸ In another, the decoration treats “the chin, the corners of the mouth, and apparently the area around the ear.”⁹⁹ In others, there are “spirals and curves around the mouth and on the side of the chin.”¹⁰⁰ Another “has tattooing or scarification on both cheeks, around one eye, and on the chin.”¹⁰¹

93. Thompson, “Tattooing and Scarification among the Maya,” 250.

94. Ibid. 250–51.

95. Cara G. Tremain, “A Multidisciplinary Approach to Ancient Maya Adornment and Costume: Mobilizing the Body and the Senses,” *Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology* 19, no. 1 (2011): article 6, <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem/vol19/iss1/6>.

96. Pamela L. Geller, “Transforming Bodies, Transforming Identities: a Consideration of Pre-Colombian Maya Corporeal Beliefs and Practices,” (PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2004), 369, https://www.academia.edu/3863168/Transforming_bodies_transforming_identities_A_consideration_of_pre_Columbian_Maya_corporeal_beliefs_and_practices.

97. Thompson, “Tattooing and Scarification among the Maya,” 252.

98. Ibid.

99. Ibid.

100. Ibid.

101. Ibid.

Thompson describes other examples as well — too many to be discussed individually here. He notes that “the archaeological catalogue of examples of tattooing or scarification could be greatly extended,” but his intent “is merely to show that the archaeological evidence supports the accounts of the early writers and also to indicate that the custom has a respectable antiquity.”¹⁰² Other sources add that tattooing and scarification in the Americas date from as early as 1,400 BC through the European conquest.¹⁰³

The instruments mentioned by Thompson for cutting the skin include “stone lancets,”¹⁰⁴ and “a lancet or flint.”¹⁰⁵ Other instruments may have been used as well. As for color, Cortez and his conquistadors described natives who “imprinted on their bodies the images of their demons, held and perpetuated *in black color* for as long as they live, by piercing the flesh and the skin, and fixing in it the cursed figure.”¹⁰⁶ Thompson says, “there is no mention of any color in addition to black, although, as we have seen [in iconographic evidence], red and black tattoo marks may occur in the Temple of the Chacmool, Chichen Itza.”¹⁰⁷

The archaeological evidence doesn’t, of course, prove that Lamanites or Amlicites bore such marks, but it does suggest the possibility. Perhaps the Lamanites borrowed such practices from indigenous neighbors in the promised land. Or the idea to adopt such practices may have come from the Old World, where they were prevalent enough to be prohibited by the law of Moses.

Distinguished by Obedience to God and Not by Parentage

Additional context in Alma 3:9–11 corroborates the idea that the Lamanite mark was self-imposed and not their natural skin color. The mark designated those who followed Lamanite traditions, regardless of parentage. Anyone who chose to be led by the Lamanites was marked

102. Ibid., 253.

103. “Olmec Stone Mask,” “A History of the World in 100 Objects,” Episode 29, British Broadcasting Corporation, (website), 2014. Transcript at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/about/transcripts/episode29/>; Coe, *The Maya*, 168, 234; and Gilbert, *Tattoo History*, 98–101.

104. Thompson, “Tattooing and Scarification among the Maya,” 250.

105. Ibid., 251.

106. Gilbert, *Tattoo History*, 99, emphasis added. See also Ali Kellogg, “The Purpose, Function and Significance of Body Modification Among the Preclassic through Postclassic Maya,” Academia.edu (website), <https://ucla.academia.edu/AliKellogg>.

107. Thompson, “Tattooing and Scarification among the Maya,” 253.

and called a Lamanite. Mormon explains: “And it came to pass that whosoever did mingle his seed with that of the Lamanites did bring the same curse upon his seed. Therefore whomsoever suffered himself to be led away by the Lamanites were called under that head, and there was a mark set upon him” (Alma 3:9–10). It might be suggested that the term *mingle his seed* has sexual, and therefore genetic, connotations, but this idea isn’t supported by the usage of the word *mingle* in other passages (see 2 Nephi 15:22, Alma 5:57 and 50:22, and Helaman 1:12; see also 2 Nephi 5:23). In this passage, the word *therefore* clarifies Mormon’s meaning by linking two parallel concepts. It equates one who *did mingle his seed with that of the Lamanites* with one who *suffered himself to be led away by the Lamanites*.¹⁰⁸ The next verse confirms this meaning by contrasting these converts to Lamanite traditions with converts to Nephite traditions, who “would *not* believe in the tradition of the Lamanites, but believed those records which were brought out of the land of Jerusalem, and also in the traditions of their fathers, which were correct, which believed in the commandments of God and kept them” (Alma 3:11; see also Alma 50:22). Citing Alma 3:10, Nibley states, “The mark was not a racial thing but was acquired by ‘whosoever suffered himself to be led away by the Lamanites.’”¹⁰⁹

Mormon clarifies that the term *Nephites* doesn’t necessarily designate Nephi’s literal descendants. It includes all who repent, keep the commandments of God (including the law of Moses) and follow righteous Nephite traditions. “And it came to pass that whosoever would not believe in the tradition of the Lamanites, but believed those records which were brought out of the land of Jerusalem, and also in the tradition of their fathers, which were correct, which believed in the commandments of God and kept them, were called the Nephites or the people of Nephi from that time forth” (Alma 3:11). Citing this verse, Nibley reiterates, “the difference between Nephite and Lamanite [is] a cultural, not a racial, one.”¹¹⁰

The Lord didn’t define Nephi’s “seed” as his natural posterity. They were those who kept the commandments. “He that departeth from

108. These words appear to describe what happened to the Zoramites, who first “began to mix with the Lamanites” (Alma 35:10) and then, apparently within the same year, “became Lamanites” (Alma 43:4). Compare 3 Nephi 6:3, where some Gadianton robbers who were “set at liberty” (3 Nephi 5:4) still made a choice “to remain Lamanites.”

109. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 74.

110. Ibid.

thee shall no more be called thy seed; *and I will bless thee — etc. — and whomsoever shall be called thy seed*, henceforth and forever” (Alma 3:17). Similarly, Nephi’s brother Jacob doesn’t define Lamanites and Nephites by bloodlines. He says, “I shall call them Lamanites, they that *seek to destroy the people of Nephi*, and they which *are friendly to Nephi* I shall call Nephites or the people of Nephi” (Jacob 1:14).

All Lamanite curses, including the Lamanite mark, were caused by unrighteousness. As long as Lamanites remained unrighteous (opposing God and his people), their curses and mark remained. However, when any individual Lamanite stopped believing “in the tradition of the Lamanites” (including, presumably, the tradition of marking themselves) and “believed in the commandments of God and kept them” (Alma 3:11) (no longer opposing God and his people), the curses of God no longer applied, and that Lamanite was called a Nephite.

The Absence of the Mark as a Lagging Indicator of Repentance

While all curses from God end with repentance, a permanent Lamanite mark would have remained on the skin throughout the life of a repentant, no longer cursed, individual. Like many other consequences of sin, this mark didn’t immediately disappear due to repentance. Righteous descendants of repentant Lamanites, however, were not marked. The text in the Book of Mormon is consistent with this sequence of events, but the consistency may not be obvious at first glance. Conversion made the mark irrelevant and therefore no mark is mentioned with respect to recent Lamanite converts. All that is expressly stated, however, fits the narrative of a life-long mark. For instance, Alma 3:10 explains that a mark was set upon each dissenting Nephite, but Alma 3:11 doesn’t say that the mark was removed from any repentant Lamanite.

In economics and business, the term *lagging indicator* refers to an indicator that changes sometime after the initial change with which it is correlated. Lagging indicators confirm changes, but only after the changes have happened (like baptism is a lagging indicator of faith and repentance). Thus, the absence of the mark among a repentant people was a long-term (generational) lagging indicator of repentance.

For example, the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi completely forsook their unrighteous traditions. They took “their swords and all the weapons which were used for the shedding of man’s blood” and buried them “deep in the earth” (Alma 24:17). It’s possible that these weapons “used for the shedding of man’s blood” included not only weapons of war, but also other instruments used in pagan rituals that shed human blood and

violated the law of Moses, including tattooing, scarification, and perhaps bloodletting¹¹¹ (see Leviticus 19:28 and 21:1 and 5; Deuteronomy 14:1; and 1 Kings 18:28).

The Nephites invited the presumably still marked, but covenant-keeping Anti-Nephi-Lehies, who would not use weapons of war, to their lands. The Nephites agreed to defend them with their own lives in exchange for “a portion of their substance to assist [the Nephite armies]” (Alma 27:24). These converted Lamanites were called “the people of Ammon” (Alma 27:26), and were “numbered among the people of Nephi, and also numbered among the people which were of the church of God” (Alma 27:27). They were “distinguished for their zeal towards God and also towards men” (Alma 27:27) and were a “beloved people” (Alma 27:30).

Even though a permanent mark on the skin would have remained with these converts throughout their lives, the account doesn’t directly mention either the presence or the absence of any mark after their conversion. The sole reference to a curse after their conversion says, “the curse of God *did no more follow them*” (Alma 23:18). In this phrase, the word *curse* may mean *cursed thing* and may therefore refer to the mark itself. If so, these words indicate that no mark followed these converts to the next generation.¹¹² Of course, the repentance of these converts immediately ended their separation from God (see Alma 34:31). The unrighteous tradition of marking the skin also ended with them, so their righteousness kept this mark from reaching their offspring.

The Book of Mormon never identifies any group whose righteous seed bear a mark on the skin after the conversion of the parents. This includes the children of the people of Ammon — the stripling warriors who served under Helaman, calling themselves Nephites (see Alma 53:16). Although these young warriors were descendants of Laman (Alma 56:3), they’re never referred to as having a dark skin or otherwise having an appearance that might be mistaken for the Lamanite enemy on the battlefield. The account never suggests that any of these young Nephite warriors bore a Lamanite mark.

The account of “the more part of the Lamanites” (Helaman 5:50) who were taught by Helaman’s sons Nephi and Lehi (and by thousands

111. See Coe, *The Maya*, 13, 89, 129, 150, 184, 242, and 274.

112. See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “follow, v.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/72569?rskey=4dpT4m&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>. See sense III.16.a: “To happen or occur after (something) in time; to come after (something) as an event; to succeed.” Includes Early Modern English examples.

of their Lamanite converts), is also silent about whether the initial converts bore a mark. They, like the people of Ammon, “did lay down their weapons of war, and also their hatred and the tradition of their fathers” (Helaman 5:51; see also Helaman 15:7–10). They interacted with Nephites during the first three years after the great conversion (see Helaman 6:3–8), but both peoples were soon occupied with difficulties caused by robbers. There appears to have been little interaction between these peoples for the next 39 years during which these covenant-keeping Lamanites lived the law of Moses (see Helaman 6:34, 13:1, and 15:5), and therefore would not have marked their skins. However, as long as the converted Lamanites remained in Lamanite lands, the Nephites continued to call them Lamanites. (See Helaman 6:1, 3–4, 8–9, 37, 13:1–2, 16:15, and 3 Nephi 1:29–30.)

Like the army of Helaman before them, the descendants of these Lamanite converts weren’t bound by the covenant made by their fathers. So, after 42 years, when this converted people chose to fight the Gadianton robbers, those who had made that covenant would have been too old for battle. For comparison, note that in the days of Moses it took 40 years for all the men of war who left Egypt to pass away (see Joshua 5:6). Likewise, after 42 years, most of the original (marked) Lamanite converts would also have died, including those who suffered untimely deaths due to their covenant not to defend themselves with the sword (see Helaman 5:51 and 15:9).

Mormon uses the word *became* twice as he describes the descendants of those original converts. The simple past tense verb *became* simply means *came to be*.¹¹³ It can indicate a gradual change. For example, Mormon says that some Nephites in the land northward “*became* exceeding expert in the working of cement” (Helaman 3:7). He also says that, due to the preaching of Alma, Amulek, and many others, “the establishment of the church *became* general throughout the land” (Alma 16:15).¹¹⁴ Likewise, in Nephi’s vision of the tree of life, after Nephi sees the destruction of his people, he sees “many generations pass away” (1 Nephi 12:21) and an angel tells him that the people “shall dwindle in unbelief” (1 Nephi 12:22). Nephi then says that “*after* they had dwindled in unbelief, they *became* a dark and loathsome and a filthy people, full

113. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “become, v.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/16784?redirectedFrom=become#eid>. See sense II.5.b. Includes Early Modern English examples.

114. See other similar uses of the word *became* in Jacob 5:74, Enos 1:20, Jarom 1:7–8, and 4 Nephi 1:10.

of idleness and all manner of abominations” (1 Nephi 12:23). The word *after* could suggest an immediate change, but the historical context indicates that their moral state gradually worsened as they dwindled in unbelief, so in this setting the word *became* has a connotation similar to *had become*. In Ether 9:16, Moroni uses both *had become* and *became* to describe parallel decades-long gradual changes. He says that “in the space of sixty and two years,” the house of Emer “*had become* exceeding strong, insomuch that they *became* exceeding rich.” Thus, the simple past usage of the word *became* doesn’t rule out a decades-long gradual change.

In 3 Nephi 2:15–16, Mormon may use the word *became* with similar meaning. He tells us that 42 years after the great conversion, “all the Lamanites who had become converted unto the Lord did unite with their brethren, the Nephites” (3 Nephi 2:12). After describing their reasons for joining forces, he adds, “and their curse was taken from them, and their skin *became* white like unto the Nephites. And their young men and their daughters *became* exceeding fair; and they were numbered among the Nephites and were called Nephites” (3 Nephi 2:15–16). Here again, the word *became* may describe a change that took place gradually over the course of decades.

This passage uses the word *white* with the word *skin*, so (as explained in more detail below) similarly worded biblical passages and 2 Nephi 5:21 suggest that the word *white* literally describes skin. It appears to refer in the broad ancient sense to the clean, unstained skin of these covenant-keeping Lamanites. Similarly, the word *fair* appears to describe attendant attractiveness,¹¹⁵ perhaps suggesting that they appeared to be worthy, under the law of Moses, to marry righteous Nephites. The emphasis on *their young men and their daughters* may highlight the pure, unstained skin of the younger generations.

Another passage may also allude to the absence of the mark as a lagging indicator of repentance. Within two years after Christ appeared at the temple in Bountiful, “the people were all converted unto the Lord upon all the face of the land, both Nephites and Lamanites” (4 Nephi 1:2). Even though all Lamanites were converted at that time, one detail about the unity of this converted people isn’t mentioned for about 75 more years.

115. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “fair, adj. and n.1,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/67704?rskey=i3x4qi&result=2#eid>. See sense A.I.1.a. Includes Early Modern English examples.

At that late date, after nine of the original twelve disciples “and also many of that generation” (4 Nephi 1:14) had passed away, we learn that there were no “Lamanites nor no manner of ites, but they were in one, the children of Christ and heirs to the kingdom of God” (4 Nephi 1:17). The latter part of this statement, that the people *were in one, the children of Christ and heirs to the kingdom of God*, might have applied some 75 years earlier. However, this statement may apply at this later date because by then, no Lamanite marks remained. With nobody marking their skin for 75 years, there were no longer people marked as *Lamanites nor no manner of ites*.

Sadly, after another hundred years or so, “a small part of the people ... revolted from the church and took upon them the name of Lamanites; therefore there began to be Lamanites again in the land” (4 Nephi 1:20). This brief passage doesn’t indicate the parentage of those who chose to take upon themselves the name of Lamanites. They may or may not have been literal descendants of Laman. Nor is there any mention of any mark. In fact, no Lamanite mark is mentioned anywhere in the balance of the Book of Mormon account. The absence of this word, however, doesn’t rule out the likelihood of a resurgence of the mark. The choice to assume the name of Lamanites was likely a choice to adopt the traditions of the former Lamanites, including the tradition of marking themselves “after the manner of the Lamanites” (Alma 3:4).¹¹⁶

Ancient Meanings of the Words *Black* and *White*

Modern readers face two challenges as we try to understand the words *black* and *white* as used in the Bible and Book of Mormon. One challenge is to avoid applying the common meanings of our day to these words — meanings that automatically come to our minds because of our present culture but weren’t in use when ancient prophets made their records. The other challenge is to apply ancient meanings to these words — meanings that don’t come naturally to us in our day because they are not part of our present culture but were in use back then. Our modern culture can obscure our view of the intended meanings of these words.

116. Mormon may suggest that, near the end of the Book of Mormon account, some wicked Nephites also began to mark themselves after the manner of the Lamanites. He refers to Nephites of his day who “have fallen into transgression and have been murdered, plundered, and hunted and driven forth and slain and scattered upon the face of the earth and mixed with the Lamanites *until they are no more called Nephites*, becoming wicked and wild and ferocious, yea, even *becoming Lamanites*” (Helaman 3:16; compare Alma 43:4).

Significant Changes in the Usage of the Words Black and White Since the 1400s

In the classical writings of the Greco-Roman era (roughly from 800 BC through AD 500) the writers rarely identify their countrymen or others in terms of skin tone. In fact, “the most remarkable aspect of all this [classical literature] is the *absence* of the kind of obsessive and corrosive concern with ‘whiteness’ and ‘blackness’ that so disfigures our modern world.”¹¹⁷ Many centuries after the Greco-Roman era, however, usage of the words *black* and *white* began to change as the transatlantic slave trade brought the modern social construct of race into being.

As early as the 1440s, before the European discovery of America, the Portuguese began an intense African slave trade by capturing slaves along the west coast of Africa and selling them to Europeans. The Portuguese word for the color black, *negro*, was first used as a noun referring to a person with black skin in the 1400s.¹¹⁸ After the discovery of America, some Europeans chose to produce sugar in South America and in the Caribbean. At the same time, others chose to produce tobacco in the Caribbean and in North America. These products required a significant amount of labor, and the producers chose to base this production on slave labor. They initially acquired slaves from several sources, but Africa soon became their most prominent source of slaves.¹¹⁹ By the 1600s the Spanish word for black, also *negro*, was used as a noun with the same meaning. At about the same time, the same noun was borrowed into the English language with the same meaning.¹²⁰ Initially, there were some Africans in the Americas who were free and those who were slaves worked alongside slaves from other lands. During the 1600s, however, the slaveholders saw the benefits of establishing a slave class that could be identified and

117. James H. Dee, “Black Odysseus, White Caesar: When Did ‘White People’ Become ‘White’?,” *The Classic Journal* 99, no. 2 (2004): 162, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3298065?read-now=1&seq=9#page_scan_tab_contents.

118. See examples of such usage in Robin Blackburn, “The Old World Background to European Colonial Slavery,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (1997): 81, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2953313>.

119. Steven Mintz, “Historical Context: Facts about the Slave Trade and Slavery,” History Resources, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, (website), <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/teaching-resource/historical-context-facts-about-slave-trade-and-slavery>.

120. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “Negro, n. and adj.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/125898?redirectedFrom=negro#eid>. See sense A.1.a.

kept in bondage in perpetuity based on inherited physical traits.¹²¹ The resulting system tied enslavement directly to physical features, focused primarily on natural skin color. This system of enslavement eventually deprived freedom from almost all people of African descent living in the Americas. Consequently, across the New World, one's natural skin color became his or her most significant physical characteristic. Freedom itself depended on skin color.

The culture that condoned this perpetual slavery system changed European and colonial languages. These changes included a redefinition of the word *race*¹²² and the adoption of the new terms *white race* and *white people* to distinguish the unenslaved, free class from those doomed to perpetual enslavement. These new terms were used “no earlier than the 1600s.”¹²³ In the English language specifically, the usage of the words *black* and *white* and other related words changed significantly from the 1400s, with changes continuing through the 1800s.¹²⁴

121. Yasuko I. Takezawa, et al., “Race,” *Britannica*, (website), November 23, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/race-human>. See also Audrey Smedley, “Origin of the Idea of Race,” *Anthropology Newsletter* (November 1997), at Public Broadcasting System, (website), <http://to.pbs.org/1P5HnAJ>; George M. Fredrickson, “The Historical Origins and Development of Racism,” *California Newsreel* (2003), at Public Broadcasting System, (website), <https://to.pbs.org/30S2p5m>; and David R. Roediger, “Historical Foundations of Race,” Smithsonian, National Museum of African American History & Culture, (website), <https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/historical-foundations-race>.

122. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “race, n.6,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/157031?rskey=oN6jMM&result=6&isAdvanced=false#eid>. See sense I.1.d. Compare senses I.1.a, I.1.b, and I.1.c.

123. Dee, “Black Odysseus,” 164.

124. Usage of the word *white* to designate a group of people based on natural skin pigmentation began in the late 1500s and became common in the 1700s. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “white, adj. (and adv.) and n.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/228566?rskey=sQdTP8&result=1>. See senses I.5.a. and especially I.5.b.; See also Dee, “Black Odysseus,” 162. Other related English words came into usage at this same time. The English noun *black* was rarely used to mean a person with dark skin before the 1600s, but such usage soon became common. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “black, adj. and n.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/19670?rskey=LcxmKH&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>. See sense A.3.a. The English word *race* didn’t denote broad classifications of people with common physical characteristics until the late 1700s. See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “race, n.6,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/19670?rskey=LcxmKH&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>. Although different sources can at times be inconsistent, this statement about the meaning of the English word *race* is consistent with the more general statement made earlier that the term *white race* wasn’t used in European

Long after the end of legally sanctioned enslavement, the heightened cultural importance of natural skin color and these language changes persist in present-day culture. Today, it can generally be assumed that the word *white* or *black*, when used to describe a person or a person's skin, refers to natural skin color, but this was not the case prior to the 1400s. Our culture brings this meaning to mind as we read these words, but today's common uses for these words came into being centuries after the books of the Bible and Book of Mormon were recorded.

Much more might be said about the social changes and language changes that took place between the 1400s and the 1900s,¹²⁵ but the discussion in this paper is centered on changes surrounding the altered usage of the English words *black* and *white*. It should be noted, however, that the unscientific categorization of people by race¹²⁶ eventually became buttressed by a wide range of pseudo-religious and pseudo-scientific beliefs. One of these was the notion mentioned earlier that the mark set upon Cain was dark skin color imposed by God. In the past, many — perhaps most — readers of the Book of Mormon followed a similar line of reasoning to conclude that the Lamanite mark was itself a dark natural skin color imposed by God.¹²⁷ They — understandably perhaps, but incorrectly — applied the racial culture of their era to the words of the Book of Mormon. This cultural confusion needn't occur today.

This paper invites readers to view the Book of Mormon's ancient words from the cultural perspective of ancient Israel — a culture not immersed in the modern social construct of race. This ancient record employs the same ancient usages of the words *black* and *white* that are found in the Old Testament. By resisting presentism as we read the Book of Mormon, we avoid disorientation caused by cultural remnants of the transatlantic slave trade.

languages before the 1600s. The urbane but inaccurate word *Caucasian* wasn't coined to refer to a member of the white race until 1807. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "Caucasian, adj. and n.," <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/29052?redirectedFrom=Caucasian#eid>. See sense A.

125. Takezawa, et al., "Race."

126. See Dee, "Black Odysseus," 165.

127. See, for example, Rodney Turner, "The Lamanite Mark," in *Second Nephi, The Doctrinal Structure*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1989), 133–57, <https://rsc.byu.edu/book-mormon-second-nephi-doctrinal-structure/lamanite-mark>; and Blake T. Ostler, "Yea, Yea, Nay, Nay: DNA Strands in the Book of Mormon," *Sunstone*, May 2005, 63–71, <https://sunstone.org/issue-details/?in=137>.

Usage of the Words Black and White in the Old Testament

Like the classical writings of the Greco-Roman era, the Old Testament rarely refers to natural skin color. Even when it uses the words *black* and *white* with the word *skin*, it always refers to other things. Four foundational principles govern the usage of the ancient words translated as *black* and *white* in the Old Testament.

- **There were few ancient Hebrew color names, so each covered not a single color, but a range of colors.** The entry for “Color” in the 1906 Jewish Encyclopedia says, “There are but few real color-terms found in Biblical or traditional literature.”¹²⁸ This entry mentions *white*, *red*, and *green* as color terms “distinguished by name,” and later adds the term “shaḥor’ (black) [transliterated herein as *shachor*]”¹²⁹ as “the usual term in the Bible to express the idea of darkness.”¹³⁰ A comprehensive study completed in 1969 by Brent Berlin and Paul Kay concluded that color names tend to come into languages gradually. Some languages have only two color names — one (black or dark) encompassing all darker/colder colors and another (white or bright) encompassing all lighter/warmer colors. Eventually, a third color name emerges (red) to distinguish reddish hues. The fourth color name to emerge (green or yellow) generally distinguishes greenish-yellowish colors.¹³¹ In languages with few color names, each represents a wide band of colors.

128. Emil G. Hirsch and Caspar Levis, “Color,” *The 1906 Jewish Encyclopedia*, at JewishEncyclopedia.com, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/4557-color>.

129. BDB, s.v. “חָשֵׁךְ.”

130. Hirsch, “Color.”

131. Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 2, https://books.google.com/books/about/Basic_Color_Terms.html?id=sGDxruwl9OkC&printsec=frontcover&source=kp_read_button#v=onepage&q&f=false. This research was updated and enhanced in 2009 in Paul Kay et al. *The World Color Survey* (Stanford, CA: Center for the Study of Language and Information, Stanford University, 2009). See also M. Vejdemo-Johansson, S. Vejdemo, and C.H. Ek, “Comparing distributions of color words: Pitfalls and Metric choices,” PLOS ONE 9, no. 2 (February 25, 2014): e89184, at National Library of Medicine (website), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3934892/>; and C.L. Hardin, “Berlin and Kay Theory,” *Encyclopedia of Color Science and Technology* (New York: Springer Science+Business Media, 2013), DOI 10.1007/978-3-642-27851-8_62-2, http://imbs.uci.edu/~kjamason/ECST/Hardin_BerlinKayTheory.pdf.

- **The Hebrew sometimes mentions something known for its appearance (without naming a color), but the English translation adds the English color name.** The English Bible identifies more colors than the Hebrew Bible. For instance, the Hebrew for Numbers 12:10 and 2 Kings 5:27, contains only the word *sheleg* (snow),¹³² but the English translation says “as white as snow.” Similarly, the Hebrew word *shani*,¹³³ the name of an insect (*coccus ilicis*), whose dried, powdered remains are used to dye cloth, is translated as *scarlet* (see, for example, Genesis 38:28–30 and Isaiah 1:18). The Hebrew word *sebah* refers to hoary hairs — the hairs of old age.¹³⁴ This non-color word is sometimes translated as “gray hairs” (Genesis 42:38; 44:29, 31).
- **Ancient Israel used colors as symbols according to specific, ancient symbolism.** White, which included the brighter hues of daytime, symbolized joy and purity. Black, which included the darker hues of night, symbolized mourning and affliction. The 1906 Jewish Encyclopedia says, “Black or dark color points to mourning or affliction On the other hand, white suggests purity ... and joy.”¹³⁵ Similarly, the 1915 International Standard Bible Encyclopedia explains that in the Bible, the English word *black* can refer to mourning and that the word *white* can be a symbol of purity.¹³⁶ These symbolic meanings cause cross-cultural confusion for readers who are unaware of the symbolism.
- **Some non-color Hebrew words relating to luster — dimness or brightness — are translated to the English words *black* and *white* in the Old Testament.**

These four foundational principles, together with other context, can help us understand English Old Testament passages that use these words to describe either skin or people.

132. BDB, s.v. “שֶׁלֶג.”

133. BDB, s.v. “שָׁנִי.”

134. BDB, s.v. “שֵׁבָה.”

135. Hirsch, “Color.”

136. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr (Chicago: Howard-Severance Company, 1915), s.v. “Color, Colors,” 675–676, <https://archive.org/details/theinternationalstandardbibleencyclopedia/The%20International%20Standard%20Bible%20Encyclopedia-%2002/page/676/mode/2up>.

Skin-Specific Old Testament Passages That Use the Words *Black* or *White*

Biblical passages that describe skin as black or white always describe actual skin and are never solely idiomatic. In some cases, however, the words *black* and *white* add a layer of idiomatic meaning to a literal reference to skin. Here are all such passages:

Leviticus 13 describes various maladies, all called leprosy. In this passage, forms of the word *white* (*laban*)¹³⁷ can indicate either pale leprous skin (see Leviticus 13:24–25) or clean, non-leprous skin (see Leviticus 13:13 and 17). The ancient literal meaning of the word *white*, which covers a wide range of lighter hues, fits well here. As mentioned above, in other passages describing leprosy, the word *snow* is translated to mean “as white as snow.” Again, the broad ancient literal meaning applies. Leprous skin wasn’t “snowy white” as that term is used today, but compared with healthy skin, it had a paler (more snow-like) appearance.

Job 7:5 describes “flesh ... clothed with worms and encrusted with dirt” and skin that “hardens, then breaks out afresh.”¹³⁸ In this context, Job tells us “My skin is black upon me” (Job 30:30). In this verse, the Hebrew verb *shachar* means *to be black*.¹³⁹ Job’s affliction literally caused his skin to become dark, or black in the broad ancient meaning, but this word also connotes affliction and mourning. Verse 28 uses the word *qadar* (to be dark; figurative of mourning)¹⁴⁰ and Verse 31 uses the word *ebel* (mourning),¹⁴¹ adding to this sad context.

Song of Solomon 1:5–6 uses the broad ancient meaning of the word *black* to refer to dark (tanned) skin. In it, a woman says, “I am black” twice. In verse 5, the word *black* again translates the Hebrew word *shachor*.¹⁴² Verse 6 uses the related word *shecharchoreth*, (blackish).¹⁴³ The woman says she is dark “because the sun hath looked upon me.”

Joel 2:6 and Nahum 2:10 both describe terrifying destruction. In the King James Version and the Geneva Bible of 1587, this destruction

137. BDB, s.v. “לָבָן.”

138. In the KJV, the wording of Job 7:5 is “My flesh is clothed with worms and clods of dust; my skin is broken, and become loathsome.” The exact wording I use is taken from the Berean Standard Bible and the English Standard Version translations.

139. BDB, s.v. “שָׁחַר.”

140. BDB, s.v. “קָדַר.”

141. BDB, s.v. “עָבַל.”

142. BDB, s.v. “שָׁחַר.”

143. BDB, s.v. “שֶׁחַרְחֹרֶת.”

causes the faces of people to “gather blackness.” The Bishops’ Bible of 1568 and the Coverdale Bible of 1535 refer to faces that are “black as a pot.” The Hebrew words translated here are *qabats parur*. *Qabats* is a common verb that means to gather or collect.¹⁴⁴ The noun *parur* is used only in these two verses. Its meaning is unclear, but it may refer to beauty or to a glow.¹⁴⁵ Translations that use the words *blackness* and *black*, may refer to faces that become flushed (darker) due to terror or they may symbolically suggest acute affliction. Other translations indicate faces that “grow pale” (their beauty is gathered in), due to terror. I favor the latter translations, so I’ve included these passages here with others that describe skin (the word *skin* isn’t used, but skin covers the face).

In the King James Version, Lamentations 5:10 says, “Our skin was black like an oven because of the terrible famine.” The Bishops’ Bible of 1568 reads, “Our skin is as it had been made black in an oven, for very sore hunger.” The Coverdale Bible of 1535 says, “our skin is as it had been burnt in an oven, for very sore hunger.” In this verse, the word *black* (or *burnt*) translates a form of the Hebrew verb *kamar*, which reflects an increase in warmth (either figurative or literal).¹⁴⁶ Also, the term *terrible* (or *very sore*) renders the word *zalaphah*, which is a raging heat.¹⁴⁷ A more direct translation would be, “Our skin is hot like an oven because of the raging heat [fever] of famine.” The Hebrew doesn’t describe appearance, so this passage doesn’t appear to portray a visual aspect of the skin.

No other Old Testament passages use the words *black* or *white* with the word *skin* (or with context that clearly refers to skin). These passages always describe actual skin, but never refer to natural skin color. Sometimes, the word *black* or *white* carries additional symbolic meaning.

Non-Skin-Specific Old Testament Passages That Use the Words *Black* or *White*

The following passages describe people (as opposed to skin) as either black or white. In passages that describe people, but don’t use the word *skin*, the words *black* and *white* don’t reflect colors. In this setting, these words are either used figuratively according to the symbolism of ancient Israel or literally, but to describe brightness or dimness rather than color.

144. BDB, s.v. “קָבַץ.”

145. BDB, s.v. “פָּאֲרוֹר.”

146. BDB, s.v. “קָמַר.”

147. BDB, s.v. “זָלַף.”

Under the law of Moses, a plant called hyssop was used in cleansing ceremonies (see, for example, Leviticus 14:4). In Psalm 51, David cries to the Lord for forgiveness, saying “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me to hear joy and gladness” (Psalm 51:7–8). Here, the verb *laben* (to be white) connotes moral (ethical) purity.¹⁴⁸ David isn’t praying for a visibly white appearance. He seeks redemption — divine cleanliness, purity, and joy.

Daniel 11:35 is a prophecy about the tragic deaths of some righteous people. These tragic deaths will have a morally purifying effect on those who remain. They will serve “to try them, and to purge, and to make them white.” Here again, the same verb (*laben*) connotes moral (ethical) purity.¹⁴⁹ The same verb is used again in the Lord’s words “Many shall be purified, and made white, and tried” in Daniel 12:10.¹⁵⁰

In Jeremiah 8:21 and 14:2, the Hebrew verb *qadar* (to be dark)¹⁵¹ is again translated as *black* and figuratively depicts mourning. In Jeremiah 8:21, the prophet laments afflictions caused by the destruction of Jerusalem saying, “For the hurt of the daughter of my people am I hurt; I am black; astonishment hath taken hold on me.” In Jeremiah 14:2, he uses the same verb with the same meaning: “Judah mourneth, and the gates thereof [the people at the gates of the city] languish; they are black unto the ground; and the cry of Jerusalem is gone up.”¹⁵²

Ecclesiastes 9:7–9 suggests that we should joyfully receive life’s blessings and comforts. This joyful setting includes advice to “Let thy garments always be white, and let thy head lack no ointment” (Ecclesiastes 9:8). A plural form of *laban* depicts white clothing (signifying cheerfulness and joy).¹⁵³ Two commentaries suggest that, in this setting, the word *white* refers to clean clothing (garments are lighter when clean).¹⁵⁴

148. BDB, s.v. “לָבֵן.”

149. Ibid.

150. Ibid.

151. BDB, s.v. “קָדַר.”

152. Ibid.

153. BDB, s.v. “לָבָן.”

154. See commentaries quoted at “Verse by Verse Bible Commentary,” StudyLight.org, (website), <https://www.studylight.org/commentary/ecclesiastes/9-8.html>, including *Gill’s Exposition of the Entire Bible*, which says, “That is, neat and clean, not vile and sordid; what is comely and decent;” *Clarke’s Notes on the Bible* quotes the Targum as saying, “At all times let thy garments be washed and pure from the stain of sin.” These meanings fit well in the joyful setting, also symbolized by the word *white*.

In the Book of Mormon, Alma uses the word *white* to mean morally clean when he says, “there can no man be saved except his garments are *washed white*; yea, his garments must be purified until it is *cleansed from all stain* through the blood of [Christ]” (Alma 5:21). He later repeats this concept, referring to “all the holy prophets, whose garments are *cleansed* and are *spotless, pure, and white*” (Alma 5:24).

In Lamentations 4:1, Jeremiah observes “How is the gold become dim!” Later, he further develops this metaphor of precious things that have lost their luster. He notes sins and iniquities as reasons for affliction (see vv. 6, 13, and 22). The Nazarites (consecrated or distinguished ones) were once “purer than snow” and “whiter than milk” (v. 7), but now, “their visage [appearance] is blacker than a coal” (v. 8). The Hebrew verb translated as *purer* is *zakah*, which means *to be bright, clean, or pure*. Although the prevailing meaning for this word in this passage is figurative of the splendor of nobles, it may reflect purity in God’s sight and moral purity (as it does elsewhere).¹⁵⁵ The Hebrew word translated as *whiter* is *tsachach*, which means *to be dazzling*¹⁵⁶ and the Hebrew word translated as *blacker* (*chashak*) means *to be or grow dark*.¹⁵⁷ Thus, the change from “whiter” to “blacker,” is from dazzling (bright) to dark (dim). While this passage details an afflicted state due to famine and exposure,¹⁵⁸ its words appear to extend the metaphor about gold, which laments a fall from radiant moral purity to the dimness or darkness of sin.

Song of Solomon 5:10 uses a similar Hebrew word, *tsach*, which means dazzling, glowing, or clear,¹⁵⁹ to describe a woman’s white (dazzling) young lover. It can be interpreted literally (as glowing health) and figuratively (as dazzling moral purity). If this poem reflects the relationship between Israel and her God, both meanings may be intended.

These are all the Old Testament passages in which the words *black* or *white* describe people, but not skin. These passages either use these words figuratively or describe brightness or dimness.

155. BDB, s.v. “זָכַח.”

156. BDB, s.v. “צָחַח.”

157. BDB, s.v. “חָשַׁךְ.”

158. Joseph Benson suggests that this passage refers to a change in complexion from light to dark. “Commentary of the Old and New Testaments,” at *BibleHub.com*, s.v. “Lamentations 4:7–9,” <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/lamentations/4-7.htm>. Such a change would not be a change in natural skin pigmentation, but a result of famine and exposure. Other commentaries similarly discuss complexion.

159. BDB, s.v. “צָחַח.”

Incidental Biblical References to Natural Skin Color

Differences in natural skin color appear to have been as unimportant in the writings of ancient Israel as they were in classical Greco-Roman writings. Other differences among people, including religious differences and geographical origin, were more important. Classical Greco-Roman writings, however, do include a few incidental references to skin color,¹⁶⁰ and the same can be said for the Bible.

Jeremiah 13:23 asks rhetorically, “Can the Ethiopian [Cushite] change his skin?” This question suggests a difference in natural skin color between most Cushites and most Israelites,¹⁶¹ but even this rhetorical question employs neither the word *black* nor the word *white*. And the fact that this is the only incidental reference to natural skin color in the entire Old Testament suggests that skin color wasn’t very significant in ancient Israel. Although some modern commentators suggest that the name *Cush* itself (which doesn’t mean *black* in Hebrew) may also mean *black*,¹⁶² there is no etymological support for this suggestion. The more accurate view, held by others, sees *Cush* as simply a name and *Cushite* as a reference to descendants of Cush or residents of Cush.¹⁶³

The New Testament was written long after Lehi left Jerusalem, but it too is a product of the culture of ancient Israel that rarely, if ever, refers to natural skin color. It uses the word *skin* once — to refer to John the Baptist’s “girdle of a skin about his loins” (Mark 1:6). The word *black* appears three times in the New Testament, but not to refer to people or their skin (see Matthew 5:36 and Revelation 6:5, 12). The word *white* is much more common, but it doesn’t describe natural skin color either.¹⁶⁴

160. See, for example, James H. Dee, “Black Odysseus” 157.

161. See *Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Cush,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (website), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/bd/cush>.

162. See, for example, *Easton’s Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Cush,” <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/eastons-bible-dictionary/cush.html>; and *Smith’s Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Cush,” <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/smiths-bible-dictionary/cush.html>. In Modern Hebrew, the Hebrew word for Cushite has become a highly offensive pejorative term for a person with a dark skin (see Ibrahim M. Omer, “‘Kushi’ is not demeaning,” *The Jewish Magazine*, December 2013, <https://www.jewishmag.com/180mag/kushi/kushi.htm>).

163. *BDB*, s.v. “כִּשְׁיִי.” See also *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Cush,” <https://www.biblestudytools.com/encyclopedias/isbe/cush-1.html> and Abarim Publications s.v. “Cush,” <https://www.abarim-publications.com/Meaning/Cush.html#.WRoxktLy01>.

164. More than half of the New Testament instances of the word *white* are in the symbolic book of Revelation. They include a reference to the luster of the

Acts 13:1 contains the sole possible reference to natural skin color in the New Testament. This verse identifies three Christian “prophets and teachers” who set Barnabas and Saul (Paul) apart for a mission. They were “Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen.” *Niger* is a Latin word for black. In the culture of ancient Israel (and the culture of ancient Rome), this byname might refer to his profession, to tanned skin, or to some other dark event or item. It wouldn’t have suggested skin color with the automatic racial overtones of our day, but the text gives no context at all, so a reference to skin hue can’t be completely ruled out. Another of these men, Lucius of Cyrene, is from Africa, which might also suggest a dark skin, but the text is silent about his skin hue.¹⁶⁵ Different shades of skin probably existed among leaders of the early Christian church, but in their culture, skin color simply wasn’t a notable characteristic.

Usage of the Words *Black* and *White* in the Book of Mormon

The original text of the Book of Mormon sprang from an ancient cultural and linguistic heritage similar to that of the Old Testament. Its ancient text was written centuries before it became common to use the words *black* and *white* to note a person’s natural skin color. Had the words of the Book of Mormon come to us from the culture of the 1800s, their meaning might be based on that culture. The linguistic data, however, is consistent with words that were revealed to Joseph Smith — ancient words with ancient meanings.

The four foundational principles reviewed above for color words in biblical passages also appear to apply to the same words in Book of Mormon passages.

resurrected Christ’s hair and face (see Revelation 1:14) and references to symbolic white clothing worn by righteous people, including angels (see Revelation 3:4–5, 18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13–14; 15:6; and 19:8). They also mention other things that are symbolically white, including a stone (2:17), horses (6:2, and 19:11 and 14), a cloud (14:14), and a throne (20:11). Passages in other books describe how the Savior shone at his transfiguration (see Matthew 17:2; Mark 9:3; and Luke 9:29) and the similar brightness of angels (see Matthew 28:3; Mark 16:5; John 20:12; and Acts 1:10). Two passages metaphorically compare wicked men to sepulchres (clean and white on the outside, but filthy on the inside) (see Matthew 23:27 and Acts 23:3). One describes ripe fields as white (light in color) (see John 4:35). In one, Jesus refers to white hair (see Matthew 5:36).

165. Acts 8:27 likewise mentions “a man of Ethiopia” without any mention of skin hue.

- The Book of Mormon appears to use only three true color names: *white* (including *whiteness* and *whiter*), *red*, and *black* (including *blackness* and sometimes *dark*), so each color name appears to cover a range of colors (not just one narrowly defined color).
- The Book of Mormon also uses the word *scarlets* twice (1 Nephi 13:7–8) perhaps translating the ancient word *shani*.¹⁶⁶ Similarly, the Book of Mormon uses the word *gray* once in the term *gray hairs*, probably a translation of *sebah*.¹⁶⁷ In fact, it seems likely that the Book of Mormon phrase “their gray hairs were about to be brought down to lie low in the dust; yea, even they were near to be cast with sorrow into a watery grave” (1 Nephi 18:18) intentionally echoes the Old Testament phrase “ye bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave” (Genesis 42:38).
- In the Book of Mormon, the words *black* and *white* also express the specific symbolism of ancient Israel. Nephi quotes the words of Isaiah, which speak of *blackness*. “I clothe the heavens with blackness, and I make sackcloth their covering” (2 Nephi 7:3). In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word translated to *blackness* in this verse is *qadruwth*, which means darkness or gloom.¹⁶⁸ The sadness connoted by this word is bolstered by Isaiah’s reference to sackcloth. In two other passages, Lehi and Alma rely on ancient symbolism as they use the word *white* to describe the fruit of the tree of life. Lehi emphasizes joy, saying, “I beheld that *the fruit thereof was white to exceed all the whiteness that I had ever seen. And as I partook of the fruit thereof, it filled my soul with exceeding great joy*” (1 Nephi 8:11–12). Alma emphasizes purity, saying, “by and by ye shall pluck the fruit thereof, which is most precious, which is sweet above all that is sweet, and *which is white above all that is white, yea, and pure above all that is pure*” (Alma 32:42),
- The word *white* is sometimes used in the Book of Mormon to reflect the concept of luster, as in the English Old Testament, so the word *white* refers to brightness (see, for example, 3 Nephi 19:25).

166. BDB, s.v. “שָׁנִי.”

167. BDB, s.v. “שֵׁבָה.”

168. BDB, s.v. “קָדְרוּת.”

These passages suggest that color words in the English Book of Mormon follow the ancient patterns found in the English Old Testament. These ancient words don't reflect the modern social construct of race. Indeed, it could be considered anachronistic for an ancient record to use color words with meanings that arose due to the transatlantic slave trade.

Nephi's Description of the Lamanite Mark

As we've seen, the Lord said that when the Lamanites rebelled *against him*, they would be cursed with a sore curse (see 1 Nephi 2:23). Nephi describes the sore curse that came upon them due to this rebellion as "a skin of blackness" (2 Nephi 5:21). The conceptual link between the blessings and cursings of 1 Nephi 2:20–24 and those of Leviticus 26 can suggest that this *skin of blackness* was a black sacrilegious tattoo that violated the law of Moses (see Leviticus 19:28). Mormon's description of the Lamanite mark in Alma 3:4–19 also appears to depict such a tattoo — a cursed thing cut into the skin in rebellion against God. The archaeological record confirms the existence of black profane tattoos (and red tattoos as well) in ancient America. The paradigm and symbolism of ancient Israel connect Nephi's words *skin of blackness* with Mormon's words in Alma 3:4–19 as well as the words of Jeremiah, Daniel, and the Book of Job.

The biblical phrase that most closely resembles Nephi's phrase *skin of blackness* may be Job's words "My *skin* is *black* upon me" (Job 30:30). As mentioned earlier, Job's words refer literally to diseased skin that is unnaturally black (in the broad ancient meaning) and symbolically to a time of affliction and mourning. Similarly, Nephi's words refer literally to tattooed skin that is artificially black and symbolically to a time of affliction for his brethren similar to that mourned by Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 8:21 and 14:2 and Lamentations 4:1–8).

Nephi says, "They had hardened their hearts against him, that they had become *like unto a flint*." (2 Nephi 5:21). In the Old Testament, Zechariah makes a similar comparison, saying "Yea, they made their hearts as *an adamant stone*, lest they should hear the law, and the words which the Lord of hosts hath sent in his spirit by the former prophets" (Zechariah 7:12). The Hebrew word translated as *an adamant stone* (*shamir*) can also be translated as *flint*.¹⁶⁹ The New King James Version says, "they made their hearts like *flint*." Nephi's metaphor may entail more than general hardheartedness. The Old Testament (Exodus 4:25

169. BDB, s.v. "שָׁמִיר."

and Joshua 5:2–3) and the scholarship on Mesoamerica¹⁷⁰ both mention flint used to cut skin. Nephi’s word *flint* may suggest the way his brethren acquired a skin of blackness.

Nephi’s description of the fulfillment of blessings and cursings under the covenant with the Lord was written from his unique point of view. To him, the Lamanite mark was a *skin of blackness* in contrast with an earlier time when he saw his brethren as “white, and exceeding fair and delightsome” (2 Nephi 5:21).¹⁷¹ This contrast indicates that the word *white*, like the word *blackness*, describes skin — skin that is now blackened (darkened), but was once white (clean and therefore lighter in appearance). In addition, biblical meanings of Nephi’s words *white and exceeding fair and delightsome* suggest an earlier time when Nephi saw his brethren as pure and joyful — a somewhat surprising idea that invites further examination of these words.

The English word *fair* can have several meanings. Three meanings might be relevant here: (A) “Beautiful to the eye; of attractive appearance; good-looking;” (B) “Of a person’s character, conduct, reputation, etc.: free from moral imperfections; exemplary, unblemished;” or (C) “Of hair or complexion: light as opposed to dark in colour”¹⁷² The first two meanings both suggest Hebrew words found in the Old Testament, but the third meaning (light complexion) isn’t found in the Bible, making it unlikely that this third meaning applies here. In the English Old Testament, the word *fair* translates several Hebrew words including *towb*,¹⁷³ *yaphah*,¹⁷⁴ and *yapheh*.¹⁷⁵ The word *towb*, in particular, often rendered as *fair*, can mean pleasant, agreeable, or good. It can refer to one who is pleasant to the sight, but it’s also the word used as God declares various parts of the creation to be “good” (see, for example, Genesis 1:4). It’s the Hebrew source for the English word *good* in “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:9) and in “knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5).

170. See Thompson, “Tattooing and Scarification among the Maya,” 252, where flint is mentioned as an instrument used for tattooing and scarification among the Maya.

171. Martin, however, suggests that the Nephi’s terms *exceeding fair and delightsome* may describe the Lamanites from their own point of view, rather than that of Nephi, “Covenantal Nature,” 122.

172. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “Fair, adj. and n.1,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/67704?rskey=JC0gvi&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>. See senses A.I.1, A.III.12, and A.IV.17.

173. BDB, s.v. “טוֹב.”

174. BDB, s.v. “יָפָה.”

175. BDB, s.v. “יָפֵה.”

So, in the Book of Mormon, the word *fair* can mean pleasant to look upon, but might also connote goodness.¹⁷⁶ Further context provided by the word *delightsome* suggests that this specific reference is to moral goodness rather than worldly beauty.

The word *delightsome* generally means giving or providing delight.¹⁷⁷ It appears only once in the English Old Testament, but eight times in the Book of Mormon. In Malachi 3:12, the land of the righteous is described with the Hebrew word *chephets* (pleasure, delight),¹⁷⁸ rendered as *delightsome*. In the Book of Mormon, terms used together with *delightsome* include “white [pure and joyful],” and “believe[ing] in Christ” (2 Nephi 30:6–7); “[those who] come to the knowledge of God, yea, the redemption of Christ” (Words of Mormon 1:8); “blessed” (3 Nephi 24:12); “fair [pleasant or good]” and “blessed according to the multitude of the promises which the Lord had made unto them” (4 Nephi 1:10–11); “they had Christ for their shepherd; yea, they were led even by God the Father” (Mormon 5:17); and “civil” [as opposed to uncivilized] (Moroni 9:12).

These contextual words suggest that *delightsome*, as used with the words *white* and *fair*, points rather consistently to a time of moral purity. Although this idea counters the common view that Laman and Lemuel were always bad to the bone, Nephi’s limited account does allow for just such a time. He mentions no iniquity or contention from the time when he taught his brethren about his vision of the tree of life until the time of the broken bow — a period that covered “many days,” (1 Nephi 16:15) and may have included several months, a year, or longer (see 1 Nephi 16:4–20). This may have been a joyful, clean, and pure interlude before Laman, Lemuel, and their followers, who later became Lamanites, ultimately hardened their hearts.

After Nephi received his vision of the tree of life, he exhorted his brethren “with all diligence to keep the commandments of the Lord” (1 Nephi 16:4). In response, “they did humble themselves before the Lord, insomuch that I had joy and great hopes of them, that they would walk

176. Also consider Matthew Bowen’s insightful discussion of the words *good* and *fair*, as used in the Book of Mormon, in which he suggests that these words, like the name *Nephi* “are derived from Egyptian word *nfr*, ‘good,’ ‘goodly,’ ‘fine,’ ‘fair,’ ‘beautiful.’” Matthew L. Bowen, “‘O Ye Fair Ones’ — Revisited,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 20 (2016): 315–44, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/o-ye-fair-ones-revisited/>.

177. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “delightsome, adj.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/49394>.

178. *BDB*, s.v. “רָצוּן.”

in the paths of righteousness” (1 Nephi 16:5). This hope is supported by an absence of any signs of rebellion for quite some time. Nephi gives no time markers during the eight-year sojourn in the wilderness (see 1 Nephi 17:3–4), so we can only estimate the length of this evidently harmonious time. After sharing this hope, Nephi says that his father “dwelt in a tent” (1 Nephi 16:6), a phrase that may mark the passage of time (see 1 Nephi 2:15, 9:1 and 10:16). While they continued to dwell in the valley of Lemuel, Lehi’s sons and Zoram all became married (see 1 Nephi 16:7). Later, Lehi received the Liahona and was commanded to move on (see 1 Nephi 16:9–10). No murmuring is mentioned as they began their journey even though some of the women may have been expecting or nursing — a cause for murmuring at a later time (see 1 Nephi 17:20). One might also have predicted contention as they started out, but none is mentioned (see 1 Nephi 16:11–12).

After they crossed the river Laman, the workings of the Liahona suggest unity, faith and diligence. They “did follow the directions of the ball, which led [them] in the more fertile parts of the wilderness” (1 Nephi 16:16). King Benjamin teaches that this “ball or director ... was prepared by the hand of the Lord that thereby *they might be led, every one, according to the heed and diligence which they gave unto [the Lord]*” (Mosiah 1:16). Similarly, Alma suggests that the Liahona wrought miracles only while “they had faith to believe that God could cause that those spindles should point the way they should go” (Alma 37:40). It faltered when “they were slothful and forgot to exercise their faith and diligence” (Alma 37:41). All may have remained faithful during these initial travels, so the Liahona led them through fertile places. Sadly, this faithful interval eventually ended. After they once again pitched their tents to rest and obtain food (see 1 Nephi 16:17), Nephi broke his bow, and then not only Laman, Lemuel, and the sons of Ishmael, but also Lehi, murmured (see 1 Nephi 16:20). Lehi soon repented and Laman and Lemuel later helped Nephi build the ship. By the time they reached the promised land, however, the hearts of Laman, Lemuel, and their followers became hardened.

God knew in advance that these earliest Lamanites would ultimately forfeit his protection and guidance as they rebelled — first against being led by Nephi, and then against being led by God. Their rebellion against God included the choice to mark themselves with a *skin of blackness* — a permanent self-imposed mark that identified them as apostates. It fulfilled God’s word that they would “not be enticing unto” righteous

Nephites (2 Nephi 5:21) but would “be loathsome” (2 Nephi 5:22) to those who chose to keep their covenants.

The unrighteous actions of the Lamanites themselves distinguished them from the Nephites “that thereby the Lord God might preserve his people, that they might not *mix and believe in incorrect traditions*, which would prove their destruction” (Alma 3:8). Nibley emphasizes the importance of traditions: “[The Lord] doesn’t want them to mingle with incorrect traditions.”¹⁷⁹ As explained above, some of the traditions adopted by the Lamanites violated sacred covenants. They would remain cursed and branded as apostates until they repented and turned again to the Lord.

An ancient tattoo could literally, visibly, be “set upon” specific rebellious adults when it began with “Laman and Lemuel, and also the sons of Ishmael and the Ishmaelitish women” (Alma 3:7). Then, the Lamanites could have continued a wicked tradition by which “whomsoever suffered himself to be led away by the Lamanites were called under that head, and *there was a mark set upon him*” (Alma 3:10).

Thus, the term *skin of blackness*, when viewed through the eyes of Nephi’s ancient culture, has nothing to do with the modern social construct of race. It describes skin blackened by a permanent, self-imposed mark. This mark was forbidden by the law of Moses and adopted in rebellion against God, a rebellion that eventually included other violations of the law as well.

All other Book of Mormon passages once thought to refer to natural skin color can also be read in light of the paradigm and symbolism of ancient Israel. It can be hard for modern readers to accept these ancient patterns of use for the words *black* and *white*. But they were firmly in place for centuries before natural skin color became such a prominent aspect of modern culture.

Nephi’s Declaration That God Invites All to Come Unto Him

As we read Jeremiah’s words, “I am black,” (Jeremiah 8:21) our culture tends to lead us initially, almost instinctively, but incorrectly, to consider his natural skin color. Nephi lived in the days of Jeremiah. His words reflect the same culture, but our cultural instincts likewise suggest skin color as we read the words *black and white* in the following passage written by Nephi: “[The Lord] inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness. And he denieth none that come unto him, *black*

179. Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon*, 249.

and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen. And all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile” (2 Nephi 26:33).

Most modern readers initially assume that the words *black* and *white* in this passage refer to natural skin color. Our present culture suggests that this reading could be essential to Nephi’s teaching that all people everywhere are alike unto God. This passage is often cited, very appropriately, to emphasize the wrongness of racial prejudice.¹⁸⁰ But these ancient words teach this essential message about God’s perfect love from outside the modern social construct of race. The historical evidence indicates that these words were written, and should be read, from the cultural perspective of ancient Israel. This passage never mentions skin. Similar passages in the Bible use the word *black* to symbolically designate mournful, afflicted people and use the word *white* to symbolically designate the pure and joyful. These ancient meanings certainly don’t pop into the minds of modern readers, but they fit perfectly in this ancient passage.

At various times in our lives, each of us might be white (pure and joyful due to repentance and righteousness) or black (afflicted and mournful due to sin). With these meanings, the words *black* and *white* jointly cover all of God’s children. Many scriptures confirm that God denies none who come unto him.¹⁸¹ For example, Jesus invites latter-day Gentiles to “turn ... from your wicked ways ... and come unto me” (3 Nephi 30:2).

This ancient symbolism for the words *black* and *white* adds meaning to an often-unexplained difference between the two visions of the tree of life. Near the beginning of Lehi’s vision, he finds himself in two dark and dreary (black and mournful) places — first a dark and dreary wilderness, and then a dark and dreary waste (see 1 Nephi 8:4–8). Feeling lost, he prays “unto the Lord that he would have mercy on me, according to the multitude of his tender mercies” (1 Nephi 8:8). These specific words allude to Psalm 51:1, which says, “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions”.¹⁸² McConkie and Millet

180. See, for example, Official Declaration 2, 30 September 1978, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, (website), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/dc-testament/od/2>.

181. See, for example, Matthew 11:28; Enos 1:2–6 and 27; and Alma 5:32–37.

182. See “Why Did Lehi Quote from a Psalm of Repentance in His Dream?” KnoWhy #325, *Book of Mormon Central*, June 12, 2017, <https://knowwhy.bookofmormoncentral>.

suggest that the “dark and dreary waste” represents “fallen man in the lone and dreary world.”¹⁸³ Lehi seeks the mercy of the Atonement. His plea brings him to the tree. Nephi, on the other hand, never mentions anything dark or dreary. He “comes unto” the tree from a bright, pure, joyful (white) place — a mountaintop (symbolic temple) where the Spirit of God rejoices with him (see 1 Nephi 11:1–8). These contrasting scenes, both of which result in partaking of the fruit of the tree, symbolically suggest that God “inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness,” including those who are black (afflicted and mournful) and those who are white (pure and joyful).

Within this ancient symbolism, the words *black and white* refer to situations (being afflicted and mournful or pure and joyful) that can change as we exercise our agency, while the other word pairs in 2 Nephi 26:33 refer to more innate qualities. This interesting combination of innate and changeable attributes is also found in two other Book of Mormon passages. Alma 1:30 describes good people who were generous to all, including “both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female, whether out of the church or in the church.” Three of these word pairs describe relatively innate attributes, but one, those who are “out of the church or in the church,” can change based on agency. Similarly, Alma 11:44 teaches that the resurrection “shall come to all,” including, “both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female, both the wicked and the righteous.” Once again, three word pairs describe fairly permanent qualities and one word pair, “the wicked and the righteous,” describes a quality we can change through our agency.

Marvin Perkins suggests that these passages reveal a pattern in which the words *black and white* are tied to the concepts “the wicked and the righteous,” and “out of the church or in the church.”¹⁸⁴ If the words *black and white* reflect the symbolism of ancient Israel, an interesting relationship exists among these passages. Our use of agency to be disobedient and wicked, including a choice to leave the church, tends to make us black (afflicted and mournful). Our use of agency to be obedient and righteous, including a choice to join the church, tends to make us white (pure and joyful).

org/knowhy/why-did-lehi-quote-from-a-psalm-of-repentance-in-his-dream.

183. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), 1:56.

184. Marvin Perkins, “Blacks in the Scriptures,” (lecture, 2014 FairMormon Conference, Provo, UT, August 7, 2014), <https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/conference/august-2014/blacks-scriptures>.

The underlying meaning of 2 Nephi 26:33, that all of God's children are alike unto him and that he invites all of us to come unto him, is the same whether the words *black and white* reflect ancient symbolism or the modern social construct of race. Nephi's words, however, were written anciently and wouldn't have relied on a modern social construct that is chronologically out of place in ancient writings.

Uses of the Word White in the Symbolic Context of Nephi's Vision

About one fourth of the instances of the word *white* in the Book of Mormon appear in the context of Lehi's and Nephi's symbolic visions of the tree of life. The word *skin* is never used in these visions. This context helps us understand these uses of the word *white*. Based on biblical usage, it's unlikely that any of these passages has anything to do with skin. As we've seen, the concept of race was beyond Nephi's worldview. A modern reader may assume that Nephi felt a need to identify people by race, but his usage of the word *white* fits better culturally and historically within the paradigm and symbolism of ancient Israel.

Various white objects seen in these visions (robes, garments, a tree, and fruit) don't give rise to cross-cultural confusion. On the other hand, when these visions involve people described as white, our cultural instincts can improperly suggest natural skin color. For example, in Nephi's vision, both a tree and a virgin are depicted as white and beautiful (see 1 Nephi 11:8–9 and 13–15). The tree and virgin are clearly similar symbols in the vision. One brings forth white fruit that symbolizes the love of God and the other brings forth the pure Savior of the world who personifies the love of God. As soon as Nephi sees the pure virgin holding the Son of God, he understands that the pure tree represents the love of God (see 1 Nephi 11:16–22). We, like Nephi, can see the whiteness of the tree as a symbol of purity. However, our racial culture can suggest that the word *white*, when describing a pure, holy woman, must depict her natural skin color. The ancient cultural context, however, indicates that her whiteness, like that of the tree, is symbolic of purity. Natural skin color doesn't enhance the vision's message, but the message requires both a pure virgin and a pure tree. This symbolism doesn't require a perfect woman. Her purity indicates that she was faithful enough to serve as a precious instrument in the Lord's hands.

The same ancient context can help us defuse the cross-cultural confusion that tends to arise as we read later passages from the same vision. After Nephi saw the Savior appear to his people, he "looked and beheld three generations did pass away in righteousness, and their

garments were white, even like unto the Lamb of God. And the angel said unto me: *These are made white* in the blood of the Lamb because of their faith in him.” (1 Nephi 12:11). This symbolism doesn’t refer to natural skin color. Nor does it mean that these Nephites were flawless, but they were repentant and were made pure (white) through the Atonement.

After Nephi sees these generations of pure, faithful (and, in that sense, white) Nephites, he sees a wayward, afflicted (black) generation of Nephites, associated with “*filthy water*,” “*mists of darkness*,” and hardened hearts, who are slain by the Lamanites (see 1 Nephi 12:16–19). Much later, Nephi sees a specific group of Gentiles who were “white and exceeding fair and beautiful,”¹⁸⁵ *like unto my people before that they were slain*” (1 Nephi 13:15). The symbolic context suggests that these Gentiles were white (pure) “like unto” the specific Nephites depicted as white earlier in the vision, before the Nephites became wicked and were afflicted and slain. Thus, these Gentiles, like those earlier Nephites, were “*made white* in the blood of the Lamb *because of their faith in him*” (1 Nephi 12:11). Like those Nephites, these Gentiles also feared God and had faith in him. Neither group was perfect, but both groups were faithful and humble. Another passage that appears to describe these same Gentiles calls them “a few which are the humble followers of Christ” who nevertheless “are led that in many instances they do err because they are taught by the precepts of men” (2 Nephi 28:14). Nephi’s vision shows that “the power of the Lord was with [these Gentiles]” (1 Nephi 13:16), suggesting that they, though misled in some things, were good, humble, and faithful.

Jacob’s Words About People, Skin, and Curses, Which Reflect His Ancient Culture

After the death of Nephi, his brother Jacob taught some Nephites that they would be cursed (mournfully afflicted) with destruction if they didn’t repent of their wickedness and hypocrisy. Even though the Lamanites were cursed with a sore cursing (a mournful affliction represented by the marks on their skins), the moral filthiness of these Nephites was worse. They, unlike the Lamanites, were violating the law of chastity and they also hated the Lamanites. Jacob said:

185. The word *beautiful*, like the word *fair* (see footnotes 169 to 173 herein), can mean pleasant to look upon, but can also depict righteousness and moral goodness. See 1 Nephi 11:8, 15; 13:37; 2 Nephi 8:24; 14:2; Mosiah 12:21; 15:15–18; 18:30; 3 Nephi 20:36, 40; and Moroni 10:31.

But woe woe unto you that are not pure in heart, *that are filthy this day before God*, for except ye shall repent, the land is *cursed* for your sakes; and *the Lamanites*, which are *not filthy like unto you* — nevertheless *they are cursed with a sore cursing* — shall scourge you even unto *destruction*. And the time speedily cometh that *except ye repent*, they shall possess the land of your inheritance and the Lord God will lead away the righteous out from among you.

Behold, the Lamanites your brethren, *whom ye hate because of their filthiness and the cursing which hath come upon their skins*, are more righteous than you. For ... [they keep the law of chastity] ... [W]herefore because of this observance in keeping this commandment, *the Lord God will not destroy them but will be merciful unto them, and one day they shall become a blessed people*.

Behold, their husbands love their wives and their wives love their husbands, and their husbands and their wives love their children. And their unbelief and their hatred towards you is because of the iniquity of their fathers; wherefore how much better are you than they in the sight of your great Creator? O my brethren, *I fear that unless ye shall repent of your sins that their skins will be whiter than yours when ye shall be brought with them before the throne of God*.

Wherefore a commandment I give unto you, which is the word of God, that ye *revile no more against them because of the darkness of their skin*. Neither shall ye revile against them because of their *filthiness*, but ye shall remember *your own filthiness* and remember that their filthiness came because of their fathers. (Jacob 3:3–9)

Throughout this passage, the word *filthiness* refers to moral foulness or corruption¹⁸⁶ (as it always does throughout the Book of Mormon). Jacob mentions that the Lamanites “are cursed with a sore cursing” (Jacob 3:3). As noted earlier, the Lord, Lehi, and Nephi all use the term *sore curse* or *sore cursing* to refer to the curse of the Lord upon the Lamanites for rebellion against him (see 1 Nephi 2:23; 2 Nephi 1:22 and 5:21). This term points to the mark on their skins — the mark that was

186. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “filthiness, n.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/70284?redirectedFrom=filthiness#eid>. See sense 2. Includes Early Modern English examples.

a curse upon them for rebellion against God. Jacob then uses the word *the* (the definite article) to refer again to “*the* cursing which hath come upon their skins” (Jacob 3:5) (the same self-imposed mark). Jacob later uses the term “the darkness of their skin” (Jacob 3:9; see also Alma 3:6) to refer again to this mark. All these terms jointly apply to the Lamanite mark.

Jacob appears to use the words *skins* and *skin* literally, as is always done in the Bible. Likewise, his words *darkness* and *whiter* can logically be taken to follow biblical patterns, referring to literal aspects of the appearance of skin. These Nephites hated the Lamanites because of “the darkness of their skin” (Jacob 3:9; see also v. 5). While this could be read as metaphorical for their wickedness, a literal visible difference due to a physical mark on their skins could have played a role in this hatred. It could be that they reviled against them because they saw them as wicked — morally filthy and cursed by God as evidenced by the literal dark mark (cursing) on their skins. It appears that Jacob also uses the word *whiter* literally to depict the relative luster (brightness) of glorified, resurrected bodies. While this luster can be read as metaphorical, it can also be literal. Jacob is referring to the day of judgment — a day that follows the resurrection, in which the resurrected bodies of chaste Lamanites will have greater glory and their immortal skins will evidently shine brighter than the resurrected bodies of impenitent, unchaste Nephites (see 1 Corinthians 15:40–42, 3 Nephi 19:25, D&C 76:70–82, and Joseph Smith — History 1:31–32).

The Descendants of the More Part of the Lamanites

As explained earlier, in 3 Nephi 2:15–16, the word *white* refers to the clean, mark-free skin of descendants of Lamanite converts. They had been living the law of Moses for over 40 years but had been separated from the Nephites. By the time they united with the Nephites, the mark had gradually disappeared from among them as the initial converts passed away and unmarked young people came of age.

Nephi’s Prophecy About Children of Lehi in the Latter-days

Nephi prophesies that in the last days (our day), descendants of Lehi will accept the teachings of the Book of Mormon, rejoice, shed their spiritual blindness, and become *white*. “And then shall they rejoice, for they shall know that it is a blessing unto them from the hand of God. And their scales of darkness shall begin to fall from their eyes. And *many generations shall not pass away among them save they shall be a white*

and a delightful people” (2 Nephi 30:6). This ancient use of the word *white*, with no mention of the word *skin*, should *not* be read as a reference to physical appearance. Here, the words *white* and *darkness* are both used metaphorically. These descendants of Lehi who accept the Book of Mormon will be joyful, will begin to see the truth, and will become a morally pure, delightful people. This passage has nothing to do with skin. It’s a prophecy about a time of purity, light, and joy.

In the 1840 edition of the Book of Mormon (the third edition), the word *white* in this passage (2 Nephi 30:6) was changed to *pure*, almost certainly by Joseph Smith.¹⁸⁷ Skousen considers this change to be one of the few clarifications made by Joseph Smith to the meaning of words or phrases.¹⁸⁸ In 1981, the Church Scriptures Committee applied this change in the official LDS version of the Book of Mormon. According to Skousen, “The evidence will not support the claim that for the second and third editions Joseph received a grammatically corrected, revealed text from the Lord.” Rather, “the unevenness of Joseph’s editing” suggests that he was trying to do his best, given time limitations, to standardize grammar (and clarify a few phrases).¹⁸⁹ Joseph Smith didn’t give us any further information about this change, but, as we have seen, in this setting, when one applies the usage found in the English and Hebrew Old Testaments, the word *white* means pure. It also connotes joy, but this passage already mentions joy, so the word *pure* provides helpful clarification. There is no reason to doubt the accuracy of the original translation to the word *white*, but the change to the word *pure* can also be seen as accurate. It tends to clarify that, in this verse, the English word *white* has the specific symbolic meaning it had in similar settings in ancient Israel: “morally or spiritually pure.”¹⁹⁰

187. See Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, Part Two: 2 Nephi 11 — Mosiah 16, (Provo, UT: FARMS, Brigham Young University, 2014), 894, <https://interpreterfoundation.org/books/atv/p2/>.

188. See Royal Skousen, “Changes in The Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 11 (2014): 169–70, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/changes-in-the-book-of-mormon/>.

189. Royal Skousen and Stanford Carmack, “Editing Out the ‘Bad Grammar’ in the Book of Mormon,” (lecture, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, April 6, 2016), <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/grammatical-variation.pdf>.

190. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “white, adj. (and adv.) and n.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/228566?rskey=664CeI&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>. See sense II.7.a. Includes Early Modern English examples.

We've now reviewed all Book of Mormon passages that refer to the Lamanite mark. These passages appear to be written from the point of view of ancient Israel. When read in light of word usage from that ancient culture, they never suggest a change in natural skin color. We've also reviewed other Book of Mormon passages that use the word *black* or *white* to describe people (with no reference to skin). It appears that in these passages the word *black* symbolizes affliction and the word *white* either symbolizes purity or joy or reflects brightness or luster.

Other Factors That Point Away From a Change in Natural Skin Color

The scriptural record, properly understood, gives us no precedent anywhere in the history of the world for any change in natural skin color imposed by God. As explained above, the notion that the mark set upon Cain (see Genesis 4:15) was dark skin color imposed by God has no place in the Church and no foundation in the Hebrew words of Genesis 4:15. Nor does any other scripture, properly understood, indicate that God ever imposed a dark skin (or any other genetic characteristic) upon any of his children as a curse or sign of disfavor.¹⁹¹ Rather, God designed our bodies in a way that allows for a wide variety of natural physical characteristics, all of which are equally good in the sight of God (see Moses 2:27, 31).

The idea that the Lamanite mark was a dark skin color also opposes what David M. Belnap calls “the inclusive, anti-discrimination message of the Book of Mormon.”¹⁹² Belnap reviews and categorizes many Book of Mormon passages, concluding that “the inclusive messages in the

191. The word *blackness* in Moses 7:8 and the word *black* in Moses 7:22 should, like other ancient words revealed to the prophet Joseph Smith, be read in harmony with the culture of ancient Israel and not our own culture. Because there is little other textual context in these verses, people in our post-transatlantic-slave-trade culture may assume that they discuss skin pigmentation. Ancient writers in ancient cultures, however, probably didn't even consider this meaning. Neither passage mentions skin. In that ancient culture, the limited context may hint at mournful affliction. For another thoughtful view that doesn't rule out skin pigmentation, consider Adam Stokes, “The People of Canaan: A New Reading of Moses 7,” *Interpreter, A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*, 47, (2021): 159–80, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-people-of-canaan-a-new-reading-of-moses-7/>.

192. David M. Belnap, “The Inclusive, Anti-Discrimination Message of the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter, A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 42 (2021): 195–370, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-inclusive-anti-discrimination-message-of-the-book-of-mormon/>.

Book of Mormon are consistent with the position advocated by current Latter-day Saint leaders condemning all racism and disavowing racist hypotheses such as those derived from a few Book of Mormon verses.”¹⁹³ This paper has reviewed all verses from which such hypotheses have been derived. As these verses are read in light of ancient culture and the usage of the words *black*, *white*, and *mark* by ancient prophets in the Old Testament, it becomes evident that these verses were never meant to be read from the modern social construct of black and white races.

God simply would not support any scheme that relied on Nephites disfavoring their brethren because of natural skin color. It would be totally out of character for God to condone treating any of us preferentially because of any bodily feature over which we have no control. The Book of Mormon consistently teaches that only our righteousness, which we choose for ourselves, including our willingness to make and keep sacred covenants, affects our salvation (see 1 Nephi 17:35 and Jacob 2:21). Similarly, the Church’s General Handbook states, “Favor or disfavor with God depends on devotion to Him and His commandments, not on the color of a person’s skin or other attributes.”¹⁹⁴ This principle is emphasized in official statements of the Church¹⁹⁵ and has repeatedly been emphasized by Church leaders, including President Gordon B. Hinckley,¹⁹⁶ President Dallin H. Oaks,¹⁹⁷ and President Russell M. Nelson.¹⁹⁸

193. Ibid., 195.

194. General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 38.6.14, “Prejudice,” https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/general-handbook/38-church-policies-and-guidelines?lang=eng#title_number220.

195. Official Statement, released August 13, 2017, and update released August 15, 2017, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/church-statement-charlottesville-virginia>; and Official Statement, “Race and the Church: All Are Alike Unto God,” February 29, 2012, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/race-church>.

196. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Need for Greater Kindness,” *Ensign* 36, no. 5 (May 2006): 58, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2006/05/the-need-for-greater-kindness>.

197. Dallin H. Oaks, “President Oak’s Remarks at Worldwide Priesthood Celebration,” (discourse at the “Be One” celebration, Conference Center, Salt Lake City, June 1, 2018). Transcript at <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/president-oaks-remarks-worldwide-priesthood-celebration>.

198. News Release, “President Nelson Shares Social Post about Racism and Calls for Respect for Human Dignity,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-

It has been suggested that although God didn't miraculously intervene to alter Lamanite skin color, his cursing was fulfilled as their descendants intermarried with a darker skinned indigenous population.¹⁹⁹ This idea can't be correct. It assumes that a loving God would bless Nephites for irrational, uncharitable prejudice. It also runs counter to the Book of Mormon account. It disagrees with 2 Nephi 5:19–21 and Alma 3:6–7, both of which indicate that Nephi's adult brethren and their followers were the earliest Lamanite recipients of the mark.

The laws of genetic inheritance might establish a uniformly dark-skinned people through a multigenerational process that couldn't begin until the third Lamanite generation. Laman, Lemuel, and Lamanites of their (first) generation were monogamous (see Jacob 3:5–7) and married others from Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 16:7), so their children had no indigenous genes. If the children of those children (contemporaries of Enos) intermarried with indigenous people, the next generation (that of Jarom) would be the first with indigenous genes. Natural selection couldn't establish a uniform skin color for dozens of generations (hundreds of years) after that. However, the Lamanite mark reliably identified the Lamanites before Enos came of age (see Jacob 3:5). Moreover, genetics can't explain a mark that was set upon adult Nephite dissenters (see Alma 3:10) or one that disappeared among descendants of "the more part of the Lamanites" (Helaman 5:50) only 42 years after their fathers were converted (see 3 Nephi 2:12–16).

The Book of Mormon tells us that the Nephites allied with the people of Zarahemla. This indicates that Nephites were sometimes willing to unite with like-minded groups. Over time, there were repeated waves of dissention and conversion among the various groups. The continuous pattern of intercultural movement adds to the implausibility that natural skin color could ever have reliably distinguished Nephites from Lamanites.

Intentionally Vague References to the Lamanite Mark

While we can glean quite a bit of information from mark-related Book of Mormon passages, the wording in these passages isn't particularly descriptive. It's not surprising that these relatively vague words have been interpreted in several different ways. Perhaps Mormon shared more information on this topic in the part of his record that was lost by

day Saints, June 1, 2020, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/president-nelson-shares-social-post-encouraging-understanding-and-civility>.

199. See, for example, Ostler, "Yea, Yea, Nay Nay," 63–71.

Martin Harris. Or maybe the vagueness is intentional. Perhaps Nephite prophets intentionally avoided more clarity.

Nephi chose not to write about the worst aspects of the Jewish culture of his day. He says, “For I Nephi have not taught them many things concerning *the manner of the Jews*, for their works were *works of darkness* and their doings were *doings of abomination*” (2 Nephi 25:2). He doesn’t spell out the specifics, so he refers vaguely to “the manner of the Jews.” Moroni uses a similar term to refer to secret combinations. He says, “I Moroni do not write *the manner of* their oaths and combinations” (Ether 8:20). Elsewhere, Mormon explains, “I write a small abridgment, daring not to give a full account of the things which I have seen because of the commandment which I have received — and also that ye might not have too great sorrow because of the wickedness of this people” (Mormon 5:9).

Perhaps the term “the manner of the Lamanites” (Alma 3:4) was also intentionally vague.²⁰⁰ Maybe all of these “manner of” terms are used to buffer readers from wickedness. Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni, like Alma, may have been wary of providing a template from which readers might copy an improper practice (see Helaman 6:25).

A Persistent Mark that Signifies Rebellion

Gerrit Steenblik’s paper offers a mark based on the ancient Maya tradition of temporarily painting²⁰¹ the skin with charcoal-based body paint and stains.²⁰² This paint could have visibly distinguished Lamanites from Nephites from time to time, including while they were on the battlefield. Temporary paint could repeatedly be applied and removed “at will”²⁰³ with no applicable curse²⁰⁴ or need for true repentance.²⁰⁵ Nevertheless,

200. References to *the manner* of something are only vague when used without mentioning more details. On the other hand, the term *the manner of* sometimes introduces or alludes to more detailed information. See, for example, 1 Nephi 17:8–9, 18:2, 2 Nephi 5:14–16, Mosiah 25:18, Alma 13:3, 49:8, 51:27, Moroni 3:1, 4:1, 5:1, and 6:9.

201. The words *painted*, *painting*, and *paintedst* are found in the KJV (see Jeremiah 4:30, 22:14, Ezekiel 23:40, and 2 Kings 9:30), but not in the Book of Mormon. If the Lamanite mark were paint, it seems likely that the common words *paint* and *painted* might have been used rather than the ill-fitting *mark* and *marked*.

202. See Steenblik, “Demythicalizing,” 172.

203. Ibid., 182.

204. Ibid., 242n134.

205. Ibid., 215.

in Steenblik's model, some repentant Lamanites concurrently²⁰⁶ or eventually²⁰⁷ abandoned the utilitarian skin-painting tradition.

Four Book of Mormon passages (2 Nephi 5:20–24, Jacob 3:3–10, Alma 3:4–19, and 3 Nephi 2:15–16) describe the Lamanite mark (or its absence). Therefore, these four passages give us virtually all the information in the Book of Mormon about this mark. To be consistent with the text of the Book of Mormon, a theory about the nature of this mark should at least acknowledge all features of the mark confirmed in a majority of these sources. There appear to be at least four such features. These passages jointly indicate that the Lamanite mark was:

- a black or dark mark on the skin that
- visibly distinguished Lamanites from Nephites, and
- had a clear connection with the sore curse that came upon the Lamanites because of their rebellion against God, such that
- skin became marked due to rebellion against God and remained marked during rebellion, but repentance eventually caused the mark to cease.

Paint temporarily made skin dark, so it accommodates the first of these features. We now consider how it accommodates the others.

A Mark that Visibly Distinguished Lamanites From Nephites

These four passages describe this visible distinction as a “mark” by which Lamanites are “distinguished” from Nephites (Alma 3:7–8); a “mark” by which Lamanites are “separated” from Nephites (Alma 3:14); as a “skin of blackness” that keeps Lamanites from being “enticing” and makes them “loathsome” to Nephites (2 Nephi 5:21–22); and as “the *darkness* of [Lamanite] *skin*” (Jacob 3:9), which is reviled against by unrighteous Nephites.

Paint applied temporarily for certain events and easily removed soon afterwards distinguishes those who painted themselves from others, but only during those events. Such a temporary “mark” would be an unreliable candidate for a mark that “distinguished” or “separated” Lamanites from Nephites because the distinction would have been intermittent. Much of the time, there would have been no distinction. Furthermore, Steenblik suggests that righteous Nephites, like Lamanites,

206. Ibid.

207. Ibid., 204.

may have temporarily painted themselves from their earliest days.²⁰⁸ If so, it would be hard to argue that such paint distinguished Lamanites from Nephites at all.

Gorman states, “Body painting, tattooing and scarification have different functions related to their permanency: painting, because it can be rubbed off, is more suitable for expressing inner states or situations that hold for short periods of time, while tattooing/scarification is an indelible mark, acquired through pain, that represents permanent states of being.”²⁰⁹ An indelible, self-imposed mark representing a covenant-breaking tradition would more likely serve as a means of long-term group identification²¹⁰ for Lamanites and as a persistent warning to righteous, covenant-keeping Nephites against such traditions.

A Mark and Curse That Represented Rebellion Against God

In these four passages, the words *mark* and *curse* are often used together and conceptually linked with transgression, rebellion, hardened hearts, and iniquity. The passages mention a “*mark ... which was a curse* upon [Lamanites] *because of their transgression*” (Alma 3:6); a “*mark*” that was “set upon” anyone who “*suffered himself to be led away by the Lamanites*” (Alma 3:9–10); Amlicites who “had come out in *open rebellion against God*” and marked themselves because “it was expedient that *the curse* should fall upon them” (Alma 3:18); a “*mark*” set by God upon those who joined the cursed Lamanites “that they *may be cursed* also” (Alma 3:14–16); a “*skin of blackness*” that came upon Lamanites “*because of their iniquity*. ... For behold, they had *hardened their hearts* against him” (2 Nephi 5:21); “*the cursing* which hath come upon [the Lamanites’] skins” (Jacob 3:5); and repentant Lamanites whose “*curse* was taken from them, and their skin became white” (3 Nephi 2:15). Every reference to the Lamanite *mark* in these passages is near a corresponding use of the word *curse* or *cursing*. This consistency across all of these sources, together with the context in which these words appear, tends to confirm a vital relationship between the words *mark* and *curse*.

Nevertheless, Steenblik holds that the mark was “unequivocally decoupled”²¹¹ from any curse. He suggests that, in some passages, improper, uninspired punctuation artificially links the words *curse* and *mark*, so he offers punctuation that he believes avoids any such link. He

208. Ibid., 218–19.

209. Gorman, “Body Modification,” 370, see also 71.

210. Ibid., 33.

211. Steenblik, “Demythicizing,” 242n134.

also proposes that “in a few instances” the wording in these passages represents imperfections in the Book of Mormon. Then he suggests that in Jacob 3:5, the word *cursings* should replace the word *cursing* and, with this change, he opines that this verse doesn’t discuss a cursing from God, but rather multiple cursings uttered by Lamanites.

Punctuation and Context

Steenblik feels that uninspired punctuation muddles the distinct concepts of a mark and a curse.²¹² He suggests that the words *mark* and *curse*, when used in consecutive independent clauses and separated by proper punctuation, become conceptually disconnected.²¹³ This rationale is questionable. In the Book of Mormon, the Bible, and other literature, consecutive independent clauses often repeat or refine closely related thoughts.²¹⁴ The grammatical structure of these clauses is essentially the same whether they are separated by a period, a comma, or a semicolon. While other punctuation choices and editorial changes of punctuation in the Book of Mormon can lead to shifts in meaning,²¹⁵ a change from one delimiter to another between independent clauses rarely, if ever, significantly alters meaning.

In each of the passages to which Steenblik applies this rationale, 2 Nephi 5:21, Alma 3:14, 3 Nephi 2:15, and Alma 3:7, the context, especially the greater context that considers the other passages, clearly suggests an intended association between the Lamanite mark and a curse. This affiliation flows quite naturally from the context regardless of which delimiters are used.

Possible Imperfections

Steenblik suggests that a few passages in which the Lamanite mark itself is called a curse may be imperfections in the Book of Mormon.²¹⁶ He only cites Alma 3:6 as a potential imperfection, but his reference to “a few” problematic passages may also implicate Jacob 3:5 and 2 Nephi 5:21,

212. Ibid., 193; 251n184; 257n226.

213. Ibid., 242n134.

214. See, for example, 1 Nephi 17:47; 2 Nephi 4:20 and 10:7–8.

215. For example, see Scott L. Howell et al., “The Diachronic Usage of Exclamation Marks across the Major Book of Mormon Editions,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 53 (2022): 265–86, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-diachronic-usage-of-exclamation-marks-across-the-major-book-of-mormon-editions/>.

216. See Steenblik, “Demythicizing,” 242n134.

each of which can be read to refer to the mark (or skin of blackness) as a curse upon the Lamanites or upon their skins.

In Alma 3:6, Mormon says, “The skins of the Lamanites were dark, according to the mark which was set upon their fathers, *which was a curse upon them* because of their transgression.” In Jacob 3:5, Jacob chastises wicked Nephites who hate Lamanites “because of their filthiness and *the cursing which hath come upon their skins*.” Nephi’s words in 2 Nephi 5:21 also appear to equate *the cursing* with *a skin of blackness*. In a nutshell, he says, “[The Lord] *had caused the cursing to come upon them....* For ... they had hardened their hearts against him... Wherefore ... *the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them*” (2 Nephi 5:21).

These passages were written by each of the three Book of Mormon prophets who discuss the Lamanite mark. It’s unlikely that each of them independently added a problematic passage whose meaning is nevertheless confirmed by the other two. These passages honor correct principles. In each, the word *curse* or *cursing* identifies the mark as a cursed, forbidden thing, such as a profane tattoo intentionally placed on the skin in rebellion against God.

A Cursing From God

Steenblik also suggests that Jacob’s words in Jacob 3:5 have nothing to do with a curse from God but were written to describe curses uttered by Lamanites as they painted themselves. In this verse, Jacob tells some wicked Nephites that they are less righteous than “the Lamanites your brethren, whom ye hate because of *their filthiness and the cursing which hath come upon their skins*.” Steenblik notes that, in the printer’s manuscript, this passage contains the plural word *cursings*.²¹⁷ He doesn’t consider Royal Skousen’s detailed analysis indicating that “the plural *cursings* in Jacob 3:5 is a scribal error for *cursing*.”²¹⁸ Steenblik adds a suggestion that the covenant of Captain Moroni and his men to keep the commandments of God or be destroyed (see Alma 46:21–23) reflects a Nephite “self-cursing tradition.”²¹⁹ He holds that these ideas support an inference that “when Lamanites applied body paint, they may have simultaneously cursed their enemies, and probably even themselves.”²²⁰

Steenblik’s inference, however, requires additional premises. It also requires that (A) the Nephites knew of these Lamanite utterances; that

217. Ibid., 207.

218. Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants*, 978.

219. Steenblik, “Demythicizing,” 207.

220. Ibid., 208.

(B) these uttered words somehow “came upon” the Lamanite skins; and that (C) the Nephite hatred condemned by Jacob was kindled by these specific uttered words. This string of inferences may be plausible, but the more direct reading reviewed earlier herein seems more so.

All mark-related passages jointly and consistently indicate that the Lamanite mark was closely affiliated with God’s curse upon the Lamanites for rebellion. None of the explanations offered by Steenblik convincingly depicts a Lamanite mark and curse that were “unequivocally decoupled.”

A Mark That Continued During Rebellion, but Ended After Repentance

The Lamanite mark began after the Lamanites rebelled against God and his laws. “[The Lamanites] had *hardened their hearts against [the Lord]*, ... Wherefore ... the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them” (2 Nephi 5:21). “The skins of the Lamanites were dark, according to the mark which was set upon their fathers, which was a curse upon them *because of their transgression*” (Alma 3:6). Others who adopted Lamanite practices were also marked: “Whomsoever *suffered himself to be led away by the Lamanites* were called under that head, and there was a mark set upon him” (Alma 3:10).

The practice of marking the skin continued during rebellion but ended with repentance. The mark remained on repentant persons, but they chose not to mark their children. “The Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them. And thus saith the Lord God: I will cause that they shall be loathsome unto thy people *save they shall repent of their iniquities*” (2 Nephi 5:21–22). “I [the Lord] will set a mark upon them, that they and their seed may be separated from thee and thy seed from this time *henceforth and forever except they repent of their wickedness*” (Alma 3:14). Later, some 42 years after a large group of Lamanites repented, when Nephites encountered their descendants, they learned that as time had passed, “their curse was taken from them, and *their skin became white* like unto the Nephites.” (3 Nephi 2:15).

Temporary paint, on the other hand, had nothing to do with a curse from God. Skin painting was a utilitarian practice available to anyone, including righteous Nephites,²²¹ for whom it might provide a benefit. It needn’t have begun with the rebellion that gave rise to any curse, needn’t have occurred only during rebellion, and needn’t have ended after repentance ended any curse.

221. Ibid., 218–19

The Lamanite mark described in these passages was a black (dark) mark on the skin that visibly distinguished Lamanites, who rebelled against God and were cursed by him, from Nephites, who kept the law of Moses. This description may reflect a Lamanite tradition of cutting a permanent dark mark into the skin in defiance of the law of Moses — a tradition that began with the rebellion of Laman and Lemuel and ended with the repentance of any individual Lamanite.

The Need for Archaeological Evidence

This paper holds that the Lamanite mark visibly distinguished Lamanites from Nephites at all times. Steenblik's paper, on the other hand, holds that the Lamanite mark visibly distinguished Lamanites from Nephites from time to time, including on the battlefield. These two approaches rely very differently on the archaeological record. This paper relies on the archaeological record only to confirm the presence of profane tattoos among ancient Americans during the Nephite-Lamanite period. The historicity of such tattoos confirms the plausibility of my thesis, because the tattoos would necessarily have distinguished Lamanites from Nephites at all times. All further required evidence is inherent in the Book of Mormon account. As explained above, all the words in the Book of Mormon can be read to support the view (1) that the Lamanite and Amlicite marks were profane tattoos prohibited by the law of Moses, and (2) that covenant-keeping Nephites lived that law and therefore would not have adopted either mark. As long as Nephites remained a peculiar people who lived the law of Moses, their appearance differed from all marked (tattooed) people. The archaeological record confirms the historicity of profane tattoos and therefore correlates seamlessly with this view.

Steenblik's candidate for the mark — temporary body paint — doesn't receive the same level of direct support from the Book of Mormon account, so his paper must rely more heavily on the archaeological record. The Book of Mormon account offers no religious reason for Nephites to avoid using temporary body paint or to use it differently from other societies.²²² Since the Book of Mormon suggests no religious prohibition that might keep Nephites from using temporary paint, Steenblik must rely on the archaeological record for evidence that temporary paint, like these marks in the Book of Mormon account, *distinguished members of one society from another*. Such archaeological evidence, however, is

222. Ibid., 218–19, 181, and 186.

missing. The available evidence never depicts societal identification based on temporary body paint. This, the only mark-based differentiation found in the Book of Mormon, isn't confirmed by the archaeological record.

Steenblik provides plenty of conjecture for this essential point,²²³ but he doesn't provide the "hard evidence"²²⁴ he needs. He acknowledges that his hypothesis requires "'spade and trowel' archaeology and expert knowledge of Mesoamerican circumstances *that correlate with Book of Mormon events.*"²²⁵ However, the "codices, murals, and polychrome earthenware vases and plates"²²⁶ that he presents never depict body paint used to distinguish *any society from its neighbors*. One might suggest that the Book of Mormon itself provides the required evidence because it never describes Nephites as marked, even on the battlefield. This circular reasoning, however, simply begs the key question: Were Lamanites and Amlicites marked with a permanent or a temporary mark?

The text of the Book of Mormon inherently supports a permanent mark — righteous Nephites obeyed the law of Moses and therefore weren't marked. Temporary body paint only fits with the Book of Mormon account if something in the archaeological record confirms that such paint likewise distinguished whole armies of allies from their adversaries. But the use of temporary paint for this purpose is problematic. Reason suggests the folly of relying, in life and death situations, on a difference that can be changed "at will" by the enemy. The archaeological record doesn't depict such a distinction between neighboring societies and therefore the evidence given for temporary body paint doesn't correlate with actual Book of Mormon events.

The limited archaeological evidence presented in this paper is sufficient to support the claim that sacrilegious tattoos distinguished Lamanites and Amlicites from righteous Nephites at all times. The more extensive archaeological evidence presented in Steenblik's paper fails to indicate that temporary body paint served to consistently distinguish adversaries at all, even on the battlefield.

Conclusion

The limited language describing the Lamanite mark makes it hard to conclusively prove any interpretation of this mark. The view presented

223. Ibid., 175–76, 181–83, 190, Appendix 214–19.

224. Ibid., 171–72.

225. Ibid., 172, emphasis added.

226. Ibid.

herein is more plausible than other proffered interpretations. It's a comprehensive interpretation that can soundly be applied to all Book of Mormon passages. It reflects the archaeological record, the ancient roots of the language on the gold plates, and the primarily Early Modern English vocabulary and syntax of the Book of Mormon's revealed text. Under this view, the Lord foresaw that Laman and his followers would rebel against his law and adopt apostate traditions, including marking their skin in violation of the law of Moses. He warned the Nephites not to follow these traditions. The self-imposed Lamanite mark was a curse upon the Lamanites and helped establish a clear division between unrighteous Lamanites, with their improper traditions, and righteous Nephites who kept the law of Moses. This mark made it unenticing for righteous Nephites to unite with Lamanites and adopt their traditions. Sadly, some Nephites dissented and became marked as Lamanites. Happily, some Lamanites repented and were called Nephites. The skins of their righteous descendants were unmarked, just like those of other Nephites.

Addendum: Other Theories About the Lamanite Mark

The body of this paper explains that the Lamanite mark was a permanent, self-imposed mark — an ancient tattoo — cut into the skin in defiance of the law of Moses (see Leviticus 19:28). This addendum compares the relevant words in the Book of Mormon with several other suggested interpretations of the Lamanite mark, all of which agree that the Lamanite mark had nothing to do with natural skin color, but each of which interprets this mark differently.

Not a Metaphor for Nephite Bias against Lamanites as Outsiders

As our modern culture rejected some of its prejudice based on natural skin color, John L. Sorenson and Brant A. Gardner recognized the unlikelihood that bias based on skin hue would have existed in the ancient Nephite culture.²²⁷ Appropriately, they attempted to explain terms describing the Lamanite mark in the context of ancient cultures.

227. See John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 90–91; Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007): 2:108ff. Excerpt found at FairLatter-daySaints.org, entitled “What Does the Book of Mormon Mean by ‘Skin of Blackness’?”, <https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/archive/publications/what-does-the-book-of-mormon-mean-by-skin-of-blackness>.

Unfortunately, they focused on other prejudices more common to ancient cultures, concluding that the phrases *skin of blackness* and *the darkness of their skins* are pejorative terms that mention skin only metaphorically to reflect a Nephite cultural prejudice against Lamanites — not based on differences present on the skin, but because Lamanites were cultural outsiders.

The text of the Book of Mormon doesn't appear to support this conclusion. As explained in the body of this paper, David M. Belnap's research finds that the themes of the Book of Mormon are overwhelmingly inclusive in nature despite the fact that inclusive messages were uncommon in Joseph Smith's day.²²⁸ Although the Book of Mormon suggests that some Nephites disparaged marked Lamanites (see for example Jacob 3:5), terms such as *skin of blackness* and *the darkness of their skins* were written by prophets of God. They were not written to express or condone such disrespect (see Jacob 3:9), but rather to describe a visible mark on the skin adopted by rebellious Lamanites in defiance of the law of Moses. This mark served God's purposes by making the Lamanites and their unrighteous way of life unenticing to righteous Nephites (see 2 Nephi 5:21), thus helping God "preserve his people" (Alma 3:8).

To attribute the preservation of the Nephites to their own prejudices is to paint an unflattering picture not only of the Nephite prophets who authored these phrases, but also of God himself. God would never rely on pride-based Nephite prejudice to preserve a supposedly righteous Nephite people. God and Book of Mormon prophets consistently condemn prejudice (see, for example, 1 Nephi 17:35, Jacob 2:21, and Moroni 8:12, 18).

Although God never invites his children to ostracize others just because they don't share the same culture, we are not to support "teachings, practices, or doctrine contrary to those of [the Church]"²²⁹ Even so, he condemns hatred, even against known apostates. Accordingly, Jacob reproved wicked Nephites who showed disdain towards marked Lamanites (see Jacob 3:5), saying, "Wherefore a commandment I give unto you, which is the word of God, that ye revile no more against [the Lamanites] because of the darkness of their skin" (Jacob 3:9). While

228. Belnap, "The Inclusive, Anti-Discrimination Message," 263.

229. See temple recommend question 7, R. Scott Taylor, "President Nelson Announces Revised Temple Recommend Questions," *Church News*, October 6, 2019, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/president-nelson-announces-revised-temple-recommend-questions>.

some proud Nephites succumbed to such arrogance, righteous Nephites resisted this temptation and shared kindness and gospel truths with Lamanites when possible (see for example, Enos 1:20, Alma 17 to 27, and Helaman 5).

The Lord tells Nephi, “I will curse [the Lamanites] even with a sore curse, and *they shall have no power over thy seed* except [thy seed] shall rebel against me also” (1 Nephi 2:23). These words suggest that one aspect of the covenantal curse was that cursed Lamanites would have no power over righteous Nephites.

The passages that discuss the source of Nephite power over the Lamanites teach that faithful, prayerful Nephites received God’s power to win difficult battles against unfaithful, unrighteous Lamanites. (See, for example, Jarom 1:5–12 and Mosiah 2:31.) However, Nephites could also become powerless against enemies through disobedience. (See, for example, Jacob 3:3–4 and Mosiah 1:13.) To the degree that Nephites became prejudiced against marked Lamanites, God withdrew his power from the Nephites (see Jacob 3:3–10). God forbids such prejudices (see Jacob 3:9–11 and Moroni 7:18), as explained by President Dallin H. Oaks:

Throughout history, many groups of God’s children are or have been persecuted or disadvantaged by prejudices, such as those based on ethnicity or culture or nationality or education or economic circumstances. As servants of God who have the knowledge and responsibilities of His great plan of salvation, we should hasten to prepare our attitudes and our actions — institutionally and personally — to abandon all personal prejudices. As President Russell M. Nelson said following our recent meeting with the national officers of the NAACP: “Together we invite all people, organizations, and government[s] to work with greater civility, eliminating prejudice of all kinds.”²³⁰

The righteousness of God’s role (and that of righteous Nephites) with respect to the Lamanite mark becomes clear as we dissociate it from prejudice against outsiders. Both Sorensen and Gardner acknowledge that there may have been some visible aspect to the Lamanite mark. The body of this paper asserts that this mark was visible. It was a self-imposed, permanent mark on the skin adopted in violation of the law of Moses (see Leviticus 19:28). Because the mark was direct evidence of the bearer’s apostasy, those bearing the mark would “not be enticing” (2 Nephi 5:21)

230. Oaks, “President Oak’s Remarks at Worldwide Priesthood Celebration.”

to righteous Nephites. God knew that the rebellious Lamanites would establish a long-term tradition of bearing this apostate mark and that the mark would distinguish them from righteous Nephites “that thereby the Lord God might preserve his people, that they might not mix and believe in incorrect traditions, which would prove their destruction” (see Alma 3:8).

In a way, righteous Nephites did treat rebellious Lamanites as cultural outsiders. When Lamanites rebelled against God and violated the law of Moses, they left the covenant God had made with the house of Israel. Righteous Nephites acknowledged the Lamanite rebellion against God’s laws as apostasy and chose not to join with them in their incorrect traditions.

Gardner recognizes that Book of Mormon passages use the words *black* and *white* both literally and symbolically as they are used in the Bible, in harmony with the culture of ancient Israel. The body of this paper explains this usage in detail.

Not a Dark Animal Skin Worn as Clothing

Ethan Sproat, in an essay entitled “Skins as Garments in the Book of Mormon,” also challenges the view that the Lamanite mark was genetic in nature.²³¹ He suggests that “in the question of the various-colored skins in the Book of Mormon narrative, the best arbiters of meaning are the Book of Mormon itself and its closest literary analog, the KJV.”²³² His suggestion is that the terms describing the Lamanite mark don’t describe a mark on the Lamanites’ own native skin, but refer instead to dark animal skins worn by them as clothing.

Although Sproat considers a skin used as clothing to be the Lamanite *mark*, the Oxford English Dictionary doesn’t contain any Early Modern English definition of the word *mark* that reflects this usage. The noun *mark* is never used anywhere in the Bible to refer to an animal skin or any other article of clothing. Similarly, the verb *to mark* is never used in the Bible to describe wearing any article of clothing.

Sproat’s analysis is based on two assertions. First, he asserts that the word *skin* (or *skins*) is ambiguous in passages that use it with a possessive reference (a pronoun or prepositional phrase, such as “their skins” or “the skins of the Lamanites”). He also asserts that in the term “a skin of

231. Ethan Sproat, “Skins as Garments in the Book of Mormon: A Textual Exegesis,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24, no. 1 (2015): 138–65, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol24/iss1/7/>.

232. *Ibid.*, 148.

blackness” (2 Nephi 5:21), the word *a* (the indefinite article) signifies an animal skin rather than the native skin. Unfortunately, each assertion opposes basic rules of English usage.

In English usage, a possessive reference to the skin of a person or group (without further context) always refers unambiguously to the native skin. Even in descriptions of the skins of things other than people, such as potatoes, such a possessive reference always refers unambiguously to the natural or original outer covering of the potato or other thing. Additional contextual language can alter meaning, but, absent such additional language, the meaning is unambiguous. This is the case in English texts dating back at least to the 1500s.

Sproat doesn’t cite a single example in any text to support his suggestion that a possessive reference used with the word *skin* is an ambiguous construct that doesn’t consistently refer to native skin. I have reviewed applicable phrases across many English texts, including the entire Old Testament, all the online magazines of the Church,²³³ and thousands of instances found on the Corpus of Contemporary American English.²³⁴ This review confirms that this construct always refers to native skin (usually literally, but sometimes metaphorically). No exception was found. There is no ambiguity. This meaning applies consistently in English texts across the centuries. Sproat’s assertion of ambiguity simply doesn’t accord with this consistent meaning.

In fact, Sproat doesn’t apply his suggestion of ambiguity consistently even within the Book of Mormon. He sees ambiguity in Jacob 3:5 (*their skins*), 8 (*their skins*), and 9 (*their skins*); 3 Nephi 2:15 (*their skin*); and Alma 3:6 (*the skins of the Lamanites*) but rules out ambiguity in similar terms in 1 Nephi 17:11 (*the skins of beasts*); Mosiah 17:13 (*his skin*); Alma 20:29 (*their skins*); or 44:18 (*their naked skins*).

The true rule applies wherever the word *skin* is used with only a possessive reference describing the native skin. Accordingly, all Old Testament passages that use the word *skin* (or *skins*) with only a

233. See, for example, all such possessive references in the magazines of the Church. One example is Carol A. Snyder, “Can You Hear the Wind?” *Friend* 19, no. 6 (June 1989), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/friend/1989/06/can-you-hear-the-wind>, where a deerskin on which a boy plans to paint a picture is called “his skin canvas” (the word *canvas* adds context) and where the earth talks to a boy through “his skin,” clearly his own skin, as he walks — even though he is wearing moccasins (made of animal skins).

234. Website link to look up words at <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/>.

possessive reference refer to the native skin.²³⁵ The few Old Testament passages that refer to animal skins worn as clothing don't include such a possessive reference but always include other words (such as *clothed*, *shod*, *put upon* or *about their loins*) identifying the animal skins' external (clothing) nature (see Genesis 3:21; 27:16; Ezekiel 16:10; and 2 Kings 1:8).

It's reasonable to assume that the Book of Mormon follows this universal, long-standing rule. In the Book of Mormon, all passages that use the word *skin* (or *skins*) with only a possessive reference (see 1 Nephi 17:11, Jacob 3:5, 8–9, Mosiah 17:13, Alma 3:6, 20:29 and 44:18, and 3 Nephi 2:15) consistently refer to the native skin. When something else, such as an animal skin used as clothing, is meant, other words are always added to clearly identify that something else.

Sproat's analysis resists this rule. He suggests ambiguity in a passage in which a possessive reference unambiguously describes native skin, "*the skins of the Lamanites*" (Alma 3:6). He asserts that necessary additional context is provided by a nearby reference to "*a skin which was girded about their loins*" (Alma 3:5). His actual suggestion is that these clothing-related words needn't even be nearby to change the meaning of a possessive term. In his view, this one instance of clothing-related words in Alma 3:5 not only lends context to the term *the skins of the Lamanites* in the next verse, but somehow also lends it to the three instances of the term *their skins* in Jacob 3:5–9 (written centuries earlier in a different book by a different author) and to the instance of the term *their skin* in 3 Nephi 2:15 (written later), which, he suggests, are all ambiguous without the extra context.

The unambiguous meaning supplied by a possessive term, however, isn't altered by distant text. For example, in Alma 43:20, warriors are described as "naked save it were *a skin which was girded about their loins*." Later in the account, a possessive reference tells us that "*their naked skins*" (Alma 44:18) — clearly their own skins — were exposed to Nephite weapons. (Their similarly uncovered [naked] animal skin loincloths were also exposed to these weapons, but the possessive reference *their naked skins*, like all similar possessive references, refers unambiguously to native skin and not to animal skins worn as clothing.)

Similarly, the unambiguous possessive term *the skins of the Lamanites* (Alma 3:6) refers to the Lamanites' own skins despite a contextually unrelated, but nearby, reference (in Alma 3:5) to an animal

235. See Genesis 27:16; Exodus 22:27; 29:14; 34:29–30, 35; 35:23; Leviticus 4:11; 7:8; 16:27; Numbers 19:5; Job 7:5; 16:15; 18:13; 19:20, 26; 30:30; 41:7; Psalm 102:5; Jeremiah 13:23; Lamentations 3:4; 4:8; 5:10; and Micah 3:2–3.

skin used by Lamanite warriors as clothing. Additional context about the Amlicite and Lamanite marks reinforces the fact that the Lamanite mark was on their own skin. Alma 3:4–19 discusses these two similar color-based marks — each of which brings a curse upon the bearer. The Amlicite mark is clearly not an article of clothing, but a mark placed on the forehead — the skin. To acquire this mark on the skin, the Amlicites “marked *themselves* ... after the manner of the Lamanites” (Alma 3:4). The phrase *after the manner of the Lamanites* tells us these two groups of people marked *themselves* in the same manner. It indicates that the Lamanites, like the Amlicites, marked *themselves* — they marked their own skins. Thus, their skins “were dark, *according to the mark*” (Alma 3:6) that was set “upon *them*” (Alma 3:14). A *mark*, not an *article of clothing*, was set upon *them*. In other words, the Amlicites, like the Lamanites, “*also had a mark set upon them*” (Alma 3:13). This clear context is discussed further in the body of this paper. It corroborates the fact that the possessive term *the skins of the Lamanites*, like every similar possessive term in the scriptures (and, to my knowledge, in all other English texts), refers to the native skin and not to a skin worn as clothing.

Sproat’s second assertion deals with a passage that doesn’t contain a possessive term. That passage says that the Lord caused “a skin of blackness” (2 Nephi 5:21) to come upon Laman and his followers. Sproat also sees this phrase as a reference to an animal skin. He notes that the word *a* (the indefinite article) in this phrase aligns it with three other passages, all of which contain the indefinite article and all of which describe animal skins worn as clothing (see Enos 1:20; Alma 43:20; and 3 Nephi 4:7). He asserts that in these three other passages the indefinite article causes the word *skin* to refer to an animal skin.

However, using the indefinite article with the noun *skin* merely indicates that this noun is a count noun (not a mass noun). Such use doesn’t, on its own, create a reference to an animal skin. The noun *skin* is used as a count noun in two specific contexts. The first context is found in 2 Nephi 5:21. It identifies *a specific type of skin* (such as *a delicate skin*, *a sunburned skin*, or *a blackened skin* — *a skin of blackness*). The second context applies in the other three passages, each of which identifies a *skin of an individual animal*.²³⁶ The source of this context in these passages isn’t the indefinite article — it’s the phrase *about their*

236. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “skin, n.,” <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/180922?rskey=uaRj4f&result=1#eid>. See sense II.8.a. Includes Early Modern English examples.

loins. This phrase clearly provides such context in each passage (see Enos 1:20; Alma 43:20; and 3 Nephi 4:7). This phrase, however, isn't present to provide this context in 2 Nephi 5:21. Without it, the indefinite article merely identifies a specific (blackened) type of native skin. Thus, the *skin of blackness*, like all darkened skin described in other Book of Mormon passages, is unambiguously native skin.

Sproat's unique view of the Lamanite mark doesn't bear scrutiny. The contexts for the terms *a skin of blackness* and *the skins of the Lamanites were dark* and all related terms unambiguously identify the Lamanites' own native skins and not skins of animals worn as clothing.

Not Merely an Idiom for Unrighteousness

In his presentation on blacks in the scriptures,²³⁷ Marvin Perkins makes several important points. He teaches that the Lamanite mark isn't natural skin color. He also teaches the meaning of the word *curse* and applies the doctrine of repentance to all curses mentioned in the Book of Mormon. He recognizes that the Lamanite and Amlicite marks mentioned in Alma 3:4–5 are tattoos. He also explains that, in the Old Testament, the words *black* and *white* are often used idiomatically — with the ancient symbolism discussed in the body of this paper.

However, in the Old Testament, each time the words *black* or *white* are used with the word *skin* (or with context that clearly refers to skin), the reference is to the skin itself. Each such Old Testament passage describes actual skin that is unusually darker or lighter than its natural hue. In some cases, this literal meaning is supplemented by the ancient symbolism of the words *black* and *white*, but this symbolism always leaves the literal meaning of the word *skin* intact. Thus, while the words *black* and *white* often have symbolic meaning in the Old Testament, the word *skin* always refers to actual skin. Because Perkins doesn't recognize this distinction, he doesn't acknowledge the literal meaning of the word *skin* in similar Book of Mormon passages.

In the body of this paper, I assert that these passages refer to the presence or absence of an actual permanent, self-imposed mark — an ancient tattoo — placed on the skin in defiance of the law of Moses (see Leviticus 19:28). While this view of these passages differs from Perkins, it supports his conclusion that the Lamanite mark had nothing to do with natural skin color.

237. Perkins, "Blacks in the Scriptures."

David M. Belnap's paper, "The Inclusive, Anti-Discrimination Message of the Book of Mormon" holds that "the inclusive messages in the Book of Mormon ... are consistent with the view that skin color in the Book of Mormon is not literal but is metaphorical."²³⁸ His conclusion might be reworded to say that the Book of Mormon's inclusive messages are consistent with the view that passages describing skin as black, dark, or white don't describe natural skin color. In support of his conclusion, Belnap cites with approval Marvin Perkins, Brant A. Gardner, Hugh Nibley, Ethan Sproat, and others. Some of the specific views of these authorities are quite inconsistent with each other. Sproat, in particular, suggests a literal, physical mark (dark clothing), rather than a metaphorical mark. Nevertheless, Belnap treats Sproat's views, like those of the other authorities, as metaphorical because they have nothing to do with human skin pigmentation.

Like the various authorities cited by Belnap, the body of this paper also supports a non-racial mark. It asserts that each Book of Mormon passage that uses the word *black*, *dark*, or *white* together with the word *skin* refers to the presence or absence of an actual, permanent, self-imposed mark — an ancient tattoo — placed on the skin in defiance of the law of Moses (see Leviticus 19:28). While this interpretation of these passages, like that of Sproat, is not metaphorical, it aligns with Belnap's thesis that the Lamanite mark had nothing to do with race.

In summary, none of the explanations of the Lamanite mark reviewed in this addendum adequately accounts for the words in the Book of Mormon that refer to this mark and a curse or cursing. These words are sufficiently vague that it may not be possible to prove that a given explanation is correct. Nevertheless, the view set forth in the body of this paper harmonizes better with all applicable provisions than any other suggested explanation.

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238. See Belnap, "The Inclusive, Anti-Discrimination Message," 195.

A NEW AND MOST WELCOME RESOURCE FOR BOOK OF ABRAHAM STUDIES

Quinten Barney

Review of Stephen O. Smoot, John Gee, Kerry Muhlestein, and John S. Thompson, “A Guide to the Book of Abraham,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2022). 302 pages.

Abstract: *The new and special issue of BYU Studies containing “A Guide to the Book of Abraham” provides a welcome and easy-to-read approach to the historicity and issues surrounding the Book of Abraham in a way that will engage those beginning their studies in the Book of Abraham just as equally as those who have already become familiar with the subject.*

Anyone who knows me well knows of my interest and deep love for the Book of Abraham and Egypt in general. If the books on my bookshelf don’t give it away, surely the life-sized sarcophagus, Rosetta Stone, or framed Facsimile replicas in my office at work will. Thus, when I hear of a new article, book, or podcast coming out dealing with the Book of Abraham, I’m usually one of the first to jump on it. For that reason, I was excited to read the most recent issue of *BYU Studies Quarterly*, which has been titled “A Guide to the Book of Abraham.”¹ Coming in at a solid 300 pages, this special issue is the result of the combined efforts of authors Stephen O. Smoot, Kerry Muhlestein, John Gee, and John Thompson. There are numerous reasons why I believe *A Guide to the Book of Abraham* deserves a place on every Latter-day Saint’s bookshelf, which I will go into below, but before I suggest the value this volume holds, let me first provide a brief overview of its contents.

1. Stephen O. Smoot, John Gee, Kerry Muhlestein, and John S. Thompson, “A Guide to the Book of Abraham,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (2022), <https://byustudies.byu.edu/journal/61-4/>.

What's in the Volume?

A Guide to the Book of Abraham is divided into three main sections, with a fair number of illustrations throughout. The first of these sections, “The Coming Forth of the Book of Abraham” happens to be the shortest of the three sections, although its five essays are comparatively lengthier than those found in the other two sections. As the section’s title suggests, these five chapters deal primarily with the historical context in which the Book of Abraham was produced. More specifically, it seeks to help answer questions relating to the papyri Joseph Smith possessed, how he translated them, the relevance of the “Kirtland Egyptian Papers,” and the relationship between the papyri and the Book of Abraham. A final chapter in this section focuses on the influence (or, rather, lack thereof) of the Book of Abraham on the controversial priesthood ban that was in place in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints until 1978.

The next section, “The Book of Abraham in the Ancient World,” contains over thirty chapters that present some of the evidence for the Book of Abraham being an authentic text from antiquity. Much of this evidence comes from the examination of the actual text of the Book of Abraham, including evidence of Egyptianisms, chiasmus, ancient etymology, and more. While the authors later acknowledge that these pieces of evidence are not able to “prove” the truthfulness of the Book of Abraham, the thirty-plus essays in this section nevertheless leave readers with no excuse to not take the Book of Abraham’s claim of historical authenticity seriously.

Lastly, the facsimiles of the Book of Abraham are treated in a series of thirteen essays in the final section, including an important opening chapter that presents and evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of various methodological approaches that have been used for studying the facsimiles. The remaining chapters of this section focus primarily on the iconographic elements of the facsimiles and their accompanying interpretations in the Pearl of Great Price.

What Value Can *A Guide to the Book of Abraham* Offer to Readers?

I’ll get right to the point: I highly recommend *A Guide to the Book of Abraham*, and believe it to be a valuable new resource for those who wish to deepen their understanding of anything related to the Book of Abraham or the Joseph Smith Papyri. I can provide a handful of reasons for this recommendation, though space permits me to name just a few of them here.

To begin, *A Guide to the Book of Abraham* helps remedy what the authors rightly observed as being one of the biggest hurdles in understanding the Book of Abraham. Namely, that much of the scholarship related to the Book of Abraham not only “spans decades” and is “scattered throughout multiple venues (books, journals, videos, podcasts, conference proceedings, and so forth),” but is often “very technical” (p. 7). I can attest from experience to the reality of these issues. For example, I recall as an undergraduate being invited to help edit transcriptions of some unpublished Hugh Nibley lectures on the hypocephalus that had been given in 1990, and had been inaccessible to the public for over two decades! I further remember learning how complex some studies of the Book of Abraham can be when I read about mathematical equations that could be used to obtain an approximate length of an original papyrus scroll when all you have to work with are surviving fragments. Technical indeed!

In my view, however, *A Guide to the Book of Abraham* helps to fix these issues of scattered sources and technicality by bringing the most significant and relevant scholarship on the Book of Abraham together into one volume and presenting it in bite-sized chunks that be easily digested by both scholar and lay-reader alike. Of course, the authors can only include so much in 300 pages. However, should anyone feel themselves thirsting to go deeper after reading each essay, they’ll be pleased to find that there are plenty of footnotes, suggested readings, and even a selected bibliography that can guide readers to more in-depth study.

A Guide to the Book of Abraham also addresses — and in my view satisfies — the most frequently raised objections related to the Book of Abraham. Both the merely curious as well as those whose faith has been rattled due to the Book of Abraham will most likely find many answers to their questions and concerns in this new volume. I’m certain that there will, of course, be a select group who will disagree with some of the conclusions presented in this book. However, I think that the majority of those who are genuinely seeking to understand the Book of Abraham and its history will appreciate the vast range of subtopics discussed in *A Guide to the Book of Abraham*.

Another aspect that makes this work of value is that it is the result of the combined efforts of four scholars who have experience and training in biblical and Egyptological studies. Their combined credentials hold significantly more weight than any subreddit celebrity or blogger who proudly proclaims themselves an expert on the subject simply because

they've read Ritner or Runnells. Three of the authors of *A Guide to the Book of Abraham* hold PhDs from such universities as Yale, UCLA, and the University of Pennsylvania, while another is finishing up his PhD at the Catholic University of America. All four of them hold various degrees in near eastern or ancient near eastern studies and are familiar with the relevant languages necessary for properly understanding the Book of Abraham. In addition to their schooling, several of the authors have served as directors, members, chairmen, and editors of a variety of both national and international boards, committees, and journals in Egyptology. In short, the authors are neither dumb nor ignorant, and they are more than qualified to address the topics covered in *A Guide to the Book of Abraham*.

Some may rightly ask if *A Guide to the Book of Abraham* provides anything new beyond what is already found at Pearl of Great Price Central (pearlofgreatpricecentral.org). Those who wonder will be pleased to find that not only does this volume have an additional nine essays not found on the website, but the existing essays have been revised and updated. These updates, according to the authors, have been made in order to “incorporate feedback from readers, update material in response to advances in scholarship, take into consideration constructive critiques, expand some material that was at first kept deliberately short, and include new material that could not appear in the initial run of the Insights due to constraints in Pearl of Great Price Central’s publishing schedule” (p. 8). Thus, while the authors readily admit that this volume has a shelf life, and that “future discoveries may bolster, qualify, or even undermine some of the points we have raised” (p. 284), *A Guide to the Book of Abraham* nevertheless stands as the most recent and up-to-date compilation of scholarship on the Book of Abraham at this time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I'll share one final observation that explains why I feel readers ought to familiarize themselves with the content of *A Guide to the Book of Abraham*. My own fascination with Book of Abraham studies has brought me into many conversations with critics and believers of the Book of Abraham alike. Such conversations have allowed me to observe that many of those who have raised issues with the Book of Abraham have often, when pressed, betrayed merely a surface-level knowledge of the very issues they had raised. As a result, their passion far exceeds their understanding. Unfortunately, this lack of understanding of Book of Abraham issues is also shared amongst the many believing members

I have spoken with, who have accepted the Book of Abraham on what appears to be faith alone.

While faith should not be faulted, I do believe that all members would do well to hearken to the charge in D&C 88:118 to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith,” and familiarize themselves with the challenges relating to the Book of Abraham. On this note, it would be wise to remember the caution given by Elder Ballard recently to seminary and institute teachers when he said, “gone are the days when a student raised a sincere concern and a teacher bore his or her testimony as a response intended to avoid the issue.”² For these and many other reasons, I highly recommend readers everywhere to read and become familiar with the contents found in *A Guide to the Book of Abraham*.

Quinten Barney received a BA in Ancient Near Eastern Studies at Brigham Young University, where he studied Biblical Hebrew and Middle Egyptian. He later received his MA in Religious Education from BYU, with his master’s thesis focusing on Facsimile No. 3 of the Book of Abraham. He has written articles on the Joseph Smith Papyri, the Book of Abraham, Joseph of Egypt, and the Book of Mormon. He is currently employed with the Seminaries and Institutes program of the Church, and resides in American Fork, Utah, with his wife Barbara and their four children, Eli, Asher, Lilah, and Malachi.

2. Elder M. Russell Ballard, “By Study and By Faith,” *Ensign* 46, no. 12 (December 2016): 22.

A RESTORATION OF PAUL'S UNDERSTANDING OF FAITH AS A RELATIONSHIP OF ACTION

Godfrey J. Ellis

Review of Brent J. Schmidt, *Relational Faith: The Transformation and Restoration of Pistis as Knowledge, Trust, Confidence, and Covenantal Faithfulness* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2022). 356 pages, \$21.95 (softcover).

Abstract: *Brent Schmidt builds on his earlier book on relational grace by tackling the topic of relational faith. For those interested in historical trends in religious thought, this book provides intimate details of Greek and Latin terms and the gradual corruption of the original Pauline concept of faith by Augustine and other early and influential thinkers and theologians. Leading the reader through the conceptual reworking of the idea of faith by examining both well-known and lesser-known reformers, but somewhat skirting the faith-works debate, Schmidt ends up nevertheless convincingly demonstrating two facts. First, that faith as concrete action, not just as abstract belief, is a distinguishing doctrinal foundation that is consistently preached by leaders of the Church today. Second, Joseph Smith's concept of faith as a covenantal relationship built on mutual trust was not a latter-day invention. Instead, it is a restoration of the concept of faith as originally understood by members of the church at the time of Paul.*

Faith is an eternal principle. It will not disappear at death. In fact, it existed before the creation of the world, and it will exist after the final resurrection. But what, exactly, is it?

We know that faith is the instigator and motivator of all behavior. Without faith, we would do nothing – from the faith involved in planting a springtime seed to the faith exercised in switching on a lightbulb or popping a slice of bread into a toaster, we act only because we have faith in an outcome. It is the expectation or hope of that anticipated outcome that prompts any behavior. So, it is an action word.

Theologically, faith must be centered on Jesus Christ. Joseph Smith called faith in Christ, “the first principle in revealed religion, and the foundation of all righteousness.”¹ Because faith is so critical to our very lives and beliefs, it is essential that we understand what faith is, how it functions, and how we can use it to act, rather than relegating it to merely being a hope or belief that acts upon us. Still, many members are ignorant of what faith (*pistis*) once was and how it worked at the time in which the apostle Paul was writing his epistles. Paul clearly had something in mind when he used that term and Brent Schmidt contends that Paul’s specific understanding of faith was largely lost to the world through corruption and distortion during the Dark Ages.

Accordingly, after writing his first book, *Relational Grace*,² Schmidt began to also challenge what he saw as an unsustainable distortion in the understanding of faith. That errant understanding, which Schmidt asserts is now prevalent in mainstream Christianity, was restored through Joseph Smith. In his latest book, *Relational Faith*,³ Schmidt develops the idea that faith (*pistis*), like charity (*charis*), was originally built on a reciprocal and action-based two-way relationship. As he informs the reader, “Since *pistis* is also a divine gift, like *charis*, I hypothesized that *pistis* — biblical faith — might also have the same active, relational, covenantal, and reciprocal obligations that all gifts had in the first-century Mediterranean world” (p. 3). He found evidence that this was the case and spends a considerable amount of time going over the linguistic details of the word. He shows how the term has been distorted, only to be reinstated in Restoration teachings.

Because faith is so central in our lives, Schmidt believes it is essential that Church members understand the historical evolution of faith more completely. With that understanding, they can more fully appreciate the restoration of Pauline *pistis*, understand how LDS faith differs from the faith of most other mainline Christians, and further reconcile the muddy faith/works debate. This book, therefore, has an important contribution to make to Latter-day Saint literature. It is a valiant and valuable attempt

1. “Appendix 1: First Theological Lecture on Faith, circa January–May 1835,” p. [1], *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-1-first-theological-lecture-on-faith-circa-january-may-1835/1>.

2. Brent J. Schmidt, *Relational Grace: The Reciprocal and Binding Covenant of Charis* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015).

3. Brent J. Schmidt, *Relational Faith: The Transformation and Restoration of Pistis as Knowledge, Trust, Confidence, and Covenantal Faithfulness* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2022).

to address what he asserts is the true meaning of the word, faith, and how that meaning has evolved – i.e., been corrupted – over time.

In great detail, Schmidt asserts that, “a careful study of ancient Greek and Roman literature ... [reveals that] in the ancient Mediterranean world, the relational associations of *pistis* included persuasion, knowledge, patron-client relationships, commitments, trust, covenants, and reciprocity. ... Faith entailed ... actively making choices, and forming a trusting, covenantal relationship with [Christ and his Father]” (p. 289). Faith, therefore, requires *behavior* on the part of man, as well as God, to create a two-way, reciprocal trust. This concept of reciprocity is a worldwide one. The British might say, “tit for tat.” Americans might say, “You scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours.” The Latin is, “quid pro quo.” A Chinese saying is, “a drop of help, a well of repaying.” One is reminded of King Benjamin’s teaching: “And behold, all that he requires of you is to keep his commandments; and he has promised you that if ye would keep his commandments ... he doth bless you and prosper you” (Mosiah 2:22).

Schmidt’s thesis that faith is based on reciprocal or relational behavior is very well articulated in an excellent Foreword by John Welch (xi–xiv) as well as in the author’s equally excellent Introduction (1–7) and Conclusion (289–90). This material is of great importance and relevance. It answers multiple questions. There is so much that suddenly falls into place. Chief among those is how and why the doctrine of faith as taught in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints differs from many mainline Christian positions. It was one of those “Of course — *that’s* what is happening!” moments. Once pointed out, it comes across as obvious truth. Notably, all of the material, together, requires only 12 pages or roughly 5% of the book. The remaining pages, which expand upon those 12, are also of value and necessary for a complete presentation. The bulk of the book will have particular appeal for those deeply interested in the linguistic and philosophical history of religious thought. However, I believe I received and fully appreciated the author’s main premise quite quickly in just the Foreword and Introduction. Consequently, I found the increasingly intricate discussion of how the Pauline meaning of faith began to change over time somewhat repetitive. Schmidt traces the term through Greek and Latin linguistics and across the philosophical ideas of a plethora of authors, some quite obscure.

This in-depth survey will be of great value for scholars interested in ancient Jewish, Greek, and Latin origins of words, or those wanting to use Schmidt’s book as a reference source. For many attempting to read

this book cover-to-cover and looking for inspiration, it may seem taxing as Schmidt runs through a history of obscure thinkers and philosophers. The in-depth discussion includes “The Etymologies of *Pistis* and *Fides*” (Chapter One), a somewhat vague “Social Science Theories of Trust Inherent in *Pistis*” (Chapter Two), and “Old Testament Roots of *Pistis* and *Aman*” (Chapter Three). We read about “Greco-Roman Times,” the “Nuances of *Pistis*” and “The Goddesses *Pistis* and *Fides*,” each chapter essentially making similar points, albeit from different perspectives. This is not a criticism of the book, but an observation and opinion of one reader, hopefully as an aid so that those contemplating the text will know what to expect. No doubt other readers may disagree.

In Schmidt’s presentation, Augustine emerges in the middle of the book as a key figure in this elaborate history; he is the major “bad guy” in the book. Schmidt points to Augustine as the one who used the Catholic “Rule of Faith to rationalize and condone sinful Christian behavior” (p. 124). It was Augustine who negated the association of “faith with action or even with baptism, but reduced it to mere song, metaphor, or solitary sufficiency” (p. 147). It was Augustine whose “new doctrines of original sin (and thus the need for infant baptism) and salvation by grace in defiance of free will. . . [were] instrumental in inaugurating the doctrine of predestination, radically limiting heaven to a relative few of God’s children and casting out the rest, who cannot escape their bewildering inability to affect their eternal assignment” (p. 149). Schmidt believes this contributed to Augustine “becoming ‘so obsessed with the idea of God’s power that he left little room for his love’” (p. 150). Thus, the “Catholic Fathers [primarily Augustine] held that an abstract, sovereign God could make only some people possess a mystical, passive faith through grace while He withheld faith from others” (pp. 4-5).

These Fathers were followed by “Intellectuals [who] warped the once plain, cognizable, and physical Lord into an incomprehensible, unknowable, and incorporeal being with which one could have only mystical or emotional experiences guaranteeing salvation” (p. 6). The word, *faith*, then, became corrupted from an active faithfulness and mutual trust developed because of “works” of both parties “into the domain of thoughts and beliefs” (p. xiii). Faith became merely “an amorphous idea that was intricate, confusing, complex, and ultimately passive on the part of the would-be believer” (p. 17). Schmidt sees three current trends:

First, the object of faith used to be a person ... whereas now the object of belief has come to be an idea or a theory. Second,

the act of faith used to be a decision ... whereas now the state of belief has come to be a descriptive, if not a completely passive, condition. Third, the mood of faith used to involve one's relation with ... certainties ... whereas now the mood of belief merely involves thinking about uncertainties. (p. 19.)

On a personal note, these took on relevance for me as a retired professor of counseling psychology at a Catholic university. Just before I retired, the university adopted several "core themes" and all departments and programs were required to incorporate the new core themes into all curricula. One of those core themes was "Faith." Although a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and not a Catholic, I was surrounded by faculty who were Catholic but only loosely affiliated with that faith tradition. I assumed we would all think similarly about what faith really meant. To my surprise, I found myself the only one looking for a way to align our program with faith in Jesus Christ. By otherwise unanimous vote, the rest of the faculty voted to align our program with a vague "faith in the counseling process" and "faith in psychological theory." When we submitted our statement of affiliation with this watered-down theme, the central administration was fine with that since most other programs were doing the same thing, as was the university as a whole. (Augustine would have loved that!) This is what we currently see all around us today outside the Restored Church. The concept of faith has been contaminated by Augustinian thinking. *Faith* has almost universally come to mean "emotional, mystical inner feelings equated with instant salvation" (p. 2).

Schmidt cannot be accused of lacking courage for he takes on all comers, including even most translations of the Bible. He courageously writes: "Almost all modern Bible translations diverge significantly from what *pistis* meant in about AD 50, when Paul was writing. Because of later theological changes and biases, *pistis* has not been translated according to its original meaning; the idea of faith in modern times has been contaminated by later thinking ... Many of Paul's writings have been distorted in translation and have become difficult to understand because the original context has been lost" (p. 2).

Later, Schmidt discusses Martin Luther's doctrine that "imputed righteousness through faith in Christ taught that one could inherit Christ's righteousness without striving to *be* righteous" (p. 209, emphasis added). Schmidt observes that "faith now became a one-time, immediate, born-again experience" (p. 196).

Thus, we get to the evangelical debate of Lordship Salvation vs. Non-Lordship Salvation. That split came about from the controversy of faith vs. works. This is not a debate that can be fleshed out in this review, nor is it fleshed out in Schmidt's book. It is mentioned briefly and therefore represents an undeveloped but large elephant in the room. It bears some discussion. In brief, the debate among Evangelicals is the struggle of whether works cause faith or faith causes works – or whether works are even relevant at all. The latter is the position of Non-Lordship Salvation, which, in the extreme, asserts that since we are saved by faith alone (*sola fide*), behavior is irrelevant. Once a person has accepted Christ as Savior through a one-time born-again confession, he or she does not need to also accept Christ as Lord. In other words, subsequent sin (“bad works”) or subsequent righteousness (“good works”) don't matter since salvation comes totally from grace and has no connection at all with works – good or bad. Thus, a “saved” person can violate morals and laws and still remain saved through grace since they, at one time, accepted Christ. According to that radical perspective, proponents of Non-Lordship Salvation view faith as “merely the acceptance of salvation as a free and unconditional gift — and they [portray] discipleship as a second-level commitment. Therefore, according to their view, the gospel presents Jesus as Savior only, not as Lord.”⁴

I should add that most Evangelical proponents don't agree with the extreme position of Non-Lordship Salvation and prefer Lordship Salvation where good works naturally follow, but do not cause, salvation. In fact, Non-Lordship Salvation is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer labelled, “cheap grace [which] is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance. ... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship.”⁵ Although not believing that works “cause” salvation in any way, but rather that good works flow naturally from salvation, he writes that *sola fide* [faith alone] is a rationalization and represents merely a “cheap covering for ... sins; no contrition is required, still less any real desire to be delivered from sin.”⁶

A common attack on LDS teachings is the accusation that Latter-day Saints hold the opposite extreme. We are alleged to believe that

4. John MacArthur, “A 15-Year Retrospective on the Lordship Controversy,” *Grace to You* (website), <https://www.gty.org/library/articles/A100/a-15year-retrospective-on-the-lordship-controversy>.

5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 47.

6. *Ibid.*, 46.

members can “work out their own salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12) – in other words, by works alone. That charge, of course, is demonstrably not true. The accusation is without merit and totally false. If true, it would be a complete denial of the efficacy and necessity for Christ’s atonement. Schmidt asserts that Luther “refused to allow that works are integral to faith or justification, lest they become necessary for salvation ... [which] would usurp the all-sufficient work of Christ” (p. 193). That our works can save us is not the doctrine of the Church. As Quentin L. Cook has taught in a recent General Conference: “None can return to God by his or her own good works alone; we all need the benefit of the Savior’s sacrifice. All have sinned, and it is only through the Atonement of Jesus Christ that we can obtain mercy and live with God.”⁷ Although that may sound close to *sola fide*, it is not. President Hugh B. Brown taught that “there must be more than mere lip service; faith alone is not sufficient.”⁸ The First Vision affirms his statement since Joseph Smith was told, by the mouth of the Lord, that the majority of the Christian world “draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Joseph Smith — History 1:19; see also Matthew 15:8). Similarly, the current Prophet, President Russell M. Nelson, has emphasized the reciprocal nature of trust-built relational faith. One example of such teachings can be seen in the following words: “I plead with you to take charge of your testimony of Jesus Christ. Work for it. Own it. Care for it. Nurture it so that it will grow. Then watch for miracles to happen in your life.”⁹

The above are only a few citations from Church leaders among many hundreds that could be listed. The Church clearly teaches that works are not merely the result of being saved but play a role in securing the salvation that comes only through Jesus Christ. Thus, Latter-day Saint doctrine is in close alignment with the definition of faith explicated so thoroughly in *Relational Faith*. Schmidt believes that President Nelson

7. Quentin L. Cook, “Be True to God and His Work,” *Liahona* 46, no. 11 (November 2022): 119, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2022/11/57cook>.

8. Hugh B. Brown, “Are the Latter-day Saints, or Mormons, Christians?,” *Conference Report* (April 1962), 107, <https://archive.org/details/conferencereport1962a/page/n107/mode/2up>.

9. Russell M. Nelson, Facebook, August 1, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/russell.m.nelson/videos/5938701126159705>. See, also, Nelson, “Choices for Eternity” (devotional, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, May 15, 2022), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2022/05/12nelson>.

is teaching about faith in ways that “closely parallel ancient nuances of *pistis*” (p. 284). However, the intricate balance between faith and works continues to be confusing for many members of the Church and it is not fully understood by them. There have been several analogies drawn in an attempt to explain this delicate dance. Perhaps the best known one comes from the non-member but highly respected Anglican apologist, C.S. Lewis, who famously said, “Christians have often disputed as to whether what leads the Christian home is good actions, or Faith in Christ. I have no right really to speak on such a difficult question, but it does seem to me like asking which blade in a pair of scissors is most necessary.”¹⁰ Taken apart, scissors are merely two blades that can do nothing but awkwardly stab; together, they can cut intricate designs and patterns.

Unfortunately, Schmidt’s book does not cover much of this in its focus on providing sequential and detailed history. I opened this review by saying that the book had an important contribution to make, and so it does, but I would have really enjoyed more on his take on such issues. For me, this is a book that one may need to read, but it is not a book that many would call an *enjoyable* read. I couldn’t help but think that Schmidt’s significant research and his knowledge of Greek and Latin would have made, and could still make, a terrific journal article with a broad appeal. As I opined earlier, the Foreword, Introduction, and final Conclusion chapters tell the tale extremely well and in just 12 pages. Then, again, we all recognize that humans require repetition for lasting learning, although some readers may opt out of reading *Relational Faith* after the first few chapters.

A valid question, therefore, is to ask, “Who is this book for?” It is not particularly stirring for those looking for an inspirational experience because the writing style is decidedly dry. Even general scholars might find it too heavily loaded with Greek terms, Latin terms, and rather obscure historical figures to hold their interest. However, the book would be perfect for those who care deeply about Greek philosophy, details of linguistic evolution, and the detailed history of philosophical thought.

That the book did not work for me as much as I originally hoped may be irrelevant for some readers, but possibly a caution for others. As I vented to my wife at one point, “This book seems like reading the rules of a board game before we play the game: maybe it’s necessary,

10. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; repr., New York: Collier Books, 2001), 148.

but sometimes you just want to get on with it and learn by playing a trial round.” To readers who, like me, are extremely interested in the basic premise, read the Preface by John Welch, and the Introduction and Conclusion by the author. That will be a *Reader's Digest* summary of an important understanding of Pauline faith that was lost but now re-found and restored by Joseph Smith for saints in the last days. I was not prepared for an incredibly comprehensive history of Greek terms and history of philosophical thought by dozens of obscure writers and ministers. However, I encourage interested readers to sample the work for themselves. Of course, not all books speak to all readers. This one may or may not speak to you, but I appreciate what I got out of it.

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THEOSIS IN THE BOOK OF MORMON: THE WORK AND GLORY OF THE FATHER, MOTHER AND SON, AND HOLY GHOST

Val Larsen and Newell D. Wright

Abstract: *While some scholars have suggested that the doctrine of theosis — the transformation of human beings into divine beings — emerged only in Nauvoo, the essence of the doctrine was already present in the Book of Mormon, both in precept and example. The doctrine is especially well developed in 1 Nephi, Alma 19, and Helaman 5. The focus in 1 Nephi is on Lehi and Nephi's rejection of Deuteronomist reforms that erased the divine Mother and Son, who, that book shows, are closely coupled as they, the Father, and Holy Ghost work to transform human beings into divine beings. The article shows that theosis is evident in the lives of Lehi, Sariah, Sam, Nephi, Alma, Alma₂, Ammon₂, Lamoni, Lamoni's wife, Abish, and especially Nephi₂. The divine Mother's participation in the salvation of her children is especially evident in Lehi's dream, Nephi's vision, and the stories of Abish and the Lamanite Queen.*

This dispensation of the Gospel opens with two accounts of First Visions (those of Lehi and Joseph Smith) in which a prophet initially sees a pillar of fire or light and then sees the corporeal Father and corporeal Son. Implicit in the corporeal appearance of the Father and Son is this message: God is of a kind with us. He is not, as other religions teach, an entity wholly different from us. Like us, he is a social being who lives in community with others.¹ His intent is that we who are of a kind

1. "Deification among the Latter-day Saints is not a matter of the lonely individual buried in contemplation. To become a god, one must become a god in the midst of family — as a husband, wife, daughter, son, father, or mother progressing with the family into higher and higher levels of godhood. Mormonism does not so much teach the deification of the individual as the deification of the family and the larger family of the church. Godhood is eternal communion, and

with him experience *theosis*, deification,² and become fully like him. Both Lehi and Joseph Smith are told that contrary creeds and associated practices are an “abomination” in the sight of God (1 Nephi 1:13, Joseph Smith — History 2:19).

The core of the condemned abominable creed is the false doctrine that God is infinitely and eternally, completely, and irrevocably different from humanity, the idea that he exists outside of space and time as pure BEING, as the only entity that fundamentally and necessarily exists,³ all other things being created by him *ex nihilo* and existing only contingently. From this premise, it necessarily follows, as the rigorous logician John Calvin understood and argued, that everything happening in creation happens because God willed and caused it to be so.⁴ This doctrine, Fiona and Terryl Givens write, declares “our Heavenly Father to be arbitrary, fickle, as content to damn as to save, all-controlling and manipulative. He foreordains to damnation, without reason or recourse. ... These particular creeds emphasize his total independence from human concerns, human suffering, human conceptions of fairness, or human yearning to understand him. His counsels are ‘unsearchable,’ and his concern is only with ‘his own will.’”⁵ It cannot surprise us that the loving God hundreds of millions have known intimately rejects as

the increase of this communion with God and with each other. It is not just the rule and domination of other planets; it is the progression and infinite multiplication of love,” M. David Litwa, *Becoming Divine: An Introduction to Deification in Western Culture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), 203–204.

2. Andrew Skinner describes theosis as “the restoration of ancient doctrine, specifically the doctrine of deification or, as it is called in classical Christian theology, theosis — the teaching that mortals can become gods,” Andrew C. Skinner, *To Become Like Gods* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2016), x.

3. Keith E. Norman, “Deification, Early Christian,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1992), 369–70, https://eom.byu.edu/index.php/Deification,_Early_Christian.

4. If God exists outside of space and time, nothing that happens in creation can surprise him. He is the ground of its possibility and the cause of all that occurs. Knowing all that happens before it happens and being the sole reason why it or anything else does happen, God is the author of every good or evil act. Free will, the concept typically used to absolve him of responsibility for evil, cannot relieve him of that responsibility. He foreknows the choices of all his contingent creations and has the option of creating only those beings who will not freely choose to do monstrous evil. Thus, as Calvin argues with cogent logic, evil doers are predestined by God to do evil and to experience eternal damnation. They were created to that end, an end that somehow enhances his glory.

5. Fiona and Terryl Givens, *The Christ Who Heals: How God Restored the Truth that Saves Us* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017), 24.

an abomination this conception of him. Nor is it surprising that those hundreds of millions defy logic and, accurately, think of their God as an inherently benign Being who nurtures and blesses his children and saves all who are willing to be saved.

But while most orthodox Christians reject the impeccable Calvinist logic of their own position, many nevertheless insist that others must share their conception of God to be classified as Christian. Thus, Lehi and Joseph Smith's doctrine that God is of a kind with us and that through theosis we can become fully like him⁶ separates Latter-day Saint Christianity from the other branches of Christianity and motivates the common assertion that Latter-day Saints are not Christian. Orthodox Christians may — indeed must — concede that the Restored Church of Jesus Christ does not differ appreciably from their own denominations in its teachings about the earthly life and saving mission of Christ. Were its earthly Christology the focus of their analysis, they would be obligated to classify the Restored Church as a Christian religion.⁷ They

6. "As the Son partakes of the fullness of the Father through the spirit, so the saints are, by the same spirit, to be partakers of the same fullness, to enjoy the same glory, for as the Father and the Son are one, so in like manner the saints are to be one in them: through the love of the Father, the mediation of Jesus Christ, and the gift of the holy spirit they are to be heirs of God and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ." "The Godhead, Lecture Fifth," *Lectures on Faith*, <https://lecturesonfaith.com/5/>. Note that there is no author specified for the *Lectures on Faith*. The official website of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints suggests that they were written by Sydney Rigdon but states that "the inclusion of the lectures in the Doctrine and Covenants in 1835 strongly suggests that Joseph Smith approved of the content of the lectures" ("Lectures on Theology," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/lectures-on-faith>). The *Lectures on Faith*, according to the official Church website, was decanonized and taken out of the Doctrine and Covenants beginning with the 1921 edition.

7. Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997). For example, "Here in the area of soteriology we have again found much more in common than we expected to find. Both Mormons and Evangelicals trust that they will be brought into a right relationship with God by Jesus Christ, who is both the Son of God and God the Son. Both believe in the substitutionary atonement of Christ, justification by faith in Christ and salvation by grace. Both believe in the power of his redeeming blood, and both hold the conviction that there is no other way to be right before God than through faith in Christ. Both believe that our relationship with Christ begins through faith, but that evidence of the transformation brought about by the indwelling Spirit must inevitably ensue. If we do not demonstrate good works, some sign over time, of a changed life, our

classify it as non-Christian primarily because it rejects the Trinitarian formulation of the Godhead,⁸ a variant of the Jewish/Christian/Muslim formulation discussed above in which God is a being outside of space and time who is, ontologically — in his essential being — utterly and irrevocably different from humanity.⁹ Within orthodox Christianity, the eternal Trinitarian God may join humanity in history, incarnated as Christ, who mysteriously remains One with the Father who is outside of space and time.¹⁰ But humanity can never transcend its contingent existence and join God as self-existent BEINGS, as true companions, whose existence is, like his, necessary and eternal.

Since that is true in the orthodox Christian view, a distinction must be made between *soft* (partial, limited) and *hard* (full, extensive) theosis.¹¹ The word *theosis* is a coinage of Eastern Orthodoxy, by all accounts a branch of Christianity. In Orthodoxy, theosis denotes the

professions of faith are ultimately futile. ... Differences between most Evangelicals and Mormons include our respective assessments of (1) the possibility of responding to the gospel after death, (2) how crucial a role baptism actually plays in a believer's life and (3) many of the specific details about the nature of the life to come" (ibid., 186–87). Given the Latter-day Saint embrace of these core and shared Christian doctrines, it is inaccurate to say that the Restored Church is not Christian. The accurate descriptor is "non-Trinitarian Christian." On the other hand, differences persist. "Does God the Father currently have a physical body or not? ... Was God at some point in eternity past a human being like the mortal Jesus, or has he always been the infinite Supreme Being?" (ibid., 195–96).

8. Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991). Note that in addition to the rejection of the Trinity, Robinson gives seven other reasons why traditional Christians deny that members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are Christian. But as he notes in his conclusion, "Surely now it will have dawned on the discerning reader that all of the various arguments against Latter-day Saints being considered Christians, not one — not a single one — claims that Latter-day Saints don't acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord. Consider the enormous implications of this fact. The only issue that really matters is the only issue that is carefully avoided ... When the charge is made that "Mormons aren't Christians," the very first impression created in the mind of the average individual is that Latter-day Saints don't believe in Jesus Christ" (ibid., 111).

9. Ibid., 71–89. The Trinitarian formulation is a variant of the monistic conception of God the Jews and Muslim's have in common with orthodox Christianity.

10. Daniel C. Peterson, "Notes on Mormonism and the Trinity," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 40 (2020): 97, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/notes-on-mormonism-and-the-trinity/>.

11. The authors wish to thank one anonymous reviewer for suggesting this distinction between hard and soft theosis and another for suggesting the distinction be further defined by the words in parentheses.

beautiful, compelling idea that the proper telos of contingent human beings is to achieve, through the ministrations of Christ and the Holy Ghost, mystical union with God. It is not heretical to affirm that humanity may become maximally like God within the narrow confines of what is possible for a contingent being. But if God is the sole self-existent BEING who exists outside of space and time, it is heretical to affirm and logically impossible to cogently argue that contingent beings, the created creatures of the uncreated God, become — as Nephi and Joseph Smith indicate — fully like their creator.¹² *Soft theosis* denotes Orthodoxy's mystical union of contingent beings with the transcendent God.¹³ *Hard theosis* denotes the Restoration's literal and complete

12. Jordan Vajda gives an excellent review of the similarities and differences between orthodox Christian and Restoration conceptions of theosis, a review that underscores the critical importance of contrasting divine ontologies. "The [orthodox Christian] doctrine of theosis presupposes that there is a fundamental distinction between uncreated being and created being. God, that is, the three divine persons who are the one God, are understood to be uncreated and eternal. God always has been divine and always will be divine. Human persons, on the other hand, are created from nothing — *creatio ex nihilo*. They are forever dependent on God for existence. Thus, the divine nature, the nature of God, is fundamentally different from human nature, the nature of human persons. In fact, one can speak of an ontological divide or chasm separating the two: the former is unoriginate, the latter is originate. The [Restoration] doctrine of exaltation presupposes that God is of the same species as human persons. There is no distinction between uncreated and created beings or persons since all persons, divine as well as human, are uncreated. In other words, intelligence, the core or essence of every person (whether divine or human) is self-existent and eternal, uncreated and uncreatable. Through the process of spirit birth, intelligences are clothed by divine parents with spirit bodies and become autonomous, conscious selves. And just as with human children in relation to their human parents, the spirit children of divine parents possess the innate capacity, as a fact of their spirit birth, to progress and grow up into the likeness of their divine parents." Jordan Vajda, "Partakers of the Divine Nature" (paper, FARMS, Provo, UT, November 3, 2002), 62.

13. Mark Shuttleworth, a Greek Orthodox writer, describes theosis as "the understanding that human beings can have real union with God, and so become like God to such a degree that we participate in the divine nature. Also referred to as deification, divinization, or illumination ..." He goes on to describe it as "sharing in the divine nature through grace." Mark Shuttleworth, *Theosis: Partaking of the Divine Nature* (Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2005), 1, 3, <http://ww1.antiochian.org/content/theosis-partaking-divine-nature>. Greek Orthodox Father David Hester defines theosis as "the gradual process by which a person is renewed and unified so completely with God that he becomes by grace what God is by nature." David Hester, *The Jesus Prayer* (Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2001), 13–14.

transformation of humans — through Christ’s gracious atonement on which the transformation eternally depends — into beings who are in all material respects exactly like their divine Father, Mother, and Savior Brother.¹⁴ The fact that hard theosis is an integral part of Latter-day Saint theology is now broadly accepted and institutionally affirmed.¹⁵ When it became a part of Latter-day Saint theology is a more open question.¹⁶ Most scholars believe it to be a Nauvoo theology,¹⁷ a doctrine that emerged only late¹⁸ in Joseph Smith’s life.¹⁹

14. As Dallin H. Oaks has said, “Our theology begins with heavenly parents. Our highest aspiration is to be like them.” Dallin H. Oaks, “Apostasy and Restoration,” *Ensign* 25, no. 5 (May 1995): 84, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1995/04/apostasy-and-restoration>.

15. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Becoming Like God,” *Gospel Topics Essays*, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/becoming-like-god>.

16. Jordan T. Watkins examined many documents and journals and demonstrated that the idea of theosis was already present in the writings of Joseph Smith, the revelations, and even in the First Vision years prior to the King Follet address. BYU Religious Education, “Sperry Symposium 2020 - Jordan T. Watkins,” YouTube video, 53:02, October 22, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I0TOcwHF7KA>.

17. Joseph M. Spencer, “Faith Hope, and Charity: Alma and Joseph Smith,” in *An Experiment on the Word: Reading Alma* 32 (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2014), 57–70, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=mi>. Spencer cites Boyd Kirkland, “The Development of the Mormon Doctrine of God,” in *Line Upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine*, ed. Gary James Bergera (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 38, as an example of an article on “Nauvoo theology.” Terryl Givens mentions the idea that theosis emerged in Nauvoo in “The Prophecy of Enoch as Restoration Blueprint,” *Leonard J. Arrington Mormon History Lecture Series* 18 (Logan, UT: Utah State University, 2012), 8, https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/arrington_lecture/19/. While theosis was strongly suggested by the corporeal appearance of the Father with the Son in 1820, that appearance was not reported in writing before 1835.

18. Litwa states that “[d]eification . . . is not a prominent feature of Smith’s early revelations, in particular, the Book of Mormon.” Litwa, *Becoming Divine*, 197. This contrasts with what Watkins states in footnote 16.

19. While he does not explicitly affirm late development, Andrew Skinner may implicitly support it in *To Become Like God*, which reviews the doctrine of and evidence for theosis, gleaned deification data from the Bible, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price — all the standard works except for the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon is not entirely absent in *To Become Like God*. However, it is not central to the development of the idea of theosis, unlike the other standard works, prophetic voices, the witness of Greek Orthodoxy, and other witnesses from the Protestant tradition. Its relevance to theosis is not fully

The central thesis of this article is that hard theosis is a Book of Mormon doctrine,²⁰ a doctrine that entails the existence of a divine Mother²¹ who, with the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, facilitates the deification of her children. The Book of Mormon opens in *the* pivotal moment in theological history, when the ontology of God and the existence of the divine Mother are very much in play.²² In Lehi's day, the pluralist theology Latter-day Saints continue to embrace was an old-time religion that was being displaced by a new, radically monist theology, ultimately understood to situate God entirely outside space and time. This is the theology, discussed above that by Joseph Smith's time had, itself, become the old-time, orthodox religion. Lehi's contemporary, King Josiah, ushered in this new, monist theology. Lehi rejected it, remaining faithful to the older, pluralistic theology of Abraham with its divine council, the *Sôd Elohim*.²³ While other readings are possible,²⁴

developed until the very last page of the text (p. 142). Building on an earlier quote by President Ezra Taft Benson (*ibid.*, 60), Skinner suggests that if we want to become like God, we should obtain charity by, as Moroni 7:48 teaches, praying "unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ; that ye may become the sons of God; that when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is; that we may have this hope; that we may be purified even as he is pure. Amen" (Moroni 7:48).

20. "But human deification is implied even in the Book of Mormon, which was dictated before the April 1830 organization of the Church: In mathematics, the so-called 'transitive property of equality' that if $a=b$ and $b=c$, then $a=c$. At 3 Nephi 28:10, Christ promises three Nephite disciples that 'ye shall be even as I am, and I am even as the Father; and the Father and I are one.' Analogously, if those mortal Nephites will someday be like Christ, and Christ is like the Father, they will someday be like the Father. Though rarely emphasized, this verse, which builds directly on 3 Nephi 12:48 and 19:23, seems nonetheless to contain an unmistakable, culminating promise of deified exaltation." Peterson, "Review of Becoming Divine," 168. The thrust of this article is that there is more evidence of theosis in the Book of Mormon.

21. David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, "A Mother There': A Survey of Historical Teachings about Mother in Heaven," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2011), 70–97, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol50/iss1/7/>.

22. Val Larsen, "First Visions and Last Sermons: Affirming Divine Sociality, Rejecting the Greater Apostasy," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 36 (2020): 51–58, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/first-visions-and-last-sermons-affirming-divine-sociality-rejecting-the-greater-apostasy/>.

23. *Ibid.*, 58–68.

24. The reading offered here is consistent with Margaret Barker's "What Did Josiah Reform?" and Kevin Christensen's "Paradigms Regained." For a summary of

the opening of the Book of Mormon can plausibly be read as Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob's polemic against the monist theological changes wrought by Josiah. Joined with the later, independent, pluralist polemic of Joseph Smith in the King Follett sermon, these Book of Mormon prophets firmly establish hard theosis as a theological foundation of the Restoration.

To develop our Book of Mormon theosis thesis, we first set the historical stage, focusing on Josiah's reform and evidence that Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob rejected it. We then discuss in considerable detail sections in the Book of Mormon that are especially rich in their treatment of theosis: Lehi's First Vision and associated dream, Alma 19, and the Book of Helaman. We also examine at some depth evidence of theosis in the lives of Alma, Alma₂, Ammon₂, Lamoni, Lamoni's wife, Abish, and Nephi₂.²⁵

Josiah Purges the Gods of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

To understand the theological issues in play as the Book of Mormon opens, one must read the text in *situ*, that is with an awareness of what seems to have been happening in Jerusalem when Lehi and Sariah lived there. The context is discussed at some length in the *Interpreter* article *First Visions and Last Sermons: Affirming Divine Sociality, Rejecting*

Christensen's view, see Kevin Christensen, "Prophets and Kings in Lehi's Jerusalem and Margaret Barker's Temple Theology," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 177–93. See also Margaret Barker, "What did Josiah Reform?" in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2004): 523–42, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BtFsFdINbN8>. Christensen's article is paired with one by William J. Hamblin that provides a more sympathetic, favorable view of Josiah. William J. Hamblin, "Vindicating Josiah," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 165–78, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/vindicating-josiah/>. For a dispassionate review of Margaret Barker's work and various LDS responses to Josiah, see, Eric A. Eliason, "Is the Bible Reliable? A Case Study" *BYU Studies* 60, no. 2 (2021): 159–81, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/article/is-the-bible-reliable-a-case-study/>. For a rebuttal to Eliason, see Kevin Christiansen, "'Paradigms Regained' Part 2: Responding to Margaret Barker's Critics and Why Her Work Should Matter to Latter-day Saints," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 55 (2023): 31–106, <https://interpreterfoundation.org/twenty-years-after-paradigms-regained-part-2-responding-to-margaret-barkers-critics-and-why-her-work-should-matter-to-latter-day-saints/>.

25. Subscripts following names are used in this manner: The first person with a name is never subscripted, but all other people with the same name will have a subscript, e.g., Alma and Alma₂.

the *Greater Apostasy*, which describes the religion of Abraham and the Deuteronomist changes Josiah made in it. Abraham's religion is described as follows:

[T]he high god, El, was understood to be an anthropomorphic being who lived in heaven in a royal court much like the royal courts of Middle Eastern kings on earth at that time. Like the Middle Eastern kings, El was thought to govern his dominions through the ministrations of those one would typically expect to see at court: Elah [aka, Asherah or Shaddai], the wife of El the king; the *bene Elohim*, the sons and daughters of El; *noble and great* heavenly servants, e.g., the *malākīm* or angels; and various representatives of the divine army, the host of heaven, El being the Lord of Hosts. These and other participants in the court were part of the סֹד, *Sôd*, the governing council, who shared to one degree or another the divinity of El and the governance of El's kingdom.²⁶

In this older theology, the ontology of El is not radically different from that of his wife, sons and daughters, and servants. While this divine community, the *Sôd Elohim*, council of gods, is obviously hierarchical, its members seem to be similar in appearance to each other and to human beings. Thus, when Jacob wrestles God face to face at *Peniel* (*face of God*), El is initially described as an unspecified שׂא, '*ish*, man, a confounding of God and man that suggest God is, in form and essence, much like Jacob (Genesis 32:22–31). God's willingness to wrestle Jacob as one man might wrestle another may likewise suggest ontological equivalence between God and his human son, Jacob.²⁷

26. Larsen, "First Visions and Last Sermons," 45–46.

27. For Latter-day Saints, this encounter with God, in which Jacob receives a new name, has temple significance that has been noted by various scholars. Those temple meanings underscore a premise of this article, that God is personally involved in transforming his children into beings who are like him. See Matthew L. Bowen, "'And There Wrestled a Man with Him' (Genesis 32:24): Enos's Adaptations of the Onomastic Wordplay of Genesis," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 10 (2014): 151–80, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/and-there-wrestled-a-man-with-him-genesis-3224-enoss-adaptations-of-the-onomastic-wordplay-of-genesis/>. See also Stephen D. Ricks, "The Sacred Embrace and the Sacred Handclasp in Ancient Mediterranean Religions": *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 37 (2020): 319–30, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-sacred-embrace-and-the-sacred-handclasp-in-ancient-mediterranean-religions/>. Given that this episode includes the giving of a new name to Jacob (symbolizing Jacob's entering a new, higher stage in his life) and God's hesitance

The ontological equality that is strongly implied here — e.g., corporeality and sociality of God with God and God with human beings — is crystalized in what some scholars call “Divine Kinsman theology,”²⁸ the idea that human beings have a kind of blood relationship with God. Some biblical names seem to reflect this theology. Human kinship with the Father is reflected in the name *Abiel*, which translates as *El is my Father*. Human kinship with the Son is reflected in the name *Ahijah*, which translates *Yahweh is my Brother*. Human kinship with the divine Mother is reflected in the name *Ammishaddai*, which translates *Shaddai is my kin* or *the people of Shaddai*.²⁹ Human kinship with the Mother may also be implied when Leah calls herself happy, אֲשֶׁרִי, and names her surrogate son Asher, אֲשֶׁר, probably to honor the divine Mother, Asherah, אֲשֶׁרָה, who as Shaddai, שֹׁדֵי, “shall bless thee with ... blessings of the breasts [שֹׁדִים, shaddaim] and of the womb” (Genesis 49:25).³⁰ Kinship theology suggests that theosis, if it occurs, would, presumptively, be hard theosis.

But while Lehi lived in Jerusalem, the theology of Israel changed dramatically. During a renovation of the temple, Hilkiah, the high priest found (or some think, wrote, because it greatly enhanced his

to disclose his name, may we not also understand the Hebrew *yē’āvēq* (“wrestle”) in an additional sense of “embrace?” Nibley also makes this point: “[T]he word conventionally translated as ‘wrestled (*yē’āvēq*)’ can just as well mean ‘embraced,’” Hugh W. Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment, Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* 16 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 434.

28. Christopher B. Hayes, “Lest Ye Perish in the Way’: Ritual and Kinship in Exodus 4:24–26,” *Hebrew Studies* 48 (2007): 39–54. See also Frank Moore Cross, *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore, MD: JHU Press, 2000), 12, and Matthew L. Bowen, “My People Are Willing’: The Mention of Aminadab in the Narrative Context of Helaman 5–6,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 19 (2016): 92, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/my-people-are-willing-the-mention-of-aminadab-in-the-narrative-context-of-helaman-5-6/>.

29. Bowen, “My People Are Willing,” 86n13 and 92n33. Bowen notes that the name *Abiel* is attested in the Old Testament in Numbers 13:12; 2 Samuel 9:4–5; 17:27; and 1 Chronicles 3:5; 26:5; *Ammishaddai* is referenced in Numbers 1:12; 2:25; 7:66, 71; and 10:25; and *Ahijah* is found in 1 Kings 11:29–30; 12:15; 14:2–6, 18; 1 Kings 15:27, 29, 33; 21:22; 2 Kings 9:9; 1 Chronicles 2:25; 11:36; 26:20; 2 Chronicles 9:29; 10:15; and Nehemiah 10:26.

30. These blessings come from the Almighty, in Hebrew, *Shaddai*, with word play connecting the Goddess with breasts, *shaddaim*. *Shaddai* is an alternative name for the divine Mother, Asherah.

power)³¹ the Book of the Law, which many scholars believe to be part of the current book of Deuteronomy. The book condemned Israel for worshipping the gods of the *Sôd*. It predicted that Josiah's kingdom would be destroyed because the people did not strictly keep the Law of Moses and worship Yahweh alone. Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan the Scribe who, accompanied by Ahikam, Achbor, and Asahiah, carried it to King Josiah. Upon hearing the book's content, Josiah rent his clothes, then initiated a violent theological and social reform.

In a multidimensional push to centralize theology, ritual, worship, and governance, Josiah took things in hand (2 Kings 23:4-20). The Jerusalem temple was full of things associated with members of the *Sôd*. He destroyed them. He dragged the Asherah [Mother in Heaven] statue — in the temple for at least 236 of its 370 years — down into the Kidron valley and burned it. He destroyed all the ancient temples and sacred groves in the high places, Shechem, Bethel, etc., where the patriarchs had worshipped the Gods of the *Sôd*. As Deuteronomy 12:19 required, he centralized all public ritual in one place, Jerusalem, where he could oversee and control it. As Deuteronomy 3:1-11 mandated, he killed all the priests who facilitated the worship of *Sôd* members and all the prophets who taught that there was any God with God. There is a nontrivial possibility that he killed Zenos and Zenock. Zenock taught that there was a God with God, a ben Elohim who would come down to redeem humanity from its sins (Alma 33:13-16). Zenos taught that and also emphasized the importance of humanity being closely, rather than distantly, connected with the “mother tree” [symbol of Asherah] (Jacob 5:54-60). If Josiah didn't kill Zenos and Zenock, he would have if they had been alive teaching these things during his reign.³²

This theological revolution replaced the corporeal, pluralistic Divine Kinsmen of the *Sôd* and their Heavenly Host³³ with a Solitary Sovereign,

31. For example, see L. W. Batten, “The Origin and Character of Deuteronomy,” *The Biblical World* 11, no. 4 (1898): 246–54, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/472239>.

32. Val Larsen, “First Visions and Last Sermons,” 53–54.

33. Josiah reforms “forbad veneration of the heavenly hosts ... even though ‘LORD of Hosts’ was an ancient temple title for the God of Israel, who Isaiah had seen in the temple and described as ‘the King, the LORD of Hosts’ (Isaiah 6:5).” ...

the transcendent One God, Yahweh. The reasoning behind the change may

have been rooted in a perceived revelatory linkage between God's name and the Hebrew verb *to be*, which yields a sophisticated reading of Moses's first encounter with God in Exodus 3:1-15. There Yahweh declares that his name is אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה, *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh*, "I Am that I Am." This name statement can be read, philosophically, as saying that Yahweh is pure BEING, BEING as such, the only thing that exists in and of and by itself. Speaking in the first person, God says אֶהְיֶה, *'ehyeh*, "I Am," and reveals his unique status as pure BEING. Speaking of God in the third person, we say יְהוָה, *yahweh*, "He Is," so we refer to God, the great I Am as Yahweh, He Is. And we may think of him as the one and only thing that purely, self-existently IS. This monistic way of thinking about God as pure BEING, as the ground of all being, makes him abstract, transcendent, prior to and separate from all created things.³⁴

Lehi seems to allude to and deprecate this new, monist theology when, in what may be the most philosophical, metaphysical passage in all scripture, he asserts the need for "opposition in all things," that "all things must be a compound," that pure Oneness is nihilistic, for "if it should be one body it must remain as dead, having no life, neither death, nor corruption nor incorruption." Without plurality, Lehi says, "there is no God. And if there is no God we are not, neither the earth; ... wherefore, all things must have vanished away" (2 Nephi 2:11, 13). For Lehi, a monist metaphysics like that of Josiah is nihilistic and fundamentally false.

"Fourth, they were not to look up to the sun, moon and stars, the host of heaven, lest they be tempted to worship them, and the punishment for such worship was death by stoning (Deuteronomy 17:2-5). The ancient title for the LORD, however, had been LORD of Hosts — the same heavenly hosts — a title that appears 56 times in Isaiah 1-39, 40 times in Jeremiah, and 42 times in Zechariah, but only 6 times in Isaiah 40-55 and not at all in Ezekiel. It seems that the title LORD of Hosts had characterized the Zion and temple tradition of the monarchy, hence its use by Isaiah of Jerusalem, and by Zechariah who was trying to reestablish this after the exile. Its absence from Ezekiel, who was a temple priest immediately after Josiah's changes and went into exile (Ezek. 1:3), suggests that he had adopted new ways and abandoned the hosts. In ancient poetry, the hosts were the stars, but they fought the wars of the LORD and so must have been warrior angels (e.g., Judges 5:20, 23)." Margaret Barker, *The Mother of the Lord* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 32, 35.

34. Val Larsen, "First Visions and Last Sermons," 55-56.

The person Lehi was speaking to as he made this argument, his son Jacob, also seems to allude to and deprecate this change in theology. In his introduction to the martyr Zenos's Allegory of the Olive, in which God portrays himself³⁵ as a social being working with other similar beings, Jacob wrote (interpolations added):

[Josiah's Jerusalem] Jews were a stiffnecked people; and they despised the words of plainness, and killed the prophets [Zenos and Zenoch], and sought for things that they could not understand [a radically other, Solitary God]. Wherefore, because of their blindness, which blindness came by looking beyond the mark [Gods in form like us], they must needs fall; for God hath taken away his plainness from them [the *Sôd Elohim* with its Divine Family (Father, Mother, Son) and Heavenly Host], and delivered unto them many things which they cannot understand [a Solitary Sovereign, outside of space and time, who is pure BEING], because they desired it. And because they desired it God hath done it, that they may stumble. (Jacob 4:14)

Lehi's son Nephi also alludes to and deprecates this change in theology as he opens the Book of Mormon with a Lehi experience — the receipt of a sacred book — which parallels the experience that motivated Josiah to initiate his Deuteronomist purge. All Nephi's Lehi parallels seem calculated to discredit their Josiah counterparts. They discredit them by having obviously superior theological provenance and diametrically opposite theological meaning. Thus, the initial location of Josiah's book is the temple, the house of God's *name*³⁶ where the mercy seat, God's symbolic throne, is located. The initial location of Lehi's book is heaven, the place the temple merely symbolizes, where the actual throne of God and God Himself are located. Hilkiah, the human High Priest, chief administrator of the temple, sends the book to Josiah. El

35. Zenos frames the allegory as a story told by God: "thus saith the Lord" (Jacob 1:3).

36. "Consistent with this Deuteronomist denial that God could be seen was Josiah's militant aniconism, his aggressive destruction of all images of purported gods. Likewise consistent was Deuteronomy's new 'name theology,' the repeated suggestion that it was the imperceptible, intangible name of God, not God himself as previously suggested, which dwelled in the Holy of Holies (e.g., Deuteronomy 14:23, 16:2, 26:2)." Val Larsen, "Josiah to Zoram to Sherem to Jarom and The Big Little Book of Omni," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 44 (2021): 222.

Elyon, the Most High God and divine High Priest, who sits upon the heavenly throne and administers heaven and earth, sends the book to Lehi. Hilkiyah gives the book to Shaphan, the scribe, who carries it to Josiah accompanied by other scribes. These scribes bearing and reading texts mark the advent of a text-centered, sophic, rabbinic religion,³⁷ that will reject Jesus, God with God, when he comes to them in the meridian of time. El Elyon gives the book to Yahweh, ben Elohim, who carries it to Lehi accompanied by twelve of the Host of Heaven.³⁸ This divine Son and his apostle companions anticipate the advent of the mantic,³⁹ revelatory religion they will promulgate in the meridian of time. Josiah's book prophesies that Jerusalem will be destroyed because it believes in and worships other gods with God. Lehi's book prophesies that Jerusalem will be destroyed because it fails to worship God with God, the Messiah who will be sent to redeem the world, and who works, side by side, in heaven and on earth, with the divine Father, Mother, Holy Ghost, and Heavenly Host.

God's approval of Lehi and the patriarchs' theology and his disapproval of the new Deuteronomist theology is reflected in Nephi's contrasting uses of the expression *carried away* in his account of Lehi's First Vision. Lehi, he tells us, is "carried away" in vision to heaven (1 Nephi 1:8). He will also be carried to a symbolic heaven, the Promised Land. Those who embrace Deuteronomist theology, Lehi prophesies, speaking in the voice of God, will be "carried away captive into Babylon," a symbolic hell and striking contrast with Lehi's Promised Land (1 Nephi 1:13).

Theosis in the Visions of Lehi and Nephi

The visions of both Lehi and Nephi are foundational in the Book of Mormon. The key to understanding both Lehi and Nephi is understanding the visions they received.

37. The origin of Rabbinic Judaism "had its roots in the time of Josiah when the process of canonization of scripture started [and when] in national, social, and military matters the written scribal Torah already prevailed." Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomist School* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972): 162–63.

38. Read *in situ*, it is highly unlikely that Lehi would have recognized the twelve as future apostles. That is a New Testament reading of the text.

39. H. Curtis Wright, "A Sophic and a Mantic People," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (1991): 51–65, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol31/iss3/5>.

Lehi and the *Sôd Elohim*

Lehi's story begins in the desert outside of Jerusalem, a prototypical location for theophany and the commissioning of a prophet, when a pillar of fire descends and sits before him upon an unhewn stone.⁴⁰ Evoking as it does the burning bush and the pillar of fire that nightly led Israel during the exodus, this pillar signifies Lehi's calling to be a new prophet who will lead Israel out of the new Egypt Jerusalem has become, then on to the Promised Land. Evoking as it likewise does the holocaust offering on the temple's unhewn stone altar and the *eben shetiya*, the unhewn rock floor of the Holy of Holies where the throne of God sits, this fire on unhewn stone likewise signifies Lehi's calling to be the High Priest of his people, one who will build altars, offer sacrifices, and lead the people through the veil back to the throne of God.⁴¹

After being credentialed in the desert as prophet and priest,⁴² Lehi returns home, a symbolic act because he will next pass through the veil and see into heaven, our true home. He casts himself on his bed, then "overcome with the Spirit, [is] carried away in a vision." As we shall see through multiple examples, the enrolling role the Spirit plays is vitally important. The Spirit carries Lehi into the presence of God, whom he sees "sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels." The Spirit enrolls Lehi as one of the Heavenly Host.⁴³ As John W. Welch says, "he functionally, if not constitutionally, join[s] the

40. Adam S. Miller, *Future Mormon: Essays in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016), 15–18. See also Val Larsen, "First Visions and Last Sermons," 59.

41. Don Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages: Reconstructing the Book of Mormon's Missing Stories* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2019), 145–46.

42. Adam S. Miller, "Burnt Offerings: Favor, Afflictions, and the Mysteries of God," in *A Dream, a Rock, and a Pillar of Fire: Reading 1 Nephi 1*, ed. Adam S. Miller (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2017), 17–29, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/2/>.

43. "Following his interaction with the council mediator, Jesus Christ, Lehi could perform the very same act identified with the 'numberless concourses of angels' (1 Nephi 1:8). Given the way biblical prophets like Isaiah were seen as official members of the council, Nephi's account may suggest that Lehi had become one of these angels, or messengers, praising God." David E. Bokovoy, "On Christ and Covenants: An LDS Reading of Isaiah's Prophetic Call," *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 3 (2011): 38–39, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1016&context=sba>. See also Michaël Ulrich, "Joining the Heavenly Chorus," in *A Dream, a Rock, and a Pillar of Fire: Reading 1 Nephi 1*, ed. Adam S. Miller (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2017), 111–23, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/2/>.

council as one of its members.”⁴⁴ Lehi next sees One, a divine being, “descending out of the midst of heaven” whose “luster [is] above that of the sun at noon-day.” The One is followed by twelve other seemingly divine beings whose “brightness did exceed that of the stars in the firmament.” The One comes to Lehi, gives him a book, and bids him read. He reads that Jerusalem is about to be destroyed because it has rejected the One, the Messiah God with God, who has been tasked in heaven to redeem the earth.

In situ, the One and the Twelve who descend from heaven are divine members of the *Sôd Elohim*: a Ben Elohim and some Heavenly Host. Lehi certainly would have seen them that way. Nephi marks their membership in the *Sôd* by associating them with symbols of divine beings in the old theology: the sun and the stars, the very symbols Josiah took care to remove from the temple and destroy in the Kidron valley (2 Kings 23:4–6, 11).⁴⁵ The obvious divinity of the One who descends in this episode will later be underlined in Lehi’s dream. Continuing the mission there that he begins here, Yahweh will lead Lehi back to his *Sôd* home. The divinity of the twelve descending beings of light will also later be underlined when an angel tells Nephi that they will sit as last judgment judges (1 Nephi 12:9), a quintessentially divine role. Last judgement is the prerogative of the Father, who signifies the Son’s divinity by conferring that role on him.⁴⁶ The Son, in turn, signifies the divinity in the Twelve by conferring the judgment role on them. Like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the exalted 12 apostle judges at the last judgment “sit upon thrones, and are not angels but are gods” (D&C 132:37).

44. John W. Welch, “The Calling of Lehi as a Prophet in the World of Jerusalem,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 432, <https://archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/calling-lehi-prophet-world-jerusalem>.

45. The Host of Heaven are framed as both servants or armies of God (1 Kings 22:19) and as stars in the heavens (Deuteronomy 4:19; Isaiah 24:21–23; 40:26; Jeremiah 8:2). “Ahaz had a strong interest in the heavenly host: the temple roof with its altars, built by several kings, was remembered as the upper chamber of Ahaz (2 Kings 23:12), and presumably the altars were for the cult of the host of heaven. A century later, such worship was condemned by Zephaniah — ‘those who bow down on the roofs to the host of heaven’ (Zeph. 1:5) — and by Jeremiah (Jer. 19:13; 32:29), but the heavenly host were part of the older religion. The stars had been warriors in the ancient wars of the LORD (Judges 5:20).” Margaret Barker, *The Mother of the Lord*, 93.

46. John 5:22: “For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son.”

Having read the New Testament, we, of course, recognize the Twelve as Christ's human apostles,⁴⁷ but they are not merely human. And it is very important for us to combine Lehi's recognition of their divinity with our recognition of their humanity. Lehi's First Vision is a temple vision, and in temple contexts a member of the *Sôd*, i.e., the archangel Michael, may create worlds as a divine being, then inhabit them as a human being. In temple contexts, the descending Heavenly Host Lehi sees, i.e., Peter, James, and John, may blur the boundary between heaven and earth, between the divine and the human, working to redeem humanity side by side with the One they follow.

The descent of the Twelve from heaven affirms two vital truths: a) the Twelve and all of us are divine beings passing briefly through mortality, whose proper telos is to rejoin the *Sôd Elohim* with our divinity fully expressed, and b) the Gods develop our inherent divinity by involving us in their divine work. Rather than reserving the soul saving for themselves, they involve all who are willing in soul-saving apprenticeships. Where their companions, the Heavenly Host, have the capacity to play a redeeming role, they assign them that role.

Thus, when the Son hands Lehi the heavenly book, he "inducts him into the chorus of angels around the throne." Speaking with the "tongue of angels,"⁴⁸ Lehi exclaims with that chorus "Great and marvelous are thy works, O Yahweh, El, Shaddai," praising the governing heads and loving core of the heavenly council, Son Yahweh, Father El, and Mother Shaddai.⁴⁹ "[F]illed with the Spirit of the Lord," i.e., after the Holy Ghost plays for Lehi its *Sôd*-enrolling role, Lehi receives the Heavenly Host honor of voicing God's word of warning: "Wo, wo, unto Jerusalem, for

47. The word *apostle* and its derivatives are never mentioned in the Old Testament.

48. Several scholars have noted that angelic speech may be a form of deification. See Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology*, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2016), 51–52; John W. Welch, "The Calling of Lehi as a Prophet," 432; and Neal Rappleye, "With the Tongue of Angels": Angelic Speech as a Form of Deification," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 21 (2016): 303–23, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/with-the-tongue-of-angels-angelic-speech-as-a-form-of-deification/>.

49. Lehi praises the "Lord God Omnipotent." These terms have corresponding Hebrew meanings that were translated into English from the original Hebrew. The terms can be back translated to recover the original term. Back translating these words through the King James Bible to the original Hebrew, we get *Yahweh* (Lord), *El* or *Elohim* (God), and *Shaddai* (Almighty).

I have seen thine abominations! ... Jerusalem [will] be destroyed, and the inhabitants thereof; many [will] perish by the sword, and many [will] be carried away captive into Babylon” (1 Nephi 1:13–14). So Lehi’s First Vision ends with the new prophet/priest cast as God’s companion and surrogate. Lehi has already modeled for us incorporation within the saving circle of love that is the *Sôd Elohim*.

But the vision is not finished. When the Son descends from the throne of Father El and comes to Lehi in that First Vision, he has a two-part charge. He will first give Lehi the book that will lead him out of Jerusalem. He will then fulfill the temple task of leading Lehi through life in a dark and dreary world and bringing him again home to the *Sôd Elohim*. There, Lehi will be incorporated in the *Sôd* circle of love through the ministrations of the two most salient objects of the Father’s love, the divine Mother and Son, Shaddai and Yahweh, who will henceforth be consistently coupled as they jointly work to save souls.

So having given Lehi the book that led him out of Jerusalem in his First Vision, the Son fulfills the second part of his charge in Lehi’s dream. This dream, to reiterate, should be read as a continuation of the First Vision.⁵⁰ Like the vision, the dream will begin in the wilderness and end at the *Sôd*. It begins when the One, the Son, still dressed in white as when he descended from heaven, approaches Lehi and says, come, *follow me* (1 Nephi 8:6–7). Lehi faithfully follows his guide for some time through “a dark and dreary waste,” wilderness symbol of a challenging mortal life. After many hours in this darkness, Lehi prays to Yahweh, “the Lord,” for mercy. His prayer is immediately answered. He sees a sacred Tree, set in a spacious field, whose fruit is “desirable to make one *happy*,” in Hebrew אֲשֵׁרֵי, *ashre*. Symbol and sound⁵¹ link this Tree with Asherah, אֲשֵׁרָה, the divine Mother, whose symbol is a tree trained to grow in the shape of a menorah.⁵² The Tree Lehi sees bears a fruit that like Yahweh’s sun-lustrous robe is “white, to exceed all whiteness that I had ever seen” and “sweet, above all that I had ever before tasted” (1 Nephi 8:11). The

50. “[O]ne possible reason is that the revelations Nephi received in 1 Nephi 11 can be seen, in part, as divinely given interpretations of Lehi’s throne theophany.” Ulrich, “Joining the Heavenly Chorus,” 111–12.

51. The words אֲשֵׁרֵי (*ashre*) and אֲשֵׁרָה (*Asherah*) differ only in their final Hebrew consonant or, with English sounds, only in their final vowel sounds: -ee versus -ah. See Daniel C. Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 23–24, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol9/iss2/4/>.

52. Joan E. Taylor, “The Asherah, the Menorah, and the Sacred Tree,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 66 (1995): 33.

Son is the fruit borne by the Mother Tree.⁵³ Thus, we have in the dream the pairing of Mother and Son, a pairing that will become a powerful motif that underscores the critical role the Mother plays in saving us.

Now having partaken of the sacramental fruit and been, himself, enrolled in the *Sôd*, Lehi takes up the Heavenly Host role of apprentice soul saver. He looks around and sees Sariah, Sam, and Nephi, who have not yet been saved. He beckons them in a loud voice to join him at the Tree and partake of the fruit, which they do. He beckons Laman and Lemuel as well, but they refuse to join him at the Tree. If we understand the setting of this scene, their refusal is unsurprising.

Lehi's dream has the topography of Jerusalem. Lehi is located in the one place where the divine Son and Mother might most aptly be worshipped — the Mount of Olives. This is the place where Gethsemane will be located, the place where Christ will ascend into heaven following his earthly ministry, and where, at the Second Coming, he will descend from heaven and enter the temple through the eastern gate, in one Jewish tradition, accompanied by the Shekhina, the Feminine Divine.⁵⁴ This is also the place where a sacred Asherah Tree had stood from the time of Solomon until the time of Lehi, when Josiah chopped it down (2 Kings 23:13–14).

On the other side of the Kidron valley, opposite the Mount of Olives, stands Mount Moriah, the temple mount, the highest point in Jerusalem, with the temple sitting at its summit. The great and spacious temple,⁵⁵ high in the air, and the other great building in Jerusalem, the king's palace, are full of high-status people, priests by mandate (Exodus 28:5–8, 39; 39:27–29) and princes by custom, dressed in exceedingly fine clothing. Influenced by Josiah, these Jerusalem elite, in buildings that will soon be utterly destroyed, mock, persecute, and kill those who, like Lehi, worship Sons of God at sacred Mother Trees. In response to the mocking, some who have joined Lehi at the Tree become ashamed and fall away. The responses of Laman and Lemuel and the unvaliant worshippers at the Tree have important implications for the location or

53. 1 Nephi 11:7: "...after thou hast beheld the tree which bore the fruit which thy father tasted ..."

54. Howard Schwartz, *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 55–56.

55. The Hebrew word translated *building* was probably *Hekal*, a word that can refer to any great building, e.g., the palace or temple. But it specifically refers to the large, middle room in Solomon's temple. See D. John Butler, *Plain and Precious Things: The Temple Religion of the Book of Mormon's Visionary Men* (self-published, 2012), 57.

boundary of the *Sôd Elohim* and for the ontology and moral obligations of the Heavenly Host.

In Lehi's First Vision, Father El and the concourses of angels were located in heaven. In Lehi's dream, Mother and Son, the sacred Tree and its Fruit, are located on earth. The important point is that the *Sôd Elohim* exists in both places. Its boundaries circumscribe all of heaven but also sacred places and people on earth.⁵⁶

Moral agency also exists in both places. The Heavenly Host, as described in the Old Testament, are moral agents who sometimes act contrary to God's will⁵⁷ and are then expelled from the council.⁵⁸ The same is true for manifestations of the *Sôd* on earth. In Lehi's theology and ours, moral agency creates real drama, real joy and pain for *Sôd* members. For Lehi, this drama and pain is most manifest in his dealings with Laman and Lemuel. His relationship with these rebellious sons is an important element of this *Sôd* narrative because Lehi models the unfailing love that Mormon will later say is obligatory when *Sôd* members interact with others who reject them and their beliefs (Moro 9:4–6). That love is sometimes expressed in affirmation and praise, sometimes in sharp rebukes.⁵⁹

Lehi and his eldest sons are at odds, much evidence suggests, because Laman and Lemuel are devout followers of Josiah,⁶⁰ the great reforming king of their youth. They agree with the people in the dream's great and spacious buildings. They testify, "we know that the people who were in the land of Jerusalem were a righteous people; for they kept the statutes and judgements of the Lord, and all his commandments according to the Law of Moses; wherefore, we know that they are a righteous people" (1 Nephi 17:22). Nephi confirms what they themselves say: "they were

56. Someone might object that God must be present for the *Sôd* to exist. But as Mathew 18:20 tells us, wherever those committed to the Savior gather, he is there with them: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

57. Orthodox Christianity views the Hosts of Heaven "as spiritual beings created by God which are either in service or rebellion against him" (Father Stephen De Young, "The Hosts of Heaven," *Ancient Faith* (blog), March 19, 2019, <https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/wholecounsel/2019/03/19/the-hosts-of-heaven/>).

58. For example, "a third part of the hosts of heaven turned he away from me because of their agency" (D&C 29:36).

59. E.g., D&C 95:2: "Wherefore, ye must needs be chastened and stand rebuked before my face ..."

60. Julie M. Smith, "Huldah's Long Shadow," in *A Dream, a Rock, and a Pillar of Fire: Reading 1 Nephi 1*, ed. Adam S. Miller (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2017), 3–4.

like unto the Jews who were at Jerusalem, who sought to take away the life of my father” (1 Nephi 2:13). Laman and Lemuel behave as the book Josiah received mandates they behave. Deuteronomy 13 requires them to kill “a prophet or dreamer of dreams,” even one who like Lehi and Nephi “giveth thee a sign or a wonder.... That prophet or dreamer of dreams shall be put to death” if he causes you “to go after other gods,” e.g., Son and Mother Gods. And “if thy brother, the son of thy mother ... say[s] let us go and serve other gods ... thou shalt surely kill him” (Deuteronomy 13:6–9). Laman and Lemuel are motivated by fierce piety.

They predictably refuse to join Lehi at the sacred Mother Tree on the Mount of Olives because it is the Tree their hero had cut down. And they first rebel against Lehi when, imitating Moses (Exodus 3:18), he ritually separates himself from Josiah’s Jerusalem Jews with a three-day journey, then violating the Deuteronomist mandate that sacrifices be made only in Jerusalem and only by a Levite, builds an altar and offers sacrifices that signify the Son he worships (1 Nephi 2:6–7).

We thus find that the people and places in Lehi’s dream correspond closely, as is often true in dreams, to the people, places, and events that are salient in the dreamer’s waking life. Lehi’s dream has obvious local significance. The politicians and priests who persecuted him are there, still pointing and mocking. Total destruction impends for their palace and temple high on Mount Moriah. Mists of darkness arise from the Kidron Valley, where Josiah burned symbols of the divine Mother and the Host of Heaven. Dangerous flash floods flow through the valley, as does the Gihon spring, a fountain of pure water. The sacred Tree is on the Mount of Olives, where the Asherah tree stood for 350 years. Josiah’s disciples, Laman and Lemuel, being true to their Solitary Sovereign God, refuse to worship the divine Mother and Son. And the elites persuade many others to give up their worship of Mother and Son on the Mount of Olives and make their way back across Kidron to the palace and temple high in the air.

As his account of the dream ends, Lehi focuses on the most local, personal meaning of all: on the wellbeing of his own family. The dream ends with a family group — father Lehi, mother Sariah, older brother Sam, younger brother Nephi — standing together at the divine Mother Tree partaking of the sacramental fruit. But “Laman and Lemuel partook not of the fruit.” Lehi is preoccupied with their refusal to do so. Knowing that the tree and its fruit are essential for salvation, he exhorts Laman and Lemuel “with all the feeling of a tender parent, that they would hearken to his words, that perhaps the Lord would be merciful

to them,” but true to their Deuteronomist faith, they do not heed his exhortation.

Nephi and the *Sôd Elohim*

Fortunately, Nephi is not satisfied to see only the immediate, local, familial meaning. He has a burning question: what does the dream mean? He is full of desire to know any mysteries of God that are encoded in the dream, so seeks further enlightenment:

And ... I, Nephi, having heard all the words of my father, concerning the things which he saw in a vision, and also the things which he spake by the power of the Holy Ghost, ... was desirous also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things, by the power of the Holy Ghost.... For he that diligently seeketh shall find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost. (1 Nephi 10:17, 19)

In response to his earnest search for understanding, Nephi has his own visionary experience of the dream that reveals what its implications are for his immediate family, his future posterity, and all the world. Nephi learns that when the One descended from heaven in Lehi's First Vision, he was charged to lead not just Lehi, but Lehi's family, and all others who will follow him back to the sacred Tree. The Tree is the *axis mundi*, the point at which heaven and earth intersect.

Nephi's vision begins where Lehi's dream left off: with the family group of father, mother, older brother, and Nephi. But the group of related beings gathered at the Tree on earth is now gathered in heaven. And the divine destiny of Nephi and each member of his family seems to be revealed. The destiny of father Lehi is revealed when he is replaced by El Elyon, the Most-High God, model of the divine Father Lehi may become. The destiny of mother Sariah is revealed when she is replaced by the divine Mother, Shaddai, model of the divine Mother Sariah may become. The destiny of Sam is revealed when he is replaced by the divine Older Brother, Yahweh, Redeemer and Exemplar for Sam and all other human beings who are charged to become like him. Nephi is the one constant between the two family groups. His kinship to his earthly father, mother, and older brother is obvious. As he now stands in the presence of the corresponding divine Beings, he is transformed as each member of his family was symbolically transformed. His own divine destiny begins to be revealed. He is *Abiel* (son of the Father), *Ammishaddai* (kin

of the Mother) and *Abijah* (brother of the Son, Yahweh). He now has the experience not of the man he has been but of the god he will eventually become.

Table 1. Human Family becomes Divine Family.

Lehi's Dream Earthly Kin	Nephi's Vision Heavenly Kin
Father Lehi	Divine Father, El Elyon
Mother Sariah	Divine Mother, Shaddai
Older Brother Sam	Divine Older Brother, Yahweh
Nephi	Nephi
Question: What does it mean?	Answer: Theosis, deification.

Like Lehi, Nephi is led to the Tree by the pre-mortal Yahweh, the Spirit of the Lord, the One who descended in Lehi's First Vision. Nephi then encounters those whose names his father had exclaimed in praise: Yahweh, El, and Shaddai. He meets them not on the earth but in heaven, their and our true home. His experience begins when he is "caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceedingly high mountain" (1 Nephi 11:1).⁶¹ Now at the threshold of heaven, Yahweh asks him what he wants. Nephi replies, "I desire to behold the things which my father saw." Yahweh then asks whether he believes his father saw the Tree. When Nephi replies that he believes all the words of his father, the gates of heaven suddenly open and he is ushered into the presence of God. Yahweh exclaims "Hosanna to *Adonai*,⁶² *El Elyon*," signifying that Nephi now stands before the Father, El Elyon, the Most-High God.⁶³ In the temple manner, Yahweh now gives Nephi a two-step introduction to the Mother, emphasizing as he does her close connection with himself. Nephi is first told what will happen. It then happens.

Yahweh says, "Behold this thing shall be given unto thee for a sign, that after thou hast beheld the tree which bore the fruit which thy father tasted, thou shalt also behold a *man* descending out of heaven, and ... ye

61. Verse 1 says "caught away," but in three subsequent references to this event, Nephi describes himself as being "carried away" in the Spirit (1 Nephi 14:30; 15:1; and 2 Nephi 4:25), aligning himself not only with Lehi (1 Nephi 1:8), but also Mary (1 Nephi 11:19), the 12 apostles (1 Nephi 11:29), King Lamoni (Alma 19:12) and Alma₂ (Alma 29:16), all of whom were "carried away" by God or by the Spirit.

62. The word *Lord* in the King James Bible translates two different words, *Yahweh* and *Adonai*. *Adonai* is a plural meaning *Lords*, which fits with the plural *Elohim*, meaning Gods. Thus, in this context, *Adonai* is more likely than *Yahweh* to be the Hebrew word that is translated *Lord*.

63. Neal Rappleye, "'With the Tongue of Angels,'" 313.

shall bear record that it is the *Son of God*.” These words couple Mother and Son, marking how their actions are intertwined. And they confound *man* and *God*, an important motif, marking them as being of one kind. What Yahweh had described as plan, now begins to happen. “And I looked and beheld a tree; and it was like unto the tree which my father had seen; and the beauty thereof was far beyond, yea, exceeding of all beauty; and the whiteness thereof did exceed the whiteness of the driven snow. And it came to pass after I had seen the tree, I said unto the Spirit: I behold thou hast shown unto me the tree which is precious⁶⁴ above all.” Still in heaven, Nephi has encountered the divine Mother, in person or symbol, whose glory and beauty exceeds anything possible on earth.

As he had stood with his father, mother, and older brother in Lehi’s dream, Nephi now stands in the presence of Father El, Mother Shaddai, and Son Yahweh. The divine transformation of each family member who stood with him partaking of the Tree in Lehi’s dream signifies his own transformation, a transformation that is underscored in text that again blurs the distinction between man and God: “for *I* spake unto him as a *man* speaketh, for *I* beheld *he* was in the form of a *man*, yet nevertheless, *I* knew that it was the *Spirit of the Lord*; and *he* spake unto *me* as a *man* speaketh with *another*” (1 Nephi 11:11). Is Yahweh a *man* or a *God*? Is Nephi a *man* or a *god*? Both are both, or eventually will be both! And Nephi’s symbolic transformation is powerfully emblematic of the proper telos of all human souls. Each of us, like Nephi, are personally known by Father, Mother, and Son, and each needs to return to them and, having been deified, individually stand in intimate relationship with them.

Nephi now asks for a deeper understanding of the divine Mother/Tree who stands before him. To more fully reveal who she is, Yahweh commands Nephi to look at him, but when Nephi does, he disappears. The scene suddenly shifts. Nephi is now on the earth, in Nazareth where he sees a virgin who has the same two attributes that characterized the divine Mother in heaven, exceptional beauty and whiteness.⁶⁵ Nephi’s new companion, an angel who has descended from

64. The word *precious* is used nine times in the remainder of the vision to refer to things wrongly taken out of scripture, a major theme in the vision. Repetition of the word *precious*, first used here in connection with the divine Mother, may suggest that Mother in Heaven is one of the plainest and most precious things taken from scripture.

65. While Mary is connected with the divine Mother by sharing the same two attributes, exceptional beauty and whiteness, for Mary, these attributes are exceptional by earthly standards. Mary is “most beautiful and fair above all other [earthly] virgins.” The beauty and whiteness of the divine Mother is transcendent,

heaven to replace Yahweh, who disappeared, asks Nephi if he knows “the condescension of God.” The phrase refers in the first instance to Yahweh’s sudden disappearance and descent from heaven to earth, but it is probably a double entendre. Moments before, Nephi personally experienced the “condescension of god” as he, having the experience of a god, moved instantaneously from heaven to earth. The angel now tells Nephi that “the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God, *after the manner of the flesh*.” The qualifier, “after the manner of the flesh,” implies that the Son of God has another Mother, *after the manner of the spirit*, the divine Mother from whom, as promised, Yahweh has descended out of heaven.

Nephi now witnesses the virgin Mary have the same experience he just had. Like him, “she was carried away in the Spirit.”⁶⁶ Time passes during which she, too, presumably encounters the Father, the Mother, and the Son in heaven. This encounter reveals that Mary, like Nephi, is intrinsically divine.⁶⁷ “And after she had been carried away in the Spirit for the space of a time, the angel spake unto me, saying: Look!” The descent of the Son, which began in the presence of the Mother/Tree in

“far beyond, yea, exceeding all beauty” and whiteness that exceeds all possible earthly whiteness.

66. 1 Nephi 11:19 mentions twice that Mary was “carried away in the Spirit.”

67. If Mary’s experience parallels Nephi’s, she stands in heaven with Father, Mother, and Son/Brother. The corresponding earthly group would be Joseph, the father; Mary, the Mother; and Christ, both Brother and Son. Given that she played a role in human history arguably second only to that of the Son she bore and raised, there is a strong *prima facie* case that Mary has the status of Heavenly Host. Details in the Book of Mormon confirm her importance and connection with heaven. She is linked to the divine Mother through shared attributes of beauty and whiteness. Her importance and tight connection with her Son is evident in King Benjamin’s great discourse, which positions God the Father and Mary in the middle of the atonement, between Gethsemane and the Cross. Benjamin says Christ “shall suffer temptations, and pain of body, hunger, thirst, and fatigue, even more than man can suffer, except it be unto death; for behold, blood cometh from every pore, so great shall be his anguish [in Gethsemane] for the wickedness and the abominations of his people.” He then pauses his description of the atonement to feature the Father and Mary, each of whom, as noted in the text, suffered with the Son. He then takes us to the cross: “after all this they shall consider him a man, and say that he hath a devil, and shall scourge him, and shall crucify him” (Mosiah 3:7–9). We thus find the divine agent of heaven, Mary, at both the beginning and end of the most important human life ever lived. Perhaps the elements of divinity in Mary are also evident in Christ’s instruction that John take her away (John 19:25–27). Perhaps as with the Father, she had to depart because Christ could not bear the sin of the world fully alone while she remained with him.

heaven when Yahweh commanded Nephi to “Look,” now ends. The angel repeats Yahweh’s earlier command that Nephi “Look!” “And I looked and beheld the virgin again, bearing a child in her arms.” The angel now says, “Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father!” As he was promised in heaven, Nephi now “behold[s the] man descending out of heaven, and [can] bear record that it is the Son of God.” He has seen Mary descend out of heaven carrying the Son of the Eternal Father inside her, and he has seen her holding the Lamb of God in her arms.

The title here given the Son, *Lamb of God*, is significant. It provides a hermeneutical key to what follows. The angel now asks Nephi, “Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw?” Nephi answers, “Yea, it is the Love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men.” In all but two of its 39 Old Testament and 46 Book of Mormon appearances, the word *shed* is connected with blood, often, the blood of a sacrificial lamb. The Love of God is the Son, the fruit of the Tree, the Being who voluntarily sheds his sacramental blood each week, throughout the world, to redeem the hearts of the children of men.

But the preeminent object and sign of God’s love is also the Mother,⁶⁸ who is inseparably connected with the Son. Thus, Nephi adds that the Tree of Life, from which the sacramental fruit hung in Lehi’s dream, is also the object and sign of God’s love, as is a fountain of pure water that flows from the Tree.⁶⁹ In the narrative that follows, Nephi uses these two symbols of the divine Mother, first the fountain, then the Tree, to reveal the symbiotic relationship Mother and Son have as they work together to redeem humanity.

Immediately following his declaration that Tree and Fountain are also the object and sign of God’s love, Nephi recounts the baptism of Christ. Baptism is an inherently female symbol, a kind of birth, and Nephi links Christ’s baptism with his physical birth, characterizing both with the distinctive epithet “the condescension of God” (1 Nephi 11:16, 26). So juxtaposed as it is here, the maternal fountain of pure water that flows from the Tree becomes the waters of baptism. As in heaven, so

68. “Both tree and fountain, Nephi tells us, signify the ‘love of God’ (1 Nephi 11: 22, 25). The divine Mother and divine Son are the ‘love of God’ (1 Nephi 11: 22, 25) in multiple senses. They are the objects of God’s love but also preeminent earthly manifestations of his love for all humanity because they make people *ashre*, happy, full of joy (1 Nephi 8: 9, 12).” Val Larsen, “Hidden in Plain View: Mother in Heaven in Scripture,” *SquareTwo* 8, no. 2 (2015), <https://squaretwo.org/Sq2ArticleLarsenHeavenlyMother.html>.

69. This fountain is likely the Gihon Spring, associated with the Mother God, and also known as the Virgin Spring. Margaret Barker, *Mother of the Lord*, 82, 100.

on earth, our divine Mother plays a role in our spiritual birth/rebirth. Christ sets the example, here rising from the amniotic waters to a new life, a new ministry as Savior of the world. Following his example, we too rise to new spiritual life, born of and cleansed by both the symbolic amniotic waters of the Mother and the redeeming blood of the Son.

And as our spirits enter our bodies at our physical birth, so at our spiritual rebirth through baptism, the Holy Ghost descends upon us. Mother, Son, and Holy Ghost join together with the Father in whose name we are baptized to enroll us as members of the *Sôd Elohim*. By being filled with the Holy Ghost, we become Heavenly Host, *malākîm*, angels, companions and surrogates of the *Sôd* principals. Nephi later explains: “by following your Lord and your Savior down into the water, according to his word, behold, then shall ye receive the Holy Ghost... and then can ye speak with the tongue of angels And now, how could ye speak with the tongue of angels save it were by the Holy Ghost? Angels speak by the power of the Holy Ghost; wherefore, they speak the words of Christ” (2 Nephi 31:13, 32:2–3).

But Nephi’s experience in this vision suggests that we become more than mere angels. We become gods. Nephi, who stood in the *Sôd Elohim* at the beginning of his vision declares that his own words, like those of his father, are the words of the Gods: “if ye shall believe in Christ ye will believe in these words, for they are the words of Christ, and he hath given them unto me.... Christ will show unto you, with power and great glory, that they are his words, at the last day; and you and I shall stand face to face before his bar; and ye shall know that I have been commanded of him to write these things” (2 Nephi 33:10–11). Along with the twelve divine apostle judges, exalted Nephi will appear as a divine witness or judge at the judgment bar.⁷⁰

Nephi’s vision of Yahweh’s ministry ends at a Tree (Acts 5:30), the cross, where the Savior’s body hangs as the white fruit hung from the sacred Tree in Lehi’s vision. Mary, the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh, stands at the foot of the cross and shares the pain of her Son (John 19:25–27). As Simeon had prophesied, that which pierces him “shall pierce through thy own soul also” (Luke 2:35). In both surrogate (Mary) and symbol (Tree), the Mother of the Son of God after the manner of the spirit is also present with her Son while he suffers for the sins of all her other children. And the symbols suggest that, like Mary, the divine Mother is pierced as her Son is pierced. When the nails

70. And so will his brother Jacob (Jacob 6:13) and descendant (see 3 Nephi 5:20) Moroni (Moroni 10:34).

pierce his body, they also pierce the cross, the Tree, symbol of the body of the divine Mother. She deeply feels his pain. Her suffering his suffering may be reflected in an Old Testament era scripture quoted in the early Christian work, *the Epistle of Barnabas*: “[God] points to the cross of Christ in another prophet, who saith, ‘And when shall these things be accomplished? And the Lord saith, When a tree shall be bent down, and again arise, and when blood shall flow out of wood.’”⁷¹ These words may poetically describe the suffering of a divine Mother who feels the agony of and metaphorically bleeds with her Beloved Son.

For Christ to fully bear our sins, he had to lose his intimate connection with Father, Mother, and Holy Ghost. He could not have fully experienced the consequences of our sins, which include separation from the *Sôd Elohim*, if he had maintained his normal unity with them. That necessary separation is documented in Isaiah’s prophesy, “I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people there was none with me” (63:3). It is more proximately documented in Christ’s cry on the cross, “*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*” (Matthew 27:46). But while Christ could not be with them as he suffered, those who loved him could not avoid being with him. His suffering caused suffering for all who were unified with him in the *Sôd*’s circle of shared purpose and love. His pains pained the Father,⁷² Mother, Holy Ghost, and all the Host of Heaven. It takes nothing away from the Savior who fully bore the pain of our sins to know that his pains as our proxy were and are shared in substantial measure by all who profoundly love him. Indeed, our own broken-hearted contrition as we contemplate what he suffered on our behalf seems to be an essential component of our transformation into beings who “have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2; see also 2 Nephi 2:7; 3 Nephi 9:20).

The especially strong coupling of Mother and Son that is manifest in the visions of Lehi and Nephi is signified by the fact that the marks in the Son’s body are matched by marks in the Mother’s symbolic body. As Lehi taught (2 Nephi 2:15–27), our passage back to the *Sôd* is mediated by the Son but also by the divine Mother, who in symbol (the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil) facilitates our entry into mortal life where

71. Epistle of Barnabas in *The Sacred Writings of Barnabas* (Altenmünster, DEU: Juzzybee Verlag, 2012), 389.

72. Abraham’s suffering in the pending sacrifice of Isaac is meant to help us understand what the Father felt when his Son was sacrificed, but for the Father, with no reprieve from the fortunate sudden sighting of a ram caught in a thicket to replace the beloved Son.

we become as the Gods, knowing good and evil, and who in symbol (the Tree of Life) then facilitates our entry into eternal life where our divine potential is fulfilled.⁷³

Like Lehi, Nephi sees the Twelve Heavenly Host who descended with Yahweh in Lehi's First Vision. As previously noted, he sees them ultimately sitting as divine last judgment judges (1 Nephi 12:9). But he also witnesses a kind of echo of the collapse of Lehi's great and spacious temple, a collapse precipitated by the Jerusalem Jews rejection of the One and Twelve Heavenly Host who descended. That local event is echoed when Nephi attributes the collapse of his more cosmic great and spacious building, "the pride of the world" (1 Nephi 11:34–36), to its rejection of and fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

The vast scope of Nephi's vision makes it clear that he sees not as a man sees but as a god sees. Thus, he sees the history of his own descendants from beginning to end. He sees their wars across many generations, the destruction that precedes the visitation, then the visitation of Christ. He sees the twelve apostles chosen from among his descendants who also become divine last judgment judges (1 Nephi 12:10). He sees the apostasy of his people and their final destruction at the hands of the Lamanites, who themselves are then scattered by gentiles arriving in the New World.

At the conclusion of his God's-eye vision, Nephi sees John, one of the Twelve who descended with the One, still dressed in white. John, he is told, "shall write ... many things which thou hast seen" (1 Nephi 14:24). Among those things will be a more literal description of the Mother/Tree in Heaven, from whom Christ descends: "And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars: And she being with

73. "The richness and openness of the *Sôd* ethos is embodied in these trees. Having dwelled in heaven (or Eden) with God, we knew good in a flat, unidimensional way. But to fully comprehend what good was, we had to add another dimension to our experience. We had to taste evil. The fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is Satan. It is he that gives us the fruit — himself — and persuades us to eat it. Having eaten it, Eve knows who Satan is because she understands his essence, evil. Having encountered Satan, we have a new depth of knowledge about what good is, seeing it more clearly from its contrast with Satanic evil. Knowing Satan, having the taste of him in our mouths, separates us from the Elohim. But if, as in Lehi's dream, we come to the tree in its other guise, the Tree of Life that bears its other Son as fruit, if we then eat the fruit of that tree, the taste or influence of Satan is washed out of us and we qualify ourselves to be reintegrated into the divine *Sôd* — but now having the deep, full knowledge of good and evil that makes us as one of the Gods." Val Larsen, "First Visions and Last Sermons," 67.

child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered.... And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne” (Revelation 12:1–2, 5). John also explains why the divine Mother has become mostly invisible, except in symbols: “And when the dragon saw that he was cast unto the earth, he persecuted the woman which brought forth the man child.” “And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God” (Revelation 12:13, 6).

What is evident in Nephi’s expansive vision is the fact that the core members of the *Sôd Elohim* work together “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). All contribute and cooperate and, whenever possible, involve others in their work of salvation. Their involvement of others is not incidental, for others may become like them only if they, too, consecrate their time and talent to the soul-saving work of the *Sôd Elohim*. If we so consecrate ourselves, the divine destiny of Lehi, Sariah, Sam, and Nephi may be ours. Like them, we may be transformed into precisely the kind of divine being that our Father, Mother, and Older Brother now are. This is the essence of *hard* (full, extensive) theosis.

Theosis in the Visions of the Almas

While Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob vigorously defended the religion of Abraham, that faith did not prevail in the Small Plates.⁷⁴ By the time of Amaleki, last Small Plates author, revelation and prophesy have ceased. Amaleki must learn the gospel of Christ by reading the words of Nephi and Jacob. The prevailing religion among the Nephites appears to have been the one taught and administered by the priests of Noah, in which Christ and the *Sôd Elohim* play no part. It having been lost, the gospel of Christ must be restored through revelations to Benjamin and Abinadi, and those restorations do not seem to have fully reestablished understanding of the communal nature of the Gods and the *Sôd Elohim*. But there is, nevertheless, evidence that theosis and incorporation of followers of Christ into the *Sôd Elohim* continued. We discuss several examples below.

74. Val Larsen, “Josiah to Zoram to Sherem to Jarom and the Big Little Book of Omni,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 44 (2021): 248–56, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/josiah-to-zoram-to-sherem-to-jarom-and-the-big-little-book-of-omni/>.

Alma and the *Sôd Elohim*

The important prophet Alma began his ministry as one of the priests of Noah. His beliefs, like those of the other priests, did not include Christ. But having heard Abinadi preach, full of the power of the Spirit, Alma learns about Christ, repents of his sins, and begins teaching others who will listen (Mosiah 18:1). In a narrative containing elements that echo Nephi's vision, he takes his followers to a "fountain of pure water" near a grove of trees (Mosiah 18:5), a place reminiscent of the "fountain of living waters" near the tree of life in Nephi's vision. There, in the pure maternal waters of Mormon, Alma cries unto the Lord, "saying: O Lord, pour out thy Spirit upon thy servant, that he may do this work with holiness of heart. And when he had said these words, the Spirit of the Lord was upon him" (Mosiah 18:12–13). Alma now repeatedly uses variations on the word desire: "now, as ye are desirous," "if this be the desire of your hearts." These words, Matthew Bowen tells us, recall "Lehi and Nephi's visions of the tree of life and the fruit which was 'desirable to make one happy' (1 Nephi 8:10) and 'desirous above all other fruit' (8:12) and the 'love of God' which was 'most desirable above all things' (11:22). They also recall Lehi's being 'desirous that [his] family should partake of [the fruit] also' (8:12)."⁷⁵ So as Lehi, Sariah, Sam, and Nephi were enrolled in the *Sôd Elohim* by partaking of the fruit, Alma's followers are likewise enrolled through baptism.

These converts have a communal orientation. They love one another much as Christ loves them. They have compassion for others in need and are willing to suffer vicariously with them (Mosiah 18:8–9).⁷⁶ Manifesting the charity that "beareth all things" (Moroni 7:45), they are willing to "bear one another's burdens, that they may be light" (Mosiah 18:8). Again, manifesting the charity that "suffereth long, and is kind" (Moroni 7:45), they "mourn with those that mourn" and "comfort those that stand in need of comfort" (Mosiah 18:9–10). To have his Spirit more abundantly with them (Mosiah 18:9–10), they "stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things." And having done these things, they are "filled with the grace of God" (Mosiah 18:16).

75. Matthew L. Bowen, "Most Desirable above All Things: Onomastic Play on Mary and Mormon in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 13 (2015): 47, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/most-desirable-above-all-things-onomastic-play-on-mary-and-mormon-in-the-book-of-mormon/>.

76. D. Kelly Odgen and Andrew C. Skinner, *Verse by Verse: The Book of Mormon, Volume 1: 1 Nephi to Alma 29* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 362.

The text later underscores the fact that those who were baptized at the waters of Mormon have joined the *Sôd Elohim* by making the same covenant the Gods make. This happens when the Lord, himself, repeating the covenant language, fulfills the covenant obligations that the people took upon themselves through baptism. Alma's people fall into the hands of Noah's priests and allied Lamanites, who oppress them by loading them with tasks and forbidding them to pray. When the people silently pray for relief, the Lord, echoing their baptismal covenant, comforts them: "Lift up your heads and be of good comfort." He bears their burdens that they may be light: "I will ease the burdens ... put upon your shoulders that ... you cannot feel them. ... And now ... the burdens which were laid upon Alma and his brethren were made light" (Alma 24:13-15).⁷⁷ In using this language and doing these things, the Lord signifies that the covenant they have made is the covenant he has made. He and all the *Sôd* members are obligated to serve them by the same covenant that obligates them to serve one other. Having made and kept the same covenants as the Gods, Alma's converts are enrolled in the *Sôd Elohim*.

Alma₂ and the *Sôd Elohim*

Raised in Alma's righteous household, Alma₂ rebelled against his father's teachings.⁷⁸ Being "a very wicked and an idolatrous man" (Mosiah 27:8) and a man of many words, he used flattery to lead "many of the people to do after the manner of his iniquities" (Mosiah 27:8). But while he and the sons of Mosiah were "going about to destroy the church of God," an angel appears and admonishes them to "seek to destroy the church no more," even if they, themselves, would be destroyed (Mosiah 27:15; Alma 36:9, 11). Astonished by this encounter, Alma₂ falls into a stupor and for the space of two days and two nights experiences eternal damnation, "everlasting burning" (Mosiah 27:28).⁷⁹ Then, remembering the words of

77. Heather Hardy, "Another Testament of Jesus Christ: Mormon's Poetics," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 2 (2007), <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol16/iss2/4>.

78. Kylie Nielson Turley argues persuasively that Alma₂ was not a rebellious youth but a mature man when he rebelled against his father's teachings. See *Alma 1-29: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2020): 10-18.

79. How could Alma₂ experience eternal damnation and everlasting burning in the space of only a few days? "The feeling that suffering is eternal is an essential experiential attribute of hell. The endlessness of this state does not consist in an extreme extension of linear time, but in its transcendence. The individual

his father, Alma₂ cries out to Christ for redemption, is born again, and is filled with the Holy Ghost (Alma 36:17–18; Mosiah 27:24–26). His sins are washed away, and he is harrowed up no more by their memory (Alma 36:19). Like Lehi, he penetrates the veil and is incorporated into the *Sôd Elohim*: “methought I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising their God; yea, and my soul did long to be there” (Alma 36:22).⁸⁰ From that moment on, Alma₂ engaged in the charitable work of the Gods, saving souls and enrolling them in the divine community: “Yea, and from that time even until now, I have labored without ceasing, that I might bring souls unto repentance; that I might bring them to taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste; that they might also be born of God, and be filled with the Holy Ghost” (Alma 36:24).

Having himself been called to repentance by an angel, by one already enrolled in the *Sôd Elohim*, Alma₂, after his own enrollment, expresses the fervent wish that he could likewise cry repentance to all the world. He says:

O that I were an angel, and could have the wish of mine heart, that I might go forth and speak with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth, and cry repentance unto every people! Yea, I would declare unto every soul, as with the voice of thunder, repentance and the plan of redemption, that they should repent and come unto our God, that there might not be more sorrow upon all the face of the earth. (Alma 29:1–2)

After uttering this fervent wish, Alma₂ humbly says: “But behold, I am a man, and do sin in my wish; for I ought to be content with the

undergoes tortures beyond any imagining which at that point are the only available reality; since the sense of the linear flow of time is lost, there appears to be no way out. It is only when this situation is fully accepted that one has experienced hell, and the journey can continue. In Alma’s account of his torment, the terms ‘everlasting’ and ‘eternal’ do not refer to duration, but to quality. Alma reports that his ‘eternal torment’ lasted for three days (cf. D&C 19:1–21).” Kevin Christensen, “Nigh unto Death,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 1 (1993): 1–20, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol2/iss1/2/>.

80. Alma₂ longs for heaven. In Alma 29:16, his “soul is carried away, even to the separation of it from the body, as it were, so great is my joy” when he contemplates the success of the Sons of Mosiah. In Alma 31:26, he asks, “O Lord, wilt thou suffer that thy servants shall dwell here below in the flesh, to behold such gross wickedness among the children of men?” He clearly yearns to return and dwell in heaven and, like Lehi, join the heavenly choir and speak with the tongue of angels.

things which the Lord hath allotted unto me” (Alma 29:3). Here, Alma₂ underestimates the degree to which the Lord will grant his righteous wish. Ironically, in our day, Alma₂’s voice and testimony have thundered in the hearts and minds of millions in their own tongues in all parts of the earth. Now having the status of an angel in heaven or of a god, Alma₂ has spoken and continues to speak to more people in more of the world than he could ever have imagined when he expressed that fervent wish.

Like that of Nephi₂, as we shall see, Alma₂’s death (if it happened) signifies that he is already a member of the *Sôd Elohim* while living on earth. At the end of his life, while enroute from the land of Zarahemla to the land of Melek, he disappeared without a trace. No one saw him die or be buried. People in the church speculate “that he was taken up by the Spirit, or buried by the hand of the Lord, even as Moses; and we suppose that [God] has also received Alma in the spirit, unto himself” (Alma 45:18–19). A person who is buried by God or entirely avoids death has attributes that position him as godlike or even as a god. Whatever the facts may be, the church members regard Alma₂ as having transcended normal humanity.

Ammon₂, Lamoni, Abish, Lamoni’s Wife, and the *Sôd Elohim*

Theosis, divinization, and the interconnectedness of male and female divinity is a theme that is very much manifest in the interwoven lives and interrelated stories of Ammon₂, Lamoni, Abish, and Lamoni’s Wife. In this deeply symbolic narrative, we see how the divine Father, Mother, and Son involve their human children in the *Sôd* project of making themselves and others divine. Here, the Father and Son are symbolically present in the two male protagonists, Ammon₂ and Lamoni. The divine Mother and other women whose lives are closely bound up with the births and mission of Christ are likewise symbolically present in the two female protagonists, Abish and Lamoni’s wife.

Each divine figure, the Son and the Mother, is first represented by a spiritually powerful servant who initiates the salvation of others. That service having been performed, each is then represented by a royal figure, a person who manifests the Mother and Son’s high status and sovereign power. This sequence — servant then sovereign — marks the path all must follow as they strive to be more like their Savior and Heavenly Parents.

Table 2. Servant becomes Sovereign.

Christ Figures	Divine Mother Figures
Male Servant: Ammon	Female Servant: Abish
Male Sovereign: King Lamoni	Female Sovereign: Queen

Ammon₂ and Lamoni's role as god figures and the kinship between God and man are signified, in part, by a name these men share with God, Ahman, which means *God* (D&C 78:20; 95:17). Ammon's name may also be a variant of a related Egyptian name for God, Amon/Amun.⁸¹ Lamoni's name, L-amon-i, incorporates Ammon's name. It providentially has the plausible Hebrew form לאמון and the meaning *to my God* or *for my God*, the ל meaning *to* or *for* and the ם meaning *my*. Given the importance of Ammon in Lamoni's life, wordplay on *to* or *for my Ammon* might also be relevant. The confounding of man and God is an important theme in this narrative, a theme that is inherent in theophoric naming — giving human beings divine names. Since theophoric names and word play on names is ubiquitous in the Old Testament, Mormon was equipped to recognize and build on the theophoric meaning of these names and the more subtle theophoric meaning of the name Abish.⁸² As we shall see, Abish seems to have had a remarkable vision of the divine Father. Her name, Abish, may suggest that she encountered God, as did her ancestor Jacob, in the form of a man, in Hebrew an *'ish*. Her name combines the

81. *Ahman* can signify either the Father or the Son. The name *Ammon* may have cued Mormon's recognition of the allegorical potential of these narratives. Amon was the great universal god of the Egyptians, the being in their theology most akin to Jehovah and the most popular name in the Egyptian empire in Zedekiah's time. See Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 25. Amon, a popular king of Judah during Lehi's youth, was named after this Egyptian god and seems to have worshipped his namesake (2 Kings 21:18–24). See J. P. Lesley, "Notes on an Egyptian Element in the Names of Hebrew Kings, and Its Bearing on the History of the Exodus," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 19, no. 109 (1881): 419–20. So the cult of Amon was surely well known to the migrating Mulekites who may, therefore, have used Amon as one of the names of God, a fact that would be known to Mormon if true.

82. There is, of course, no reason to think that any of the suggested meanings of Lamoni or Abish's names would have been intended by their parents. But as a reader of the brass plates, Mormon would have known that name wordplay was a ubiquitous feature of Hebrew scripture. That awareness would have made him attentive to potential wordplay in his own writing. On Mormon's recognition and use of Hebrew name meanings, see Matthew L. Bowen, "My People Are Willing," 83–107.

Hebrew *Abi*, “my father,” with *‘ish*, “man,” and can be translated as “my Father is a man.”⁸³ It reflects the confounding of God and man that, as noted above, is an important theme in this narrative.

In this section, we begin with a discussion of ways in which Ammon₂, who bears a divine name, is framed as symbolically and literally divine. We then discuss the transformation of Lamoni from murderer into Christ figure. We then discuss multiple dimensions on which Abish and the Queen signify the divine Mother and show how integrally the Mother is involved in the salvation of her children.

One sign that theosis is occurring is the confounding of men and gods, as in Nephi’s heavenly encounter with Yahweh, who is referred to as both *man* and *God*. That confounding of *man* and *God* occurs over and over again in the story of Ammon₂. Matthew Bowen has suggested that the word *man* here becomes a *Leitwort* that interacts with allusions to God, suggesting that God, too, is a *man*.⁸⁴

This story begins inauspiciously. Ammon₂, his brothers, and Alma₂ initially abuse their talents and princely power and are confronted by one of the *malākīm* of the *Sôd*, an angel who shakes the earth with the power of his voice (Mosiah 27:15). But after having that experience, Ammon₂ twice renounces worldly power, first declining to be the king of the Nephites (Mosiah 29:3), then declining to take one of Lamoni’s daughters to wife and become a nobleman among the Lamanites (Alma 17:24–25). Instead, he fully embraces the service ethos of the *Sôd Elohim* where greatness is measured by degree of service (Matthew 23:11) and becomes the servant of Lamoni. It is in that service role that he is most emblematic of his true master, Christ.

Ammon₂ first becomes a Christ figure when, at the Waters of Sebus, his fellow servants are caught in a tragic dilemma.⁸⁵ If they do not protect

83. One indication that Mormon thought the name Abish was meaningful is that he did not report the name of another female servant who played a similarly dramatic role in a Book of Mormon narrative, the maid servant of Morianton, who changed the course of history (Alma 50:28–33).

84. Matthew L. Bowen, “Father Is a Man: The Remarkable Mention of the Name Abish in Alma 19:16 and Its Narrative Context,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015): 77–93, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/father-is-a-man-the-remarkable-mention-of-the-name-abish-in-alma-1916-and-its-narrative-context/>.

85. For close readings that show why the political dynamics briefly summarized here are probably in play, see Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007): 4:274–78; and Val Larsen, “In his Footsteps: Ammon₁ and Ammon₂,”

Lamoni's flocks from being scattered and stolen, they will be killed by Lamoni. If they are violent toward any noble kinsman of the Great King, Lamoni's father, they will be killed, probably with all their family. When Lamoni's noble enemies attack and scatter his flocks, the servants are doomed. They will die if the flocks remain scattered and will die if they resist those who have scattered them. They begin to weep in despair, for all is lost (Alma 17:28).

But because noble Ammon₂ has condescended to be one with them, because he encourages them to recover the scattered flock while he faces their adversaries "in number not a few," because he miraculously defeats their numerous adversaries who are "astonished at his power," these servants, unlike their predecessors, are through Ammon₂'s gracious act, able to keep both laws that bind them. They return to their lord with the flock intact and without having struck a blow against any noble kinsman of the Great King.

After his fellow servants describe Ammon₂'s exploits, King Lamoni exclaims: "Surely, this is more than a *man*. Behold, is not this the *Great Spirit*?" Having heard still more, he subsequently adds: "Now I know that it is the Great Spirit; and he has come down at this time to preserve your lives.... Now this is the Great Spirit of whom our fathers have spoken." The moral code of the powerful Lamanite nobles held that "whatsoever they did was right." But Ammon₂'s actions cause Lamoni to reject that view and adopt the moral code of the *Sôd*, in which the lives even of slaves have intrinsic value. Thus, "Lamoni began to fear exceedingly, with fear lest he had done wrong in slaying his servants." He then learns the depth of Ammon₂'s faithfulness as a servant, for upon his return, as previously commanded, Ammon₂ immediately began preparing for Lamoni's journey to see his father. Ammon₂'s devotion to duty causes Lamoni to be still "more astonished ... [and say]: Surely there has not been any servant among all my servants that has been so faithful as this *man*; for he doth remember all my commandments to execute them. Now I surely know that this is the *Great Spirit*."

Coming shortly thereafter to Lamoni, Ammon₂ demonstrates additional superhuman powers. "Lamoni marveled again, for he beheld that Ammon could discern his thoughts.... Lamoni did open his mouth, and said unto him: Who art thou? Art thou that Great Spirit, who knows all things?" Ammon replies, "I am not." Lamoni says: "How knowest thou the thoughts of my heart? I would guard thee with my armies;

but I know thou art more powerful than all they.” Ammon₂’s power is so great that he not only can read thoughts but could, Lamoni believes, single handedly defeat entire armies.

In the midst of all these observations about his superhuman devotion and powers, Ammon₂ had said, “I am a man, and am thy servant,” but he is clearly more than a mere man. Lamoni’s servants will soon see him raise Lamoni from the dead much as Christ raised Lazarus.⁸⁶ These are not the acts of a mere man. Many others soon conclude “that Ammon [is] the Great Spirit” (Alma 19:25). But Lamoni now learns the actual source of Ammon₂’s power. He asks, “Art thou sent from God?” Ammon₂ replies, “I am a *man*; and *man* in the beginning was created after *the image of God*, and I am called by his Holy Spirit... And a portion of *that Spirit dwelleth in me*, which giveth me knowledge, and also power according to my faith and desires which are in God.” Ammon₂’s will, like that of Nephi₂ (as we shall see), is fully aligned with the will of God. Because of that alignment, he now shares a portion of God’s power.

God is a social being, who dwells in heaven with “all his holy angels” (18:30). Ammon₂ and all men are created in the image of God, look like God, are kin with God. When a man puts his faith in his Father, God, and aligns his desires with those of God as Ammon₂ has, the Holy Ghost can possess him,⁸⁷ making him, from a human point of view, as the attestations of Lamoni and others indicate, indistinguishable from a god. Ammon₂ is an especially pronounced case of inherent godhood becoming substantially expressed, but as Nephi before him and Nephi₂ after him show, he is not alone in his demonstration that human beings may become gods.

Of course, his brothers Aaron, Omner, Himni, and their companions are no less members of the *Sôd Elohim* than Ammon₂ is, though they have manifested no superhuman powers apart from exceptional desire to save others spiritually and patience in suffering. They had been “taken and cast into prison, and bound with strong cords, and kept in prison for many days” (Alma 20:30). When Ammon₂ came to rescue them, “they were naked, and their skins were worn exceedingly because of being bound with strong cords. And they also had suffered hunger, thirst, and all kinds of afflictions; nevertheless they were patient in all their

86. At least some of Lamoni’s servants believe him to be two-days dead when he arises as Ammon₂ said he would (Alma 19:5, 12), so whatever the truth of the matter may be, they see the “dead” rise.

87. Newell D. Wright and Val Larsen, “The Holy Ghost in the Book of Moroni: Possessed of Charity” (forthcoming in *Interpreter*).

sufferings” (Alma 20:29). It is arguable that this suffering in the service of others is the most godlike behavior of all. While the healings and other miracles Christ performed helped signify that he was the Son of God, his suffering the sins of all humanity was by far the most divine thing he did. So divinity is most revealed in service *Sôd* members give, not in superhuman powers. This probably explains why God preached the gospel to Lamoni’s father (who wrongly believed might made right) through Aaron, an emaciated man much acquainted with grief, a man who bore in his hands and feet the mark of his bonds, rather than, as the king had requested, through Ammon₂, the man who had bested him in battle (Alma 22:1–4). The high king needed to understand that suffering and service, not marshal might, are the most salient attributes of his Savior. And yet, the powers Ammon₂ possessed are, nonetheless, a divine attribute and help demonstrate that the proper telos of a human being is to be not a man but a god.

While immersed in a culture that believed marshal might made right and that failures to fulfill the king’s commands merited death, Lamoni unjustly killed a number of his servants. That culture gives mighty Ammon₂ great credibility. Now persuaded by godlike Ammon₂ that his might is nothing, Lamoni repents of those murders and embraces the gospel of Christ. Textual elements suggest he now has a vision similar to the paradigmatic visions of Lehi, Nephi, Mary, and Alma₂. Like Lehi (1 Nephi 1:8), Nephi (1 Nephi 11:1, 14:30, 15:1), and Mary (1 Nephi 11:19), all of whom were “carried away” in the Spirit of God, Lamoni is “carried away in God” (Alma 19:6).

In the detailed accounts of Lehi and Nephi’s visions (and of Joseph Smith’s First Vision), the most salient feature of the divine Beings they encounter while carried away is the luster, the brightness, the whiteness of the light they exude. Here, the text speaks of “the light which did light up [Lamoni’s] mind, which was the light of the glory of God, which was a marvelous light of his goodness” (Alma 19:6). The text seems to suggest that, like Nephi, Lamoni has seen God the Father in his glory. It then suggests that he saw Yahweh the Son and the divine and earthly mothers of Yahweh as well. When he regains consciousness, Lamoni says, “I have seen my Redeemer and he shall come forth, and be born of a woman” (Alma 19:13). This two-part phrase — “shall come forth, and be born of a woman” — fits what Nephi witnessed. Yahweh “came forth” when he descended from the Woman in heaven, the Mother of the Son of God after the manner of the Spirit, then was “born of a woman,” the mother of the Son of God after the manner of the flesh

on earth. As we shall see, this reading receives support from Lamoni's response to his wife when he arises from apparent death.

We first encounter the Queen, Lamoni's wife, with her children around her, "mourn[ing her two-day dead husband] after the manner of the Lamanites, greatly lamenting his loss" (Alma 18:43). Others believe Lamoni's body is decomposing and want to bury him, but the Queen resists. Instead of burying Lamoni, she asks that Ammon₂, the Christ figure who had redeemed her servants, be sent to her. Ammon₂ tells her that after lying "as if he were dead"⁸⁸ for "two days and two nights," on the third day her husband, like Christ, will rise again to new life, indeed immortal life. The Queen has faith in the Christlike messenger Ammon₂ and in her Christlike husband Lamoni. She replies, "I believe that it shall be according as thou hast said" (Alma 19:9). On the third day, her faith in Ammon₂, the first Christ surrogate, is rewarded, when Lamoni, the second Christ surrogate, rises and says, "Blessed be the name of God, and blessed art thou. For as sure as thou livest, behold, I have seen my Redeemer; and he shall come forth, and be born of a woman" (Alma 19:12–13).

What is striking in Lamoni's statement is the anomalous grammatical equation of God and a woman: "blessed be the name of God, and blessed art thou." What has Lamoni seen that would cause him to grammatically coordinate a divine Being and a human being? What leads him to view the life of his wife as the surest of sure things and swear by that?⁸⁹ If as textual echoes indicate, he has seen something like what Nephi saw — the divine Woman Shaddai manifesting the divine destiny of a mortal woman, Lamoni's wife — the grammatical equation makes sense. Now understanding who the Gods are, Lamoni has double vision and sees

88. Kylie Nielson Turley, "Acting As If the Dead Shall Arise: Faith in the Real World" (presentation, Book of Mormon Studies Association Annual Meeting, Logan, UT, 8 October 2020).

89. Since human lives are ephemeral, an oath sworn on a human life has attenuated force. The life of a divine being is not ephemeral. If Lamoni, having seen the divine Mother, now appreciates the immortality of his wife, his oath may have double meaning, referring to the immortality of both. Speaking a short time later about this episode and its meaning, Mormon uses the oath in its strongest form: "And as sure as the Lord liveth, so sure as many as believed, or as many as were brought to the knowledge of the truth, through the preaching of Ammon and his brethren, according to the spirit of revelation and of prophecy, and the power of God working miracles in them — yea, I say unto you, as the Lord liveth, as many of the Lamanites as believed in their preaching, and were converted unto the Lord, never did fall away" (Alma 23:6).

two Queens, with the mortal Queen on earth being destined to become an immortal Queen in heaven. Strictly speaking, Lamoni equates the Queen not with God but with the name of God, *Elohim*, the plural whose literal translation is “Gods.” “Gods” suggests that God exists not as the Father alone but as a Father/Mother dyad. This dyad creates human beings in their image, “male and female” (Genesis 1:27). Having spoken to his Queen and called her blessed, Lamoni sinks “again with joy; and the queen also sunk down, being overpowered by the Spirit,” carried away to her own personal encounter with divine Beings.

Ammon₂ and all his fellow servants but one are likewise overcome by the Spirit and fall to the earth unconscious. While unconscious, they converse with angels, and are enrolled in the *Sôd Elohim* (Alma 19:33–34). The one exception is Abish, the only long-standing Christian in the room, the only person whose own visions and spiritual seasoning have prepared her to consciously endure a visitation of such spiritual power. Abish knows what is happening to the others — “she knew that it was the power of God” (Alma 19:17 — most likely because she has previously had the same experience, “a remarkable vision of her father” (Alma 19:16). This phrasing is ambiguous. Did Abish see her earthly father in vision? Did her earthly father have a vision he told her about? It was certainly a vision of her Father in the sense of having been caused by God. But in this context where all others see God in vision, the most likely meaning is that Abish had “a remarkable vision of her [F]ather” in which she directly experienced “the power of God” the same way that Lamoni and the Queen are now experiencing it.⁹⁰

Eager for others to witness this outpouring of spiritual power, Abish runs through the town urging people to go to the palace and see what is happening. Those who gather know that some superhuman power is operative, though they disagree sharply on what it may be. When Abish returns and sees the contention, she weeps, then goes to the Queen and takes her by the hand. “As soon as [Abish] touched her hand [the Queen] arose and stood upon her feet, and cried with a loud voice, saying: O blessed Jesus, who has saved me from an awful hell! O blessed God [Elohim], *have mercy on this people!*” The Queen, who has seen the

90. The one indication that the vision might be of Abish’s earthly father is her use of the singular “my” rather than plural “our” pronoun when referring to her father. But the “my Father” can be accounted for by the fact that this vision remained a personal experience which Abish “never ... made ... known” (Alma 19:17). So she did not experience it as a vision of “our” Father, even if it was an experience with God, Father of all.

Father, Son, and perhaps the Mother, now shares the mission of the *Sôd*, saving others. Having the tongue of an angel, she speaks “many words which were not understood, and when she had done this, she took the king, Lamoni, by the hand, and behold he arose and stood upon his feet” (Alma 19:29–30). Standing side by side with the Queen, Lamoni, the man who rose from the dead on the third day, now begins to teach the people the gospel of Christ and, thus, initiates a great spiritual awakening in their kingdom.

Let us now ask, as Nephi did after hearing his father’s dream, what this narrative means. One thing that became apparent with Nephi was the coupling of the saving work of the divine Son and Mother. That coupling is replicated here. It is striking that the Lamoni and Queen salvation narratives both begin with the Christ surrogate Ammon₂ sharing a message that his companion whole heartedly believes, and both end with a divine Mother surrogate raising the spiritual newborn to her/his feet. The parallelism of “she arose and stood upon her feet” and “he arose and stood upon his feet” suggests that Queen and King stand side by side, emblems of the Mother and Father in whose *Sôd* kingdom they are now enrolled and in whose soul-saving work they now jointly participate. Other surrogate symbolism underscores the importance of this Elohim partnership.

The divine Mother surrogates, Abish and the Queen, each reveal something essential but different about the Mother in whose image they were created,⁹¹ and about other women closely connected with the

91. Though neither is very young, Abish seems older (see Turley, *Alma 1–29: A Brief Theological Introduction*, 118) and is at least spiritually older than the Queen. The aptness of an older and a younger woman jointly representing the divine Mother is beautifully illustrated in the following Jewish narrative about the Shekhinah, the feminine Divine: “[Rabbi Abraham] walked through the streets of [his hometown] Safed, crying out ‘Arise, for the Shekhina is in exile. ...’ He longed, more than anything else, to bring back the Shekhinah out of exile. ... [Advised to go to the Wailing Wall, after fasting, he set off on foot.] With every step he took, he prayed God to reveal ... a vision of the Shekhina to him. By the time Rabbi Abraham reached Jerusalem, he felt as if he were floating, as if he had ascended from his body. And when he reached the Wailing Wall, Rabbi Abraham had a vision there. Out of the wall came an old woman, dressed in black, deep in mourning. And when he looked into her eyes, he became possessed of a grief as deep as the ocean, far greater than he had ever known. It was the grief of a mother who has lost a child; the grief of Hannah, after losing her seven sons; the grief of the Shekhinah over the suffering of Her children. ... At that moment Rabbi Abraham fell to the ground in a faint, and he had another vision. In this vision, he saw the Shekhinah once more, but this time he saw Her dressed in Her robe woven out of light, more magnificent than the

births and most salient actions of Christ. As apostate monist theology and violence have forced Shaddai into the wilderness and hidden her from the world, so the wickedness and violence of her surrounding culture have forced Abish to remain hidden, her deep Christian faith and spiritual power unknown to the world. Abish nevertheless exists and blesses all around her. She has known the Father longer than anyone else in this narrative, she “having been converted to the Lord many years” on account of that remarkable vision of her Father. And as Abish, the surrogate Mother, was with the Father before the newer convert Ammon², the surrogate Son was, so Shaddai was with El Elyon before their Son Yahweh was.⁹²

Being a servant, Abish intrinsically symbolizes the service ethos that governs the *Sôd Elohim*. As she rushes from place to place in the city bidding all to gather to the palace where they may be born again spiritually, Abish symbolizes the divine Mother’s desire and efforts to gather her children back to her, the Tree of Life, where they may be spiritually reborn and permanently return to live with her. As Abish sees those she has gathered sharply contending with one another and begins to weep, so the divine Mother sorrows when her children so often contend with each other and refuse to be saved. The nature of Shaddai is then most saliently symbolized by the power of Abish’s touch to help a soul become spiritually conscious and live a holy life that qualifies her to be part of her divine Parents’ *Sôd Elohim*.

Lamoni’s wife, the Queen, like Abish, signifies who the Mother is, in part, by virtue of her social role, which is prominent and powerful.

setting sun, and Her joyful countenance was revealed. Waves of light arose from her face, an aura that seemed to reach out and surround him, as if he were cradled in the arms of the Sabbath Queen. ‘Do not grieve so, My son Abraham,’ She said. ‘Know that My exile will come to an end, and My inheritance will not go to waste.’” Schwartz, *Tree of Souls*, 63–64.

92. The divine Mother, in her Wisdom guise, may refer to her primordial partnership with the divine Father when she speaks as follows in Psalm 8:22–36. “The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning. ... Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth. While as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields. ... when he prepared the heavens, I was there. ... Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him ... and my delights were with the sons of men. Now therefore hearken unto me, O ye children: for blessed [*ashre*] are they that keep my ways. Hear instruction, and be wise, and refuse it not. Blessed [*ashre*] is the man that heareth me.... For whoso findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the Lord. But he that sinneth against me wrongeth his own soul: all they that hate me love death.”

Along with being among those who most serve, the divine Mother is the powerful Queen of Heaven. As previously noted, when we first encounter this human Queen, she is mourning a dead man who, she doesn't yet understand, will rise on the third day. Here, she is much like the virgin Mary, Mary of Bethany, and Mary Magdalene, faithful women who mourned for Christ at his death. Each of those mourning women is a divine Mother surrogate. The virgin Mary we have already discussed. Mary of Bethany anoints Christ, head and feet, with the Tree-derived precious oil that signifies healing and resurrection, just before his atonement, death, and resurrection (Mark 14:3–9; John 11:2, 12:1–8). In doing this she makes him the Messiah, the anointed one. The virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene sit with and minister to the body of Christ in the tomb (Mark 15:46–47) much as the Queen sits with the body of Lamoni.

But the Queen, like Abish, most saliently symbolizes the nature of Mother Shaddai through the power of her touch. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were blocked from putting forth their hands to touch the Tree of Life (Genesis 3:22–24). Still unrepentant, had they done so, they would have lived forever in their sins. But while sinful human beings are blocked from putting forth their hands and touching the Tree of Life, the Tree of Life, the divine Mother, may graciously put forth her hand and touch repentant human beings, Lamoni and the Queen, raising them from spiritual death to eternal life in the *Sôd Elohim*. Indeed, when at the touch of the Queen's hand, Lamoni rises to new spiritual life, all the many life-giving roles of the divine Mother are symbolized: her role in our birth into mortality as we each partake of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and take leave of her and the Father; her role in our spiritual births as we are born in heaven and emerge from the amniotic baptismal waters on earth; her role as we receive new life from the Cross, the Tree of Life, where Mother and Son are jointly pierced by nails and jointly produce the sacramental fruit that redeems us from sin and makes us members of the *Sôd Elohim*.

In addition to all these meanings, the Queen joins Mary Magdalene as the enactor of an ancient and potent type scene in which the dyadic nature of proper governance is signified by the presence of the Queen at the resurrection of the King, with King and Queen then standing side by side as the proper rulers of the world. As Kevin and Shauna Christensen have noted, narratives in which the divine Woman resurrects the divine Man are common in the religions of the ancient Middle East and also

appear in Mesoamerica.⁹³ Christ appearing after his resurrection, first to Mary Magdalene, his possible wife,⁹⁴ even before ascending to the Father, is an important example. The Queen raising Lamoni and standing before the people with him is another. These narratives imply that in the *Sôd Elohim*, an exalted Man is fully empowered only if he has as his consort and co-ruler a divine Woman.

Nephi₂: The Assumption of Divine Powers

Like his namesake Nephi, Nephi₂ provides a clear Book of Mormon example of theosis, perhaps the clearest in all scripture. He becomes the chief judge at the death of his father, Helaman₃ (Helaman 3:37). In that purely human role, he is not a success. Almost all of the Nephite lands are lost during his judgeship, then only half of what was lost is regained. Few politicians could survive as leader in the wake of a military collapse of

93. "Significantly, the story of Abish and the Lamanite queen qualifies as a 'type-scene,' a prophetic prefiguring not only of the resurrection of Christ, but also of the role of women in that event. As Robert Aller remarks, 'The type-scene is not merely a way of formally recognizing a particular kind of narrative moment; it is also a means of attaching that moment to a larger pattern of historical and theological meaning.' Compare the general features of this account in Alma with a conspicuous pattern in ancient Near Eastern religion: 'One of the most striking features of the ancient Sacred Marriage cult was that the goddess had an important part to play in the resurrection of her husband.... We will recall how Anath made possible Baal-Hadad's resurrection by attacking and destroying his enemy, Mot, the god of death. In Mesopotamian myth it was Inanna-Ishtar who descended into the realm of death to destroy Erishkigal's power so that dead Dumuzi-Tammuz could be restored to life. Aristide's Apology describes how Aphrodite descended into Hades in order to ransom Adonis from Persephone. Cybele likewise made possible the resurrection of Attis on the third day, while in Egypt it was Isis who made possible the restoration of her husband, Osiris. ... But no matter what the details of these ubiquitous Near Eastern death-and-resurrection legends, the underlying theme is the same: the god is helpless without the ministrations of his consort. ... The reunion of Jesus and Mary Magdalene at the tomb on Resurrection Morning therefore clearly fits within this well-known tradition.' The same motif also appears in the Mesoamerican Popol Vuh in the story of One Hunahpu's death and the maiden daughter of the underworld lords, through whose courageous actions life was renewed." Kevin and Shauna Christensen, "Nephite Feminism Revisited: Thoughts on Carol Lynn Pearson's View of Women in the Book of Mormon," *FARMS Review of Books* 10, no. 2 (1998): 17–18. The Christensens cite Eugene Seach, "A Great Mystery: The Sacred Marriage and Bridal Chamber in Early Christianity and Judaism" (Salt Lake City, unpublished MS, 1979), 198–99.

94. Christopher James Blythe, "Was Jesus Married?" *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2021): 75–84, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol60/iss3/7>.

that magnitude. Unsurprisingly, Nephi₂ loses his position as chief judge. The text blames the people for this loss (the Book of Mormon is, among many other things, a sympathetic history of Alma family rule), but the people surely blamed Nephi₂. It is very unlikely that his resignation from the chief judgeship (Helaman 5:1) was entirely voluntary.

No longer the chief judge, Nephi₂ “[takes] it upon himself to preach the word of God all the remainder of his days” (Helaman 5:4). In this new mission, the preternaturally spiritual Nephi₂ is joined by his younger brother, Lehi₄, who is “not a whit behind him as to things pertaining to righteousness” (Helaman 11:19). With the Holy Ghost filling their souls, the pair have “power and authority given unto them that they might speak, and they also [have] what they should speak given unto them” (Helaman 5:18). They first preach in all the northerly lands held by the Nephites. Moving south, they then preach, with notable success, to the Lamanites and dissenting Nephites who hold the land of Zarahemla. Moving still further south, they attempt to preach to the Lamanites who hold the land of Nephi. Here, they are accosted by an army and thrown into the same prison into which Ammon and Abinadi had been cast.⁹⁵ As Kimberly Matheson and D. John Butler both note, this prison becomes a temple like the one Isaiah saw in vision (Isaiah 6:4; 2 Nephi 16:4), filled with smoke as the temple would be on the Day of Atonement.⁹⁶ Nephi₂ and Lehi₄ will now serve as temple guides who help patrons part the veil and pass through it into communion with heavenly beings. They are assisted by Aminadab, whose name, Matthew Bowen notes, is theophoric, meaning “my [divine] Kinsman is willing” to provide salvation or “my people are willing” to receive it. Here again, Mormon seems to recognize and incorporate Hebrew name meanings that are relevant to his narrative.

In this prison temple, Nephi₂ and Lehi₄ recapitulate experiences of Abinadi, of Alma (their great, great grandfather), and of Alma₂ (their great grandfather), experiences that were foundational in the establishment

95. The text specifically mentions that this is the prison into which Limhi cast Ammon (Helaman 5:21). We know that Abinadi was also imprisoned by Noah in the land of Nephi. That Abinadi was cast into this same prison and was executed in or by this prison is a reasonable inference. If there were more than one prison, it is likely that the best-fortified, most secure prison would have been used for each of these prominent prisoners.

96. Kimberly Matheson Berkey, *Helaman: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, 2020), 42. See also D. John Butler, *The Goodness and the Mysteries* (self-published, 2012), 88–94 and Bowen, “My People are Willing,” 95.

of the church Nephi₂ now heads. First, like Alma₂ and Amulek — figures twice explicitly mentioned in this chapter (Helaman 5:10, 41) — they are denied food for many days while imprisoned (Alma 14:22; Helaman 5:22),⁹⁷ then are saved, in part, by an earthquake that shakes the walls of the prison (Alma 14:27; Helaman 5:27) and makes it impossible for their adversaries to flee (Alma 14:26–27; Helaman 5:34). Like Abinadi (with Alma as witness) Nephi₂ and Lehi₄’s faces “shine exceedingly” (Mosiah 13:5; Helaman 5:36). This attribute marks their theosis, a shining face being a feature of God and Christ (Joseph Smith 1:17). Like Abinadi, the brothers are protected by divine light, such that their enemies (Noah/Lamanites) “durst not lay their hands upon *him/them*” (Mosiah 13:5; Helaman 5:23). The phrasing is identical in the two episodes, apart from the use of the singular/plural pronouns. Other similar phrasing follows. Abinadi says, “ye have not power to slay me” (Mosiah 13:7); Nephi₂ and Lehi₄ say, “ye cannot lay your hands on us to slay us” (Helaman 5:26). This protection enables each of them to fulfill their mission.

The heavenly light having disempowered their adversaries, Abinadi, Nephi₂ and Lehi₄, now mediating between heaven and earth, bring some or all of the people who see and hear them to Christ. To be sure, Nephi₂ and Lehi₄, assisted by Aminadab, are more successful with their audience than Abinadi and Alma₂ were with theirs. But in all three narratives, people who have heard the word enter the *Sôd Elohim* by passing through a ring of fire. This is a painful passage for Abinadi and the women and children Alma₂ and Amulek converted in Ammonihah, for they enter the *Sôd* through the fires of martyrdom. This is a joyful passage for Nephi₂, Lehi₄, and their prison converts. Aminadab urges them to plead for Christ’s mercy. They do and are then encircled by pillars of heavenly fire that do not burn them (Helaman 5:43). The brothers’ converts are again touched by fire as the Holy Ghost possesses them: “the Holy Spirit of God did come down from heaven, and did enter into their hearts, and they were filled as if with fire, and they could speak forth marvelous words” (Helaman 5:45). As Bowen notes, the prison converts are “commissioned in a divine council setting” but “in this instance [as in Lehi’s dream], they do not ascend into heaven, but rather the divine council (or a portion thereof) descends to them.”⁹⁸ Nephi₂ and Lehi₄, who are already one with the Holy Ghost and members of the *Sôd*

97. Given the outcome, Nephi₂ and Lehi₄ probably combined prayer for the wellbeing of those who were imprisoning them with the forced fast.

98. Bowen, “My People are Willing,” 95.

Elohim, do the work of the Gods: enabling others to become one with God through possession by the Holy Ghost.⁹⁹

In addition to echoing what Abinadi and the Almas did, the work the mortals Nephi₂ and Lehi₄ do here anticipates what Christ, a divine being, will do when he visits Bountiful. In both episodes, there are smoke and earthquakes that shake the earth *as if it were about to divide asunder* (Helaman 5:33; 3 Nephi 8:6), a *still voice of perfect mildness*, not a harsh voice, neither was it a loud voice that *pierces the very souls* of those who listen (Helaman 5:30; 3 Nephi 11:3). The voice speaks *three times* (Helaman 5:33; 3 Nephi 11:5) from heaven lamenting the people's sin and calling for repentance. Then in both episodes, angels descend from heaven, and the ones the angels visit are encircled by fire (Helaman 5:43, 48; 3 Nephi 17:24). So Nephi₂ and Lehi₄ here do at least some of the work of a God.

That they minister as members of the *Sôd Elohim* is signified not only by their shining faces but also by their orientation to and conversation with a heavenly being, God or Christ (Helaman 5:36), and with angels of God (Helaman 5:39), those whom Lehi (1 Nephi 1:8) and Alma₂ (Alma 36:22) had seen populating heaven in their visions. Aminadab and the other people in the prison first witness the brothers' interactions with divine beings, then are themselves incorporated into the *Sôd Elohim*. Following ministrations of those already incorporated — Nephi₂ and Lehi₄ and the visiting angels — the three hundred prison-temple converts themselves become agents of the Holy Ghost and participate in the work and glory of God:

And it came to pass that they did go forth, and did minister unto the people, declaring throughout all the regions round about all the things which they had heard and seen, insomuch that the more part of the Lamanites were convinced of them, because of the greatness of the evidences which they had received. And as many as were convinced did lay down their weapons of war, and also their hatred and the tradition of their fathers.

And it came to pass that they did yield up unto the Nephites the lands of their possession. (Helaman 5:50–52)

99. See Newell D. Wright and Val Larsen, "The Holy Ghost in the Book of Moroni: Possessed of Charity" (forthcoming in *Interpreter*), for a full discussion of possession by the Holy Ghost.

What Nephi₂ had been unable to accomplish as the secular chief judge — the recovery of Nephite lands lost to the Lamanites — he now accomplishes as a spiritual member of the *Sôd Elohim* who preaches the Gospel of Christ.

Nephi₂'s mediation between God and humanity in the prison temple foreshadows his receipt of all God's divine power to move within and affect the world. The predicate for this conferral of power is the alignment of Nephi₂'s mind with the mind of God. As the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one in will and one in work, so, the text tells us, Nephi₂ is now and forever one with the Godhead in will and work, a unity that only possession by the Holy Ghost could make possible. Thus, God speaks to Nephi, using the same words Lamoni used when he equated his wife with divine beings:

Blessed art thou, Nephi, for those things which thou hast done; for I have beheld how thou hast with unweariness declared the word, which I have given unto thee, unto this people. And thou hast not feared them, and hast not sought thine own life, but hast sought my will, and to keep my commandments. And now, because thou hast done this with such unweariness, behold, I will bless thee forever; and I will make thee mighty in word and in deed, in faith and in works; yea, even that all things shall be done unto thee according to thy word, for thou shalt not ask that which is contrary to my will. Behold, ... I am God. Behold, I declare it unto thee in the presence of mine angels, that ye shall have power over this people. ... Behold, I give unto you power, that whatsoever ye shall seal on earth shall be sealed in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven; and thus shall ye have power among this people. ... [T]hus saith the Lord God, who is the Almighty. ... (Helaman 10:4–7, 11)

At this point in his life, Nephi₂, like his master and guide, Christ, has become an incarnation of God on the earth.¹⁰⁰ As he would be the first to insist, he did not, like the Savior, live a perfect life. Unlike the Savior, on whom his own perfection depends, he was not born as an incarnation

100. In orthodox Christian theology, this statement is logically incoherent. Only Christ incarnates God, and even his incarnation of and oneness with God is an incomprehensible mystery. In Restoration theology, our divine Father and Mother desire that all their children fully attain the telos proper to a child of God and become full incarnations of Father and Mother's divinity. Thus, what Nephi₂ here models — becoming an incarnation of God — is what God calls all of us to do.

of God. But through the grace and power of Christ's atonement, he has become one with the Savior and one with God. He has become what Christ commands all of us to become: perfect, even as our Father in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:48; 3 Nephi 12:48). He is a full-fledged member of the *Sôd Elohim* and by all but the most abstract, philosophical standards, is a god.¹⁰¹ Like Nephi, he knows what only God could know (Helaman 9:41). Like Nephi, he moves from place to place as only God could move (Helaman 10:16). Unsurprisingly, as was true for Ammon₂, some of the people declare, more in truth than in error, "Behold, he is a god" (Helaman 9:41).

Nephi₂'s dual citizenship on earth and in heaven, but primarily in heaven, is signified, like that of Alma₂, by the last thing we are told about him. His death was not witnessed or recorded. All we know is that he "departed out of the land of Zarahemla . . . and whither he went, no man knoweth" (3 Nephi 1:3). We are left to infer that, perhaps, like Moses, Nephi₂ was buried by God (Deuteronomy 34:5–7) or that like Elijah, without dying, he passed from earth to heaven (2 Kings 2:1, 11). These ambiguities in how he passed separate him from ordinary mortals, again positioning him between earth and heaven or just in heaven. Taken together with the account we have of his receipt of divine power, Nephi₂ becomes our best scriptural example of how mortal man "receiveth my Father's kingdom; therefore all that my Father hath [is] given unto him" (D&C 84:38). Having been filled with the Holy Ghost, he has become a perfected son of God like his master and exemplar Christ (Moroni 7:48).

Conclusion

While scholars have suggested that theosis is a Nauvoo addition to Restoration theology, much evidence suggests that it was present in the Book of Mormon long before the Nauvoo period. The fact that theosis is independently articulated in the Book of Mormon and the King Follett discourse is evidence that the doctrine is an integral part of the gospel. There is no reason to believe that Joseph saw theosis in the Book of Mormon when he translated the book or that he developed his understanding of theosis from reading the Book of Mormon. Our ability to see it there is a function of insightful modern scholarship and voices speaking from the dust at Ugarit and elsewhere that have given us an understanding of what was happening in Lehi's Jerusalem that Joseph

101. Nephi₂ is not like the god of the philosophers, the unmoved mover, the being without body, parts, or passions who exists outside of time and space, who is ontologically wholly unlike human beings — but neither is God.

did not have. So the articulations of the doctrine are independent, and our understanding of theosis is made richer by these related but distinct articulations. In his sermon, Joseph clarified aspects of theosis that are not fully apparent in the Book of Mormon. Joseph's pronouncements about the ontology of God and man are particularly forceful and clear. What he clearly states is only implied in the Book of Mormon. Conversely, some elements of theosis theology are developed with greater clarity in the Book of Mormon than in Joseph's deservedly famous sermon. For example, the close coupling of the divine Mother and Son as they play their linked role in salvation is especially clear there. Likewise, especially clear is the desire of the Father to feature the two most salient objects of his love, the Mother and Son, who are also his two most important gifts to humanity. We return to the Father, the Book of Mormon suggests, by coming to the Mother and Son, the Tree of Life and its fruit. And our ability to know the Father, the Mother, and the Son depends entirely on our being possessed by their fellow member of the Godhead, the Holy Ghost. We know them, we become like them, only to the degree that we become one with the being who is one with them, the Holy Ghost.

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