

Interpreter

**A Journal of Latter-day Saint
Faith and Scholarship**

Volume 69



The Interpreter Foundation

Board of Directors

Daniel C. Peterson, *President*
Steven T. Densley Jr., *Executive Vice President*
Allen Wyatt, *Vice President of Operations*
Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *Vice President of Special Projects*
Matthew L. Bowen
Kristine Wardle Frederickson
Jeffrey Dean Lindsay
Shirley Smith Ricks
Loren Blake Spendlove

Management

Deborah Peterson, *Secretary/Treasurer*
Kent Flack, *Assistant Treasurer*

Communications Advisor

Newell D. Wright

Board of Advisors

Kevin Christensen
Louis C. Midgley
Gregory L. Smith
Ed Snow
Ted Vaggalis

Contributing Editors

Robert S. Boylan
Jennifer C. Lane
David J. Larsen
Ugo A. Perego
Kyler Rasmussen
Stephen D. Ricks
Lynne Hilton Wilson
Mark Alan Wright

Board of Editors

David M. Calabro
Craig L. Foster
Taylor Halverson
Benjamin L. McGuire
Martin S. Tanner
Bryan J. Thomas
A. Keith Thompson
John S. Thompson

Typesetting

Emily Rogers

Media and Technology

Mark Johnson
Tyler R. Moulton
Kyler Rasmussen
Russell D. Richins
Alan Sikes

Legal Advisor

K. Paul MacArthur

The Interpreter Foundation

Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship

Editorial Management

Daniel C. Peterson, *Editor*
Allen Wyatt, *Managing Editor*
Godfrey Ellis, *Executive Editor*
Brant A. Gardner, *Executive Editor*
Rebecca Reynolds Lambert, *Executive Editor*
Tanya Spackman, *Editorial Services Manager*

Source Checking

Eden Buchert
Deidre Marlowe
Elizabeth Wyatt

Copy Editing

Jonn Claybaugh
Verlanne Johnson
Julie Russell
Kaitlin Cooper Swift

Audio and Video

Conversations with Interpreter

Avram Shannon
Thora Shannon

Interpreter Insights

Martin S. Tanner
Terry Hutchinson

© 2026 The Interpreter Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution — NonCommercial — NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/.

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)

ISSN 2372-126X (online)

Mission Statement

Supporting The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through scholarship.

The Interpreter Foundation supports the Church in the following ways:

- **Promotion:** We provide tools to encourage and facilitate personal learning by study and faith, and disseminate accurate information to the public about the Church.
- **Explanation:** We make the results of relevant scholarship more accessible to non-specialists.
- **Defense:** We respond to misunderstandings and criticisms of Church beliefs, policies, and practices.
- **Faithfulness:** Our leadership, staff, and associates strive to follow Jesus Christ and be true to the teachings of His Church.
- **Scholarship:** Our leadership, staff, and associates incorporate standards of scholarship appropriate to their academic disciplines.

The Interpreter Foundation is an independent organization that supports but is not owned, controlled by, or affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The material published by The Interpreter Foundation is the sole responsibility of the respective authors and should not be interpreted as representing the views of The Interpreter Foundation or of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

This journal compiles weekly publications. Visit us online at InterpreterFoundation.org.

Table of Contents

<i>Glaciers, Plant Succession, and the Sheer Wonder of It All</i> Daniel C. Peterson	vii
<i>Joseph Smith and the Twin Priesthood Keys of Authority and Knowledge</i> Matthew Scott Stenson	1
<i>Dynastic Dynamics: Competing Bloodlines and Political Legitimacy in the Book of Mormon</i> Noel Hudson	23
<i>A Scientific Evaluation of the Zelph Revelation</i> Jerry D. Grover Jr.	49
<i>A Proposed Kinship between Alma₂ and Nephihah</i> Brant A. Gardner	61
<i>Nephi's "Shazer": New Insights into an Arabian Pillar of the Book of Mormon</i> Warren P. Aston and J. Wanless Southwick	67
<i>The Opposite of Faith Is not Doubt: The Spiritual Gift of Doubt</i> Caleb Lemon	99
<i>Mi'kmaq, Meldrum, May, and Mark</i> Jerry D. Grover Jr.	119
<i>Entry to the Temple Is through the Principles of the Beatitudes</i> C. Thomas Black	129
<i>The Iron Rod Reimagined: Revisiting the Meaning of an Enduring Metaphor</i> Todd J. Uriona	183
<i>The Literary Structure of Alma 16</i> Derek J. Squire	215
<i>Theology as Pretext</i> John Gee	237
<i>Probing Our Culture with Problematic Data</i> Kyler Rasmussen	257

<i>40 Questions on Latter-day Saint Religion: Sincere, Frequently Respectful, Too Often Polemical</i>	
Jeffrey D. Lindsay	289
<i>God's First Recorded Speech in the Book of Mormon: A Covenant that Unifies Nephi's Record and Defines a Nephite Worldview</i>	
Steven L. Olsen	373
<i>Estranged No More: Covenant and a Reclaimed Identity of the Lamanites</i>	
John E. Cochran II.....	401
<i>Dynastic Dynamics II: Lamanite Governance and Politics</i>	
Noel Hudson	425
<i>Progressing through Gradations of Holiness in the Temple: 2 Nephi 4:32–35 as a Hymn Inspired by Ritual</i>	
Nelson Chung.....	451
<i>Who is the Real Jacques Derrida?</i>	
James E. Faulconer	467

Glaciers, Plant Succession, and the Sheer Wonder of It All

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: *According to current scientific understanding, our universe began in an inconceivable explosion of both space and time. And yet the laws that govern it took immediate effect, eventually governing the formation of galaxies and stars, the orbits of the planets, and even the colonization of sterile rock by lichens. If all this isn't cause for wonder, it's difficult to imagine what would be. Happily, the restored gospel promises us an unlimited future of learning, exploration, and, well, admiration.*

Years ago, I attempted to visit Alaska on two separate occasions. In the first case, the tour that I was to accompany as a lecturer fell through. In the second, I had been invited to deliver a lecture in Anchorage, but then an Alaskan volcano erupted. As a result, owing to the volume of particulate matter that the eruption ejected into the atmosphere, all airline flights into and out of the state were cancelled. I was able to travel as far as Seattle, where I spent the night in the airport hotel and then flew back home. I began to wonder if maybe I just wasn't ever meant to visit Alaska.

Recently, though, I finally succeeded in visiting “the last frontier,” thus checking an item off my bucket list — at a stage of advanced geezerhood when bucket lists are just a bit more pressingly urgent than they used to be. I thoroughly enjoyed it. There was much to see and to experience, much in which to take pleasure and delight.

Rather curiously, among the things that particularly struck me was the process of plant succession after glacial retreat. (As elsewhere around the planet, many of the glaciers in Alaska have been visibly

receding for generations—and, in recent decades, at an increasingly rapid rate.) There is much to be concerned about in connection with the apparent phenomenon of global warming, but there is also much from which we can learn. I listened with fascination to a naturalist's lecture aboard our cruise ship while we were visiting Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve, west of Juneau in southeast Alaska. I paid close attention again, and most particularly, at Hubbard Glacier in eastern Alaska's Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve and at Mendenhall Glacier, near Juneau.

The plant succession that occurs in the wake of a retreating glacier provides a textbook example of what botanists call "primary succession." I can't help but think that it must bear at least some resemblance, too, to the way in which the new, cooling, and barren Earth itself came to be filled with life—which, on our planet and biologically speaking, is as "primary" as it could possibly be.

And the Gods ordered, saying: Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the earth come up dry; and it was so as they ordered; And the Gods pronounced the dry land, Earth; and the gathering together of the waters, pronounced they, Great Waters; and the Gods saw that they were obeyed.

And the Gods said: Let us prepare the earth to bring forth grass; the herb yielding seed; the fruit tree yielding fruit, after his kind, whose seed in itself yieldeth its own likeness upon the earth; and it was so, even as they ordered. And the Gods organized the earth to bring forth grass from its own seed, and the herb to bring forth herb from its own seed, yielding seed after his kind; and the earth to bring forth the tree from its own seed, yielding fruit, whose seed could only bring forth the same in itself, after his kind; and the Gods saw that they were obeyed. (Abraham 4:9–12)

As a glacier recedes, it leaves behind a barren landscape of naked rock and gravel. This is the result of the seemingly irresistible centuries-long movement of enormous weights of ice over the ground, grinding and scrubbing what is beneath it. Little or no soil remains after the glacier recedes. Now, though, the territory relinquished by the glacier is once again exposed to the sun and, therefore, to its life-giving energy.

In 1980, the late astronomer, planetary scientist, and public

intellectual Carl Sagan published a book entitled *Cosmos*, which was designed to accompany his PBS miniseries *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*. At one point in that book, he exclaims,

What a marvelous cooperative arrangement—plants and animals each inhaling each other's exhalations, a kind of planet-wide mutual mouth-to-stoma resuscitation, the entire elegant cycle powered by a star 150 million kilometers away.¹

Anyone who is familiar with the biblical book of Genesis or with the marvelous Book of Abraham, given through the Prophet Joseph Smith, may well remember, in this context, the scriptural accounts of Creation:

And the earth, after it was formed, was empty and desolate, because they had not formed anything but the earth; and darkness reigned upon the face of the deep, and the Spirit of the Gods was brooding upon the face of the waters. And they (the Gods) said: Let there be light; and there was light. And they (the Gods) comprehended the light, for it was bright; and they divided the light, or caused it to be divided, from the darkness. . . .

And the Gods organized the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night; with the lesser light they set the stars also; And the Gods set them in the expanse of the heavens, to give light upon the earth, and to rule over the day and over the night, and to cause to divide the light from the darkness. And the Gods watched those things which they had ordered until they obeyed. (Abraham 4:2–4, 16–18)

The observed process of post-glacial plant succession requires a century or more to be complete. Yet, it happens—and this is what primarily caught my attention—in at least four rather clearly distinct stages:

- During the "Pioneer Stage," which occurs over roughly the first two decades after a glacier's retreat, the nutrient-poor outwash and the bare rock that it has left behind are colonized by lichens. A wide variety of lichens flourishes in Alaska, bearing a wide variety of names. By a wide margin,

1. Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Random House, 1980), 33, archive.org/details/cosmossa00saga/page/32/mode/2up.

my favorite among these names is “fairy barf” (*Lecladophila ericetorum*). The lichens, along with mosses and cyanobacteria (which are also sometimes known as blue-green algae), break down the rock and add tiny amounts of organic matter, thus providing the very beginnings of soil.

- The “Herbaceous Stage” (lasting roughly from the twentieth year after glacial withdrawal through the fortieth) sees tough “pioneer” plants establish themselves. These include dryas (a genus of perennial cushion-forming evergreen dwarf shrubs that takes its name from the dryads or tree nymphs of ancient Greece), fireweed, and scattered grasses. Their roots stabilize the loose but still relatively meager soil that was created in the earlier stage and, thus, prevent its loss through erosion.
- From approximately the fortieth year to the century mark, the “Shrub Stage” witnesses the rise of deciduous shrubs and of trees such as willows and alders. Alders host nitrogen-fixing bacteria in the nodules of their roots, which greatly enriches the soil’s all-important nitrogen content.
- Finally, after a century or so, the boost in nitrogen afforded by the previous stage permits evergreen trees like Sitka spruce (Alaska’s official state tree) to take root. The spruce ultimately—and, in a way, rather sadly—shades out the alders, which played their required role in the cycle. To this extent at least, the alders “filled the measure of [their] creation” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:19). In turn, over the course of centuries, hemlock may eventually replace spruce. Thus is created a mature coniferous forest or what is called, as the fourth and final stage in the process of plant succession, a “Climax Forest.”

I was impressed with this sequence and, if you will, by the genius of it—a mere tiny fragment of the genius that is somehow inherent overall in nature. I thought of a substantial passage from Doctrine and Covenants 88:

All kingdoms have a law given; And there are many kingdoms; for there is no space in the which there is no kingdom; and there is no kingdom in which there is no space, either a greater or a lesser kingdom. And unto every kingdom is given a law; and unto every law there are certain bounds

also and conditions. All beings who abide not in those conditions are not justified.

For intelligence cleaveth unto intelligence; wisdom receiveth wisdom; truth embraceth truth; virtue loveth virtue; light cleaveth unto light; mercy hath compassion on mercy and claimeth her own; justice continueth its course and claimeth its own; judgment goeth before the face of him who sitteth upon the throne and governeth and executeth all things.

He comprehendeth all things, and all things are before him, and all things are round about him; and he is above all things, and in all things, and is through all things, and is round about all things; and all things are by him, and of him, even God, forever and ever. And again, verily I say unto you, he hath given a law unto all things, by which they move in their times and their seasons; And their courses are fixed, even the courses of the heavens and the earth, which comprehend the earth and all the planets. And they give light to each other in their times and in their seasons, in their minutes, in their hours, in their days, in their weeks, in their months, in their years—all these are one year with God, but not with man.

The earth rolls upon her wings, and the sun giveth his light by day, and the moon giveth her light by night, and the stars also give their light, as they roll upon their wings in their glory, in the midst of the power of God. Unto what shall I liken these kingdoms, that ye may understand? Behold, all these are kingdoms, and any man who hath seen any or the least of these hath seen God moving in his majesty and power. (Doctrine and Covenants 88:36–47)

Rereading that passage, which comes from a revelation given through the Prophet Joseph Smith at Kirtland, Ohio, on 27–28 December 1832 and 3 January 1833, I thought immediately of another statement from Carl Sagan, who was, as it happens, a vocal religious agnostic. "How is it," he asked,

that hardly any major religion has looked at science and concluded, "This is better than we thought! The Universe is much bigger than our prophets said, grander, more subtle, more elegant?" Instead they say, "No, no, no! My god is a

little god, and I want him to stay that way.” A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the Universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths.²

Impressive as I find the process of post-glacial plant succession, though, it represents only the surface froth on a vast and deep ocean of unfathomably rich complexity. As Sagan put it in *Cosmos*, “If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe.”³ Yes, you need ingredients like pie crust, apples, sugar, flour, cinnamon, lemon, egg, and nutmeg. And you’ll require an oven, as well as such tools as a mixing bowl, a rolling pin, a whisk, and so forth. But where do such necessary ingredients and implements come from?

Our current understanding suggests that the necessities ultimately emerged from a “singularity” in which all matter—the stuff of which all future amoebas, whales, people, and zebras, all eventual mountains, stars, planets, and galaxies would be composed—was condensed into an unimaginably tiny point. This singularity had zero volume, infinite density, and infinite gravitational pull, and the laws of physics as we know them did not apply.

However, 13.8 billion years ago the Big Bang occurred, and the laws of physics came into force. As time passed, stars formed, serving as the forges in which every atom of carbon and oxygen and iron in the universe was produced. They were the engines that scattered every element heavier than helium across the vast distances of space. Citing Carl Sagan again,

The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of starstuff.⁴

Gases, stellar dust, and water coalesced into planets, including our Earth, and eventually wheat and flour and pie crusts came into being, along with apples and sugar and lemon and nutmeg and pie tins and aluminum foil and both plastic and metal forks—and glaciers, lichens, grasses, willows and alders, Sitka spruce, and all coniferous trees. If

2. Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (New York: Random House, 1994), 50, archive.org/details/palebluedot00carl/page/50/mode/2up.

3. Sagan, *Cosmos*, 218.

4. Sagan, *Cosmos*, 233.

this emergence of everything from the singularity isn't worthy of awe and wonder, I cannot imagine anything that would be.

I turn for the moment from the agnostic Carl Sagan to the very religious Gerard Manley Hopkins, an English Jesuit priest and poet, and to his famous poem "Pied Beauty":

Glory be to God for dappled things —
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
For rose-moles in all stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced — fold, fallow, and plough;
And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.⁵

"Science is not only compatible with spirituality," Carl Sagan wrote, "it is a profound source of spirituality."⁶ I cannot disagree with him, so I turn to another famous poem from Hopkins, "God's Grandeur":

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.⁷

5. Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, ed. W. H. Gardner (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 30–31, archive.org/details/bwb_S0-DQU-858/page/30/mode/2up.

6. Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* (New York: Random House, 1995), 29, archive.org/details/demonhauntedworl0000saga/page/28/mode/2up.

7. Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, 27.

“Personally,” wrote Carl Sagan, who did not believe it,

I would be delighted if there were a life after death—especially if it permitted me to continue to learn about this world and others, if it gave me a chance to discover how history turns out.⁸

Latter-day Saints are blessed to understand and to teach that learning and mind- and soul-expanding experiences will continue well beyond the end of this mortal life.

If you could hie to Kolob
In the twinkling of an eye,
And then continue onward
With that same speed to fly,
Do you think that you could ever,
Through all eternity,
Find out the generation
Where Gods began to be?

Or see the grand beginning,
Where space did not extend?
Or view the last creation,
Where Gods and matter end?
Methinks the Spirit whispers,
“No man has found ‘pure space,’
Nor seen the outside curtains,
Where nothing has a place.”

The works of God continue,
And worlds and lives abound;
Improvement and progression
Have one eternal round.⁹

“We . . . do not expect to cease learning,” declared President Brigham Young,

while we live on earth; and when we pass through the veil, we expect still to continue to learn and increase our fund of information. That may appear a strange idea to some; but it is for the plain and simple reason that we are not capacitated

8. Carl Sagan, *Broca's Brain: Reflections on the Romance of Science* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980), 355, archive.org/details/brocasbrainrefle0000saga/page/352/mode/2up.

9. “If You Could Hie to Kolob,” *Hymns*, no. 284.

to receive all knowledge at once. We must therefore receive a little here and a little there.¹⁰

Accordingly, I hope and I trust that Carl Sagan is enjoying himself very, very much. As, I'm confident, is Brigham Young, who taught:

We can still improve, we are made for that purpose, our capacities are organized to expand until we can receive into our comprehension celestial knowledge and wisdom, and to continue, worlds without end.¹¹

Nothing less than the privilege of increasing eternally, in every sense of the word, can satisfy the immortal spirit.¹²

This sixty-ninth volume of *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*, like all its predecessors, exists in part because of a divine command:

Seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith. (Doctrine and Covenants 88:118)

We believe that learning, the acquisition of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, is an eternal imperative, that "the glory of God is intelligence" (Doctrine and Covenants 93:36). What an exciting vision of human potential!

As its forerunners did, this volume offers a wide variety of insights from faithful Latter-day Saint writers.¹³ I'm profoundly appreciative of what they've written, as I'm appreciative also of the donors, reviewers, source checkers, and editors who have made this volume possible. Most specifically, I thank Allen Wyatt, Godfrey Ellis, Brant S. Gardner, and Rebecca Reynolds Lambert for their dedicated editorial work on the essays and reviews in this volume. Both *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* and The Interpreter Foundation more generally were created and continue to be largely sustained by

10. Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, ed. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1925), 139, archive.org/details/discoursesofbrig028407mbp/page/138/mode/2up.

11. Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, 138.

12. Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, 142.

13. To be sure, there have been several authors in the span of sixty-nine volumes, now complete, who do not count themselves among the community of Saints. My comment is not meant to exclude those valuable voices, but to recognize that the vast majority are, indeed, just that—faithful Latter-day Saints.

the devoted contributions of volunteers and unpaid authors. I thank them for all that they do for the Foundation and, for that matter and much more fundamentally, for the Church and the Kingdom.



Daniel C. Peterson (PhD, University of California at Los Angeles) is a professor emeritus of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham Young University, where he founded the University's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative. He has published and spoken extensively on both Islamic and Latter-day Saint subjects. Formerly chairman of the board of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and an officer, editor, and author for its successor organization, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, his professional work as an Arabist focuses on the Qur'ān and on Islamic philosophical theology. He is the author, among other things, of a biography entitled *Muhammad: Prophet of God* (Eerdmans, 2007).

Joseph Smith and the Twin Priesthood Keys of Authority and Knowledge

Matthew Scott Stenson

Abstract: *This article proposes that priesthood keys are of two general categories: 1) keys of authority and 2) keys of knowledge. The keys of authority are the type most often discussed in meetings and classrooms, and thus, are relatively familiar. However, keys of knowledge, though an extension of the keys of authority, may be less familiar. The word key in this second case is used in a broad sense, including the keys of both knowledge and intelligence, which are richly featured in the revelations of the Doctrine and Covenants, as well as in the teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith. After some preliminaries, I examine the keys of authority and the keys of knowledge. Then, I demonstrate that keys of knowledge can also be of two sorts: 1) formally revealed scriptural keys of knowledge and 2) informally revealed non-scriptural keys of knowledge. The paper finishes with a related discussion of the special keys of authority and power (if not also knowledge) that Jesus Christ holds over death, hell, and final judgment.*

The fundamental principles, government, and doctrine of the Church are vested in the keys of the kingdom.

—Joseph Smith¹

In the nineteenth century, the language of keys and the unlocking of hidden meaning was seemingly everywhere in common usage. The use of the term key (as in *door key*) is still popularly used as a

1. Alonzo L. Gaskill and Richard G. Moore, eds., *The Revised and Expanded Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2024), 21.

metaphor, but is perhaps increasingly antiquated and may feel stilted in academic circles when applied to literary texts. No longer are literary texts perceived as mere containers of singular meaning that can be unlocked with a hermeneutical key.² That usage is likely a remnant from the centuries-old allegorical tradition.³ The word *key* appears often in nineteenth-century texts of (or related to) The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as well as in the conversational language and literature of the period.⁴ The word *key* was often on the lips of the Prophet Joseph Smith, as were its synonyms, such as *grand secrets* or *starting point*.⁵

When it comes to acquiring understanding, the term *key* is most often used metaphorically to suggest that one has a special and perhaps hitherto undisclosed principle. If used well, this principle allows others to enter into the house of meaning and, by its use, provide a way to explore the endless rooms in the house. Thus, the key of knowledge opens the door to understanding, and potentially has infinite applications, as well as targeted implications.

Accordingly, Joseph Smith understood himself not only to be setting aside the cobwebs of the creeds and the uninspired traditions of the past, but breaking new ground—pioneering a new way forward in the area of religious knowledge. As a seer, Joseph Smith sought to use his God-given gift to bring truths to light, making things known that were previously in the dark. Ammon, a Book of Mormon scout, explains what a seer's work is in these words:

A seer can know of things which are past, and also of things which are to come, and by them shall all things be revealed, or, rather, shall secret things be made manifest, and hidden things shall come to light, and things which are not known shall be made known by them, and also things shall be made known by them which otherwise could not be known.
(Mosiah 8:17)

2. This presupposes that everyone who has the key to the subject or text will arrive at the same conclusion or the same understanding.

3. According to this tradition, an intentionally multilayered text could be unlocked or decoded if one had the proper key to its meaning. The key allowed one to discover “the idea” at the heart of the text.

4. See, for example, Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology: A Voice of Warning* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978).

5. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 397, 399. Examples of Joseph Smith's use of the term appears in the Latter-day Saint Bible (JST Luke 11:52) and in a Church hymn (“O My Father,” *Hymns*, no. 292, verse 3).

In a colorful passage on the secrets contained in the writings of the Apostle Peter, Joseph Smith likens his own mission, in general, with that of Columbus venturing forth to find the New World:

(There are) 3 grand secrets [keys] lying in this chapter (2 Peter 1) which no man can dig out . . . which unlocks the whole chapter. . . . I am going to take up this subj(e)ct by virtue of the knowledge of God in me. — which I have received fr(o)m heaven. the opinions of men. so far as I am possessed concerned. are to me as the crackling of the thorns under the pot. or the whistli(n)g of the wind. (I break the ground) . . . like Columbus.⁶

It appears that scholars have not yet explored this important dimension of Joseph Smith's ministry in explicit or extensive terms. Nevertheless, this search for the key of knowledge seems to have been of great importance to Joseph Smith, even after the early published revelations grew fewer in number and frequency. His final sermons are saturated with keys to heavenly knowledge or what he often referred to as *intelligence*.

This interest in heavenly knowledge and the priesthood's role in its acquisition extended to Joseph Smith's successor, Brigham Young, who was a careful student of the Prophet. Brigham Young is reported as once having taught:

An individual who holds a share in the Priesthood, and continues faithful to his calling . . . will secure to himself not only the privilege of receiving, but the knowledge how to receive the things of God, that he may know the mind of God continually; and . . . the Priesthood . . . will continue to increase until it becomes like a fountain of living water . . . one continued source of intelligence and instruction to that individual.⁷

This truth about the keys of the priesthood is one that Brigham Young appears to have learned from his mentor, Joseph Smith.

6. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 397. The unusual transcription marks are informed by the Joseph Smith Papers project. That project and this approach to ambiguities in the earliest texts will inform all subsequent Joseph Smith citations.

7. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998), 128, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/teachings-brigham-young/chapter-18.

It should be understood that Joseph Smith (and his successor) used the terms *wisdom*, *knowledge*, and *intelligence* most often as synonyms, whereas in our day those terms are seldom used in that way.⁸ Instead, *knowing*, in today's Church vernacular, often appears to be less important than *doing* or *being*. But that is not how Joseph Smith understood these concepts or employed that language. For him, *knowledge* was the principle of salvation or exaltation; *knowing* was *becoming* like God (see Doctrine and Covenants 131:6; 130:18–19; John 17:3; 2 Peter 1:8). *Wisdom* in our day, though, is customarily associated with well-applied earthly knowledge. Today, properly used knowledge is little more than properly used information. Joseph Smith, in contrast, used words such as *knowledge*, *wisdom*, and *intelligence* to mean *pure intelligence*, much as we currently use the terms *inspiration* and *revelation*. Modern usage of this family of words often no longer refers to keys of knowledge nor to the unlocking of grand ideas. To be sure, knowledge, ironically, can even be disparaged when compared to doing and being.

So, what are the keys of knowledge? In an editorial, Joseph Smith points out that many people are ignorant of ministering spirits. This lack of understanding leaves them open to deception. These well-meaning people of faith may even have experience with supernatural power, yet remain unaware of what is from God and what is not. Joseph Smith asks what is to be done about this situation, and his answer to the dilemma is this: “A key is needed, a *rule*, a *criterion* by which one may ‘test’ all manifestations.”⁹ In this message, Joseph Smith identifies several keys for discerning the workings of potentially false spirits. Among them, he indicates that those who experience “power, revelation, or vision” may use certain keys to determine what is of God.¹⁰ One way to know what is from him, Joseph Smith explains, is to ask: Does the manifestation merely lead its recipient to shout “hallelujah” or is “intelligence communicated?”¹¹ In other words, one way to know if a manifestation is from God is that it will leave one enlightened or instructed. The manifestation will communicate substance or truths that expand the understanding. By this key—one of many that Joseph Smith provides—a person may discern what is from God.

8. David A. Bednar, *Increase in Learning: Spiritual Patterns for Obtaining Your Own Answers* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011).

9. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 265.

10. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 264.

11. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 264.

Moreover, Joseph Smith also provides keys of knowledge as they pertain to interpreting the scriptures. He explains on one occasion the key for making sense of the parables of Jesus, using the parable of the Prodigal Son as an example. Many moderns, he notes, read the parable as if it has implications for the nations of the Jews or Gentiles. To which he responds, my "rule of interpretati(o)n" is "[j]ust no interpretation at all."¹² He further clarifies, "I have a Key by whi(c)h I understa(n)d the scripture[s] — I enquire, what was the question whi(c)h drew out the answer.—(or caused Jesus to utter the parable?)"¹³ Further, to "(ascertain a parable's meaning, we must) dig up the root (and ascertain) what drew . . . the saying out of Jesus."¹⁴ As mentioned, he explains that this parable does not have national implications, but is best understood as being adapted to an "individual capacity."¹⁵ Using this "Key," Joseph Smith explains the parable's meaning: "This man [Jesus] receiveth sinners—(and eateth with them.)"¹⁶ The Prophet delighted to shed light on the "intricate subjects [of the scriptures]" by providing keys to interpretation.¹⁷ He could provide these keys for his followers because he was not only invested with keys of *authority* but with the right to keys of *knowledge*, knowledge obtained by the Holy Ghost.

As Richard Bushman explains about the beginnings of the Restoration: "The importance of priesthood was not primarily organizational, but grew out of its part in exaltation."¹⁸ He suggests that the "mystical powers of priesthood [its revelatory powers]" were only gradually "blended with the everyday business of running the church."¹⁹ Bushman adds that "it took nearly two years for priesthood to emerge as the ruling principle of Church government."²⁰ It often appears that the order of the evolving and intertwining of these two dimensions of the priesthood—and its keys of authority and knowledge—has been reversed in our day. Latter-day Saints seem to be much more

12. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 359.

13. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 359.

14. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 359.

15. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 359.

16. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 359.

17. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 359.

18. Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 258.

19. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 258.

20. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 258.

conscious of a key holder's right to direct the daily "business of the church" and less familiar with the full "potency of the priesthood."

This claim can be demonstrated by merely reviewing the entry for priesthood keys in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*.²¹ As a result of this present understanding and emphasis, the current default for the term keys is to describe them as keys of authority or administration instead of considering and utilizing their important role as a channel, conduit, or gateway for the wide dissemination of heavenly knowledge. This includes understanding for the faithful who listen to the instruction of their appointed leaders.

I propose that there is an additional, and possibly nearly forgotten, category for priesthood keys: keys of knowledge. *This is all the more surprising given that the keys of administration and governance are arguably inseparably connected to the keys of new and ground-breaking knowledge.* The keys of knowledge, when they are to be dispensed, are not usually dispensed by priesthood holders in general, nor are they usually possessed or discovered by worthy members in the Church at large. Most often, they are possessed and discovered by those who preside and hold keys of priesthood authority.

To be set apart and given keys is to have a right to revelation and, it would seem, to teach others how to receive the same. Nevertheless, faithful rank-and-file Church members can lay hold of great treasures of knowledge as they employ the keys provided to them by those who discover, possess, and teach them (Doctrine and Covenants 121:26–33).

It may even be that the keys of knowledge can be divided further: between keys identified in the scriptures and non-scripturally identified keys. The second category of keys are scattered among the instructions of Joseph Smith and his successors. Such keys are to be gathered, organized, treasured, and utilized to increase understanding and to improve discipleship.

This discussion begins with a review of scholarship on the question of priesthood keys of authority and knowledge to demonstrate the recent neglect of the second category of keys—those pertaining to knowledge. It will also define certain additional relevant terms. After that, it reviews the restoration of keys of authority or administration before illustrating that Joseph Smith often taught about keys of knowledge and keys of intelligence. To conclude, it briefly describes various

21. Alan K. Parrish, "Keys of the Priesthood," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: MacMillan, 1992), 2:780–81.

keys that have not been delegated to men and women on Earth, but which are reserved for the Lord alone. These keys he has by right of his authority and, it would seem, his knowledge. Specifically, those are the keys of power, authority, dominion, and governance pertaining to death, hell, and the heavens.

Two Standard Categories for Priesthood Keys

As explained earlier, the current way of describing priesthood keys refers almost exclusively to 1) the *keys of authority, administration, and government (ecclesiastical keys)*. This is opposed to what will be termed 2) the *keys of knowledge and intelligence (epistemological keys)*. Much as the entry on priesthood keys in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* referenced earlier, Sheri Dew, in her book on women and the priesthood, defines various truths about that heavenly agency or power. One of the important truths she presents conveys the standard definition for priesthood keys: "Priesthood keys are the manner through which the Lord authorizes and disperses his power and authority throughout the Church for both men and women."²² This standard definition is also how priesthood keys are defined in a book that was widely distributed by the Church, *True to the Faith*.²³ Priesthood authority and power in a Church context almost always centers on the role of the priesthood holder to give service to others. Elder M. Russell Ballard's treatment of the priesthood is representative of this claim.²⁴

None of these standard definitions and commonly associated principles are problematic in any way. They are merely incomplete as they stand because they do not account for the entire doctrine of the priesthood and its keys of knowledge as described in modern revelation and in the teachings of former Church leaders²⁵ and Latter-day Saint scholars.²⁶

Before proceeding, it must be acknowledged that though it is

22. Sheri Dew, *Women and the Priesthood: What One Mormon Woman Believes* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 105.

23. *True to the Faith* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 126–27.

24. M. Russell Ballard, *When Thou Art Converted: Continuing Our Search for Happiness* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), 158–61.

25. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 409–10.

26. Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Doctrine and Covenants Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey and Larry E. Dahl (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 332–33.

argued here that priesthood keys fall into two general categories, the subject is complicated and in places untidy and even ambiguous. There is much yet to learn about the assortment of keys that have been bestowed in this dispensation. There is more still to learn about the keys' relationship to one another and their relationship to the worthy servants of the Lord who are set apart to administer the gospel and govern in the Church. This extends to those who, because of their humility and diligence (though not a key holder), may also receive the conceptual keys of knowledge by means of scripture study, heeding priesthood instruction, and experience with the spirit of revelation. In other words, formally appointed key holders may or may not possess sufficient knowledge of the functions of the Holy Ghost to dispense to others the keys to knowledge. It is their right to do so, but not all presiding leaders fully live up to their privileges. Joseph Smith is our example in understanding how the two kinds of priesthood keys may come together in one (or more) persons or presidents.

In their latest book, Elder Dale G. Renlund and his wife, Ruth Lybbert Renlund, in two successive chapters, identify and explain priesthood offices and keys. In the first of these chapters, they write, "The term *priesthood keys* is used in two different ways"²⁷ and they follow by teaching that the keys of knowledge are universally available to those worthy to receive the Aaronic or Melchizedek Priesthood. Accordingly, they seem to see the matter slightly differently from Joseph Fielding McConkie.²⁸ In his article on the subject, McConkie explains that the keys of knowledge are to be understood as *widely available to the members of the Church due to their receipt of the gift of the Holy Ghost and priesthood ordinances*.²⁹ The Renlunds present their own, more particular, view of the matter when they write that all "Aaronic Priesthood holders receive the keys to the ministering of angels and the keys of the preparatory gospel of repentance and of baptism by immersion for the remission of sin" at the time the lesser

27. Dale G. Renlund and Ruth Lybbert Renlund, *The Melchizedek Priesthood: Understanding the Doctrine, Living the Principles* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018), 26.

28. It will be suggested in this article that the keys of knowledge are neither possessed nor dispensed by all worthy rank-and-file priesthood holders nor by all worthy and accountable members, but that they pertain to those in leadership who hold keys of administration. Nevertheless, these keys may, if used by the rank and file, benefit all who are wise.

29. Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Reference Companion*, 332–33.

priesthood is conferred upon them.³⁰ This teaching may raise certain questions because the Renlunds seem to use the term *keys* here in a non-standard way. As a corollary, the Renlunds suggest that those who receive the Melchizedek Priesthood obtain the "key of the mysteries of the kingdom, the key of the knowledge of God, and the keys of all spiritual blessings of the Church."³¹

To clarify, the Renlunds divide priesthood keys into two kinds. The first kind they describe as pertaining to a "right or privilege" bestowed upon all who receive either of the two priesthoods.³² This right or privilege, according to the Renlunds, has a relationship with receiving the ministering, and presumably the instruction, of angels and even the "mysteries of the kingdom," not the least of which is the "knowledge of God."³³ However, this right, which is broad and comprehensive, must be regulated. As they explain, this regulation is the role of the second category of keys. These "additional priesthood keys" confer the "right to preside over an organizational division of the Church or a quorum." It is these more familiar keys that govern and direct how the other keys are employed, according to the Renlunds. In fact, it is the key holder who, like the coach of a team, must teach and train the others ("players") who also have a right to the keys of knowledge and blessing. In this way, the Lord empowers all who receive the priesthood, as long as all things are done in proper order. Of course, this assumes that those with keys also have knowledge enough to properly govern how the keys of knowledge (to the extent they are manifest in the body of Christ) are employed for the salvation of the people.

This intriguing glimpse at the keys of knowledge (not keys of administrative authority) whets the appetite but leaves much to the imagination. It perhaps may even confuse the reader because the keys of knowledge are never definitively defined nor described by the Renlunds. Without further discussion of the keys to knowledge by these recognized teachers (one of whom is an Apostle), the Renlunds go on to describe the keys of authority or keys of administration. They write that the keys of authority allow for a priesthood holder to serve as a leader in the Church: "In this regard," the Renlunds point out, "priesthood keys [of this sort] are the authority and power to direct, lead, and

30. Renlund and Renlund, *Melchizedek Priesthood*, 26.

31. Renlund and Renlund, *Melchizedek Priesthood*, 26.

32. Renlund and Renlund, *Melchizedek Priesthood*, 26.

33. Renlund and Renlund, *Melchizedek Priesthood*, 26.

govern in the Church.”³⁴ Later they add that these same second-category “keys of presidency,” enable a priesthood holder to “lead, teach, organize, and encourage those over whom they preside.”³⁵ These brief but descriptive statements about priesthood as authority to govern and direct are the standard type of definitions and descriptions found in manuals and classrooms.

The Renlunds do not return to what they had said about the universally available keys obtained by men and women who serve under the authority of the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods. Their emphasis, thereafter, is that the Apostles share all available keys together and use them in unity with the chief Apostle, or President of the Church.

The subject of keys of knowledge appears to be unfamiliar to, or unexamined by, many people.³⁶ For this reason, and as indicated, the “formal” keys to heavenly knowledge, intelligence, and leadership are never in the hands of any other persons than those who are set apart to preside. However, and this harmonizes with the others’ views, if used wisely and diligently, the benefits of such keys may potentially reach not only to all priesthood holders, but to every member of the Church who has been baptized and has received the gift of the Holy Ghost. The keys to knowledge are not merely delegated or bestowed, but also must be sought, received, and used by those who diligently seek to learn and obey.

Before proceeding further, certain additional terms need to be defined and described. As mentioned above, in Church classroom discussions the definition of *keys* most often revolves around priesthood authority and opportunities to serve others. On occasion, however, priesthood authority is compared to and contrasted with priesthood *power*. And even more rarely (until recently), this authority and power was usually connected exclusively to the priesthood holder without reference to women and youth. However, the latter may also operate with priesthood authority and power and be blessed by that same authority through receipt of ordinances, covenants, and callings. In these situations, authority is said to be the permission and mandate to act in the name of Jesus Christ for the salvation of others.

34. Renlund and Renlund, *Melchizedek Priesthood*, 26.

35. Renlund and Renlund, *Melchizedek Priesthood*, 27.

36. This claim is based on the lack of detail on the subject in the sources just cited from Sheri Dew, the Renlunds, the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, and other sources.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks dramatically taught in the April 2014 General Conference:

We are not accustomed to speaking of women having the authority of the priesthood in their Church callings, but what other authority can it be? . . . Whoever functions in an office or calling received from one who holds priesthood keys exercises priesthood authority in performing her or his assigned duties.³⁷

Whether or not one uses this authority in such a way as to harness the "powers of heaven" depends upon that person living and operating according to the "principles of righteousness" (Doctrine and Covenants 121:36). This heavenly power or agency may bring to pass miracles when used appropriately. As some have noted, even the oath and covenant of the priesthood seems to include "all they who receive this priesthood," which may mean not only all those who receive it by *ordination*, but also all those who receive the legal administrators sent to them (see Hebrews 7:19–21; Doctrine and Covenants 84:35–40).³⁸

Certain keys of the priesthood — those having to do with righteous administration and government of the Church — direct how, when, and for whom authority can be used to benefit a person seeking salvation. Women and youth, when set apart to service under the keys of the priesthood, operate by priesthood authority, if not also by priesthood power.

In summary, it is not a new concept to suggest that priesthood keys are of two kinds or categories. Others have done this before. This distinction between keys of the priesthood can be found not only in the revelations given to Joseph Smith but also in the teachings of Church leaders dating back decades. Nevertheless, current Church culture focuses mostly on authority and its direction, but little, by comparison, on the keys to knowledge and intelligence. Keys are more than a right to serve in a certain administrative capacity such as a presidency, or to direct how, and when, or for whom, authority is used. Significantly, keys are broadly conceived also as a channel or way to knowledge and intelligence that can benefit all members of the Church. Although

37. See Dallin H. Oaks, "The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood," *Ensign*, May 2014, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2014/04/the-keys-and-authority-of-the-priesthood.

38. Sheri Dew is one who has helped expand our view of the oath and covenant of the priesthood. *Women and the Priesthood*, 127–29.

it is granted that talks and lessons discuss revelation a great deal, and thus, the acquisition of knowledge and intelligence, yet the role that priesthood keys play in the pursuit of heavenly understanding is much less clear.

What follows does not use the term *keys* to refer to *rights or authorities*, but rather as a *way, means, or channel* to heavenly knowledge. The discussion will, in passing, look at keys of authority in their more familiar sense, and then develop a larger, more thoroughgoing discussion about the nature of the priesthood keys of knowledge and intelligence. This will include consideration of the implications of these keys for the rank-and-file member of the Church. In what follows, it is important to understand that, first, I use the term *keys* and its many synonymous iterations more traditionally and, then, more broadly and without exclusive reference to tradition.

Heavenly Angels Restored the Keys of Authority and Knowledge

Priesthood keys of authority and knowledge have been restored to the Earth by the ministering of angels. It is not a mystery which priesthood keys of authority were restored through angelic ministration in this day, the “dispensation of the fulness of times” (Ephesians 1:10; Doctrine and Covenants 121:31; 128:18). The Son of God, by delegation, holds all priesthood keys under our Heavenly Father who presides over all that pertains to his family. Accordingly, Heavenly Father’s priesthood bears the name of the Son — “the Holy Priesthood, after the order of the Son of God” (Doctrine and Covenants 107:3).³⁹ In like manner, the Son of God has delegated a lesser portion of those keys and authority to his chosen servants, from Father Adam to the present day. The priesthood has apparently been on the Earth from the beginning of time in one form or another, either by lineal descent or angelic ministration. Certainly this is true whenever the Church has been on the Earth (Doctrine and Covenants 84:17). In any case, priesthood is eternal.

The Doctrine and Covenants teaches that the keys of authority — and by means of them, the keys of knowledge and intelligence — were restored in modern times by angelic ministration to Joseph Smith and his associates. John the Baptist, under the keys of presidency and

39. This priesthood is now called *Melchizedek* or the *Melchizedek Priesthood*. See Doctrine and Covenants 104:1–2.

administration held by the ancient apostles Peter, James, and John, bestowed keys pertaining to the ministering of angels and of the gospel of repentance upon Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery. This was in response to their seeking for further light and truth about the ordinance of baptism (Doctrine and Covenants 13). In later revelations, Peter, James, and John bestowed the apostolic keys of the kingdom on Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery (Doctrine and Covenants 27:12).

In the Kirtland temple, on 3 April 1836, the Lord appeared to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery. They were also visited on this occasion by Moses, Elias, and Elijah, so these ancient servants of God might reveal the keys of the priesthood they held (Doctrine and Covenants 110:1–16). Moses restored the keys of authority pertaining to the “gathering of Israel” (v. 11); Elias restored the keys of authority pertaining to the “dispensation of the gospel of Abraham” (v. 12); and Elijah restored the keys of authority pertaining to “turn[ing] the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the children to the fathers” (v. 15) — the same authority that allows families to be sealed together forever and the same that seals a person up to eternal life (v. 15). This sealing power, exercised in temples, also makes permanent and binding all priesthood ordinances sealed by the “Holy Spirit of Promise” (Doctrine and Covenants 132:7).

At the same time that these keys of authority were restored, it appears that new knowledge also came into the world. When the Lord or his angels minister, they do not only bestow authority by the laying on of hands, but they also instruct those they authorize. Based on a sermon attributed to Mormon, the angels, sent by the Son, minister to and instruct “chosen vessels” (Moroni 7:31). These chosen vessels, who are legal administrators of the gospel, impart authority and heavenly truth to the “residue of men” (Moroni 7:32). This pattern is most clearly observed by remembering that the angel Moroni, who holds the keys of the Book of Mormon record (Doctrine and Covenants 27:5) not only authorized Joseph Smith to bring forth the Book of Mormon but also taught him many prophecies to prepare him for his subsequent work (see Joseph Smith — History 1:33–41). Angels prepare the way in order that the covenants of the Lord may be fulfilled.

Joseph Smith entertained many angels during his ministry, including visitations of the Father and the Son. Each angel, it appears, bestowed upon Joseph’s head their keys of authority or imparted heavenly instruction. But what about the keys of knowledge and intelligence? To proceed, it is necessary to discuss Joseph Smith as a

“chosen vessel” of the Lord before more fully laying out what is meant by the keys of knowledge and intelligence.

The Keys of Knowledge and Intelligence

Joseph Smith was chosen by the Lord to head this current and last gospel dispensation. He holds the keys over it and will forever (see Doctrine and Covenants 90:2–5). This is a dispensation in which all keys, rights, authority, and powers known to any previous dispensation have been or will be restored. Inherent in these keys of authority are keys to receive and dispense knowledge and intelligence. The keys pertaining to heavenly knowledge are often referenced in the revelations, and they have a direct relationship to the right of presidency and government of the Church. Joseph Smith, by virtue of the priesthood keys he held, became a fount of knowledge to the Latter-day Saints.

These keys of knowledge and intelligence, which Joseph Smith received from the Lord and dispensed to others, may also be placed into two additional categories: 1) general, formal keys to knowledge and intelligence, and 2) specific, informal keys to knowledge and intelligence. The formal keys pertaining to knowledge and intelligence are not often directly discussed outside the Doctrine and Covenants. The following collection of references demonstrates that these non-administrative keys to acquiring knowledge and wisdom are gifts granted only to those who preside in the Church, unless otherwise delegated, transmitted, or shared. The list of keys below is not exhaustive, but does demonstrate the variety of ways that keys of knowledge have been described (or suggested) in modern revelation:

- Keys of the translation of ancient records (Doctrine and Covenants 6:28).
- Keys of the “ministering of angels” and preparatory gospel (Doctrine and Covenants 13:1; 84:26).⁴⁰
- Keys of the restoration of all things spoken by the prophets (Doctrine and Covenants 27:6).
- Keys of gathering together all things in one (Doctrine and Covenants 27:13).⁴¹

40. When angels visit, they often impart instruction (examples include Moses 5:6–8; 1 Nephi 11:14–34; 2 Nephi 10:3; Mosiah 3:2–22; Mosiah 27:11–31). As noted previously, in each of the visits of the angel Moroni to Joseph Smith, he instructed him at great length in the prophecies and purposes of the Lord.

41. It appears to have been understood in the early years of the Church that “the gathering” meant the gathering not only of people to places, but of all the

- Keys of revelation to the Church and to receiving the mysteries of God and his kingdom (Doctrine and Covenants 25:9; 28:7; 35:17–18, 20; 42:61–69; 43:12–14; 64:5; 84:19; 90:14; 107:19).
- Keys of the knowledge of God and all spiritual blessings (Doctrine and Covenants 84:19; 107:18).
- Keys of the “oracles” (or revelations; Doctrine and Covenants 90:4)
- Keys of the “school of the prophets” (Doctrine and Covenants 90:7).
- Keys of blessing the Church (Doctrine and Covenants 107:39; 110:12).
- Keys of revealing priesthood ordinances and turning hearts (Doctrine and Covenants 2:1; 110:14–16).⁴²
- Keys to “ask and receive” (Doctrine and Covenants 124:95–99).
- Keys of recording and transmitting knowledge on Earth and in heaven (Doctrine and Covenants 128:14).

The formal keys of knowledge, more or less chronologically arranged above, are held by chosen vessels for the benefit of Church members and others. The average lay member does not hold these particular keys but should, where possible, seek to benefit from them (Doctrine and Covenants 122:1–4). For instance, the Aaronic Priesthood holds the keys of the “ministering of angels” (Doctrine and Covenants 13:1). But what may that mean? One way to understand these keys is that those who preside over this priesthood may authorize certain others to provide the sacrament for the members of the Church.⁴³ The members who receive the sacrament, as a result of the keys held by the bishop, may thereby receive angels and may learn of such matters that will help prepare them for the blessings of the higher priesthood.

truths of the Earth to Zion. Knowledge was to be gathered up and brought to Zion. (See Doctrine and Covenants 42:61–69; 121:26–33.)

42. Priesthood ordinances are gateways to the grace and gifts of God, including the gift of knowledge. Once ordinances are received and associated covenants obeyed, power, instruction, and blessings may flow into a person's life.
43. In a ward setting, certain keys pertaining to the Aaronic Priesthood and its use are held by the bishop, the teacher's quorum president, and the deacon's quorum president. Before a bishop is called, ordained, and set apart by his stake president, approval is sought and granted from the First Presidency of the Church. That is because a bishop is both the presiding high priest in his ward and the president of the Aaronic Priesthood.

The sacrament, then, is directed by priesthood keys of authority. It simultaneously prepares the way for members, once purified of sin, to receive angels and treasures of knowledge through the Holy Ghost. The ordinance prepares members for higher and holier opportunities and associations.

Similarly, those holding the keys of the higher ordinances can help make a way for those who desire to receive the blessings of the holy temple, which blessings may eventually involve association with more than angels, in due time having the privilege to behold the Lord himself, face to face (see Doctrine and Covenants 110:7). These are two important ways to understand what it may mean for holders of the Aaronic Priesthood to exercise the “keys of the ministering of angels” (Doctrine and Covenants 13:1) and for those who hold the Melchizedek Priesthood to exercise the “key of the knowledge of God” and the “keys . . . of receiving the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” (Doctrine and Covenants 84:19; 107:18–19). The next section provides specific examples of informal keys to knowledge acquisition.

Joseph Smith and Two Examples of Keys of Knowledge

Along with the familiar priesthood keys of authority and less familiar priesthood keys of knowledge and intelligence, there are many instances in which those who preside have intentionally provided particular keys to knowledge, interpretation, and understanding. These keys of knowledge are given to the Church by means of those who preside. Put another way, new knowledge comes to the Church through the channel of priesthood keys, and this happens by divine design. The man who holds priesthood keys to lead and “administer . . . the gospel” may also act as a conduit for dispensing keys or conceptual principles that unlock the “mysteries of the kingdom, even the . . . knowledge of God” (Doctrine and Covenants 84:19). It is also by reason of these keys that ordinances are performed, which make available the companionship of the Holy Ghost (a revelator) and the enjoyment of the gifts of wisdom and knowledge. Until the key is “turned,” though, these gifts cannot be fully enjoyed by Church members.

There is a special and exclusive sense in which the ordained President of the Church — and others to whom he delegates keys — have a divine right to receive revelatory knowledge, declare doctrine, and, if needed, break new ground. This section of the article will provide two examples (one formal or scriptural, one informal or non-scriptural) from the collective and associated keys of knowledge and

intelligence. These will be described before turning to the heavenly priesthood keys of authority, exclusively held by the Lord in his foreordained and authorized role as Redeemer and Savior under the keys and authority of the Father.

Scriptural examples

In Doctrine and Covenants 129, certain keys for detecting false messengers are revealed to the Church. In these "instructions," Joseph Smith makes known "three grand keys" (v. 9), which teach members that "ministering angels and spirits" are of two sorts: 1) reembodied resurrected beings; and 2) disembodied ministering spirits (vv. 1, 3). Joseph Smith explains that "When a messenger comes saying he has a message from God, offer him your hand and request him to shake hands with you" (v. 4). Once the hand is offered, Joseph Smith says there are three ways of detection: 1) "If he [the messenger] be an angel"; 2) "If he be the spirit of a just man made perfect"; and 3) "If it [he] be the devil" (vv. 5–6, 8). The instruction concludes as follows: "These are the three grand keys whereby you may know whether any administration is from God" (v. 9).

These verses are a canonical example demonstrating where one in authority offers specific instruction to others to benefit them in detecting truth and avoiding deception. This was no doubt based on the revelations and experiences of Joseph Smith. Joseph Smith enjoyed and delegated such keys of knowledge and intelligence, exercising his right to act as authoritative teacher to the Church. The material in Doctrine and Covenants 129 is not presented as revelation from God, but as inspired instruction to members of the Church. Nevertheless, the right to offer these "grand keys" to the Church is a function of the keys of knowledge inherent in the keys of the priesthood. Joseph Smith was able to do this not merely because he was intelligent or a spiritually minded man, but because he, through angelic ministration, held the keys to offer keys of knowledge.

In addition to the keys of knowledge in the present canon of scripture, Joseph Smith also liberally distributed extra-canonical keys of knowledge. He did this both explicitly and implicitly as a function of his role as the presiding leader of the Church. Scores of examples could be identified and cited, but only one is provided in what follows.

Non-scriptural examples

One of many non-scriptural examples of Joseph Smith's distribution of

keys to knowledge and intelligence can be extracted from his teachings about the Apostle Peter (referenced earlier). In 2 Peter 1, Peter exhorts the Saints of his day to add to their faith one virtue upon another until they come to a “knowledge of our Lord, Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:8). In his 1843 exposition of Peter’s writings, Joseph Smith explains to his audience that Peter provides them only “hints of things which ex(is)ted in the prophet[']s mind. which are not written. Concer(n)ing eternal glory.”⁴⁴ In this context, Joseph Smith explains, “I break the ground,” perhaps meaning that as President of the Church, Joseph Smith would proffer interpretive principles whereby the Saints may come to understand Peter’s subject for themselves.

Joseph Smith asks his audience, if they are to understand Peter, “What is the secret—the starting point?” He identifies the starting point—or key to this knowledge—as *knowledge through the power of God*, what Peter calls “His [God’s] divine power.” After a few other related remarks, Joseph Smith succinctly sums up the “three grand secrets” to understanding Peter’s difficult teachings:

<1 Key> Knowledge i(s) the power of Salvati(o)n. <2 Key> Make his calling and Election Sure. 3 [Key] It is one thing to be on the mount. & hear the excellent voice [etc.], and another <to hear the> voice de(c)lare to you, You have a part & lot in that kingdom.⁴⁵

Again, it should be noted that to provide a key or series of keys is not to gain everything; to have a key still requires the listener to use the key if he or she is to learn what is inside the room that stores that particular treasure of wisdom and knowledge. The learner still has to ask, seek, and knock in order to obtain.

In this teaching, Joseph Smith does not interpret Peter’s writings for his listeners, going verse by verse as scriptural commentaries tend to do. Instead, he provides them with specific concepts, principles, or keys whereby they might come to understand Peter’s prophetic point and invitation more completely based upon their own further effort and inquiry. Joseph Smith is acting in his role as a key holder when he teaches about these keys for interpretation and knowledge. This is his right and prerogative insofar as he is enlightened enough to do so and assuming that the audience is also prepared for the particular lesson. The Prophet is not specifically administering the gospel so much as

44. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 397.

45. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 400.

providing, in an informal yet explicit way, a means to comprehend the mysteries of God. This is an important aspect of his duty as Church leader. This may be replicated throughout the Church, wherever there is a key holder or one appointed by a key holder to teach.

In summary, priesthood keys of knowledge are of two primary sorts, ecclesiastical and epistemological. Interestingly, this second type of keys may also profitably be divided into two additional sub-categories: formal ways of knowing and informal ways of knowing. The second of these sub-categories can be called non-scriptural keys provided by Joseph Smith as an authorized leader and teacher. It is asserted here that these many scriptural and non-scriptural keys to knowledge and intelligence fall under the priesthood keys of authority, governance, and administration belonging to Joseph Smith, his successors, and others who preside in the Church at the stake and ward/branch level. Thus, it may be said that these keys naturally reach to all members of the Church as leaders do not have a monopoly on the acquisition of saving knowledge. They are, as key holders, in a position to provide certain additional conceptual keys to further the knowledge of the Saints, either directly or by means of those they call and set apart.

Jesus Christ Holds the Keys of Death, Hell, and Final Judgment

Although Joseph Smith received keys of authority and knowledge from angels sent to him from past gospel dispensations, neither he nor his successors possess all priesthood keys. The Lord holds priesthood keys of authority beyond those possessed by the legal administrators he has chosen. Most Christians are aware that Jesus Christ received power from his Father to break the bands of death and to rise again from the tomb. Many are also aware that the power to rise from the dead in resurrection will eventually pass upon all people. However, Latter-day Saint Christians additionally believe that the vast majority of the dead, before inheriting one of the three kingdoms of glory prepared for them, will be raised in their resurrected bodies to be judged. Finally, it is widely believed by Christians that all people will stand before Jesus Christ to be judged. This is the case because the Lord holds the keys of authority pertaining to this final judgment. The scripture says that "The Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son" (John 5:22–23).

All that Jesus Christ accomplished was in service to his Father, who first called and commissioned him to the priesthood in the premortal

realms and in this second estate. He became a high priest forever (see Hebrews 5:5–6; Alma 13:8–9). In his relationship with the Father, the Lord did only those things that pleased him. He was authorized with priesthood power and endowed, as a result, with heavenly knowledge that enabled him to carry out and complete his mission on Earth and beyond the veil. The Lord was the messenger of the Father and taught his gospel to all who would receive his teachings. Many of his sayings were eventually written down. To this day, they expand our views and provide insights into heavenly truths. As a resurrected personage, the Lord continues to labor for the salvation of his Father’s children. According to his calling and commission, he continues to seek to perfect the work his Father has delegated to him. The keys of authority that fall to him are more extensive than those possessed by any of his followers. In fact, he alone holds the keys of death and hell (resurrection and atonement; see 2 Nephi 9:10, 10:25).

What may it mean that the Lord holds the “keys of hell” (Revelation 1:18)?⁴⁶ As a final contribution to this discussion, this doctrine can be briefly explained. This doctrine is not unrelated to the doctrine of deliverance from temporal death. Latter-day Saints believe that those persons under condemnation for transgressing divine law, if unrepentant, must suffer their portion in hell, subsequent to their time on Earth (see Doctrine and Covenants 19:1–20). Hell is a place and state of torment reserved for the devil and his angels and all “they who subject themselves unto him” (Moroni 7:17). However, the revelations indicate that, for the vast majority of the unbelieving and rebellious inhabitants of the Earth, there will be an end to their suffering (see Doctrine and Covenants 19:4–12). They will be delivered when they have learned obedience, for “all will suffer until they learn to obey Christ.”⁴⁷ Nevertheless, in time, through the Lord and his keys of authority to open hell’s gates, all will be delivered from their torment, except those who are counted sons of perdition. These rebels alone will remain there.

Because of the Lord’s keys of authority, the gates of hell are opened by him who suffered that he might obtain the “rights of mercy” (Moroni 7:27). These “rights” (an indication of his authority) seem to have relationship to the Lord’s experiential knowledge according to the flesh

46. For more on this subject, see Janet Ewell, “Easter and Doctrine and Covenants 138: Our Harrowing of Hell, Our Decensus *Christi ad Inferos*, Our Anastasis,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 68 (2026), 243–88.

47. Gaskill and Moore, *Teachings*, 470.

(see 2 Nephi 9:21–22; Alma 7:10–13). That is, he has a right to offer mercy to the penitent because he paid for our sins, having experienced all things in the flesh. The keys of hell and final judgment are solely in the hands of Jesus Christ. None other holds them. His atoning experiences qualify him as our final judge (see John 5:22; Mosiah 3:10).⁴⁸

King David understood many of these truths and thus obtained the promise that, in due time, he would be delivered from hell. This merciful promise obtained by David seems to be what Isaiah refers to as the “sure mercies of David” (Isaiah 55:3). In reality, though, in due time, all but a few rebels will find deliverance from hell because of the Lord. This same doctrine was confirmed by Peter (see Acts 2:25–36). These truths appear to explain why it is, that in the end, “every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess” that Jesus is God—their Christ, their Savior, and their Redeemer (Mosiah 27:31). In the end, all who will receive, shall enjoy one of three kingdoms of glory through the “merits, mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah” (2 Nephi 2:8). Alma, son of Alma, learned this doctrine, which he expressed after his sore repentance and spiritual re-birth, being released from the “pains of hell” (Alma 36:12–18; see also Mosiah 27:23–29).

Summary and Conclusions

Much has come through the restoration of the gospel and the priesthood. Angels have visited the Earth and have delivered priesthood keys to the Prophet Joseph Smith. Those priesthood keys are of two sorts, and the ones most often discussed in the Church are those having to do with authority and administration. However, according to the revelations given to Joseph Smith, priesthood keys also function as a means to gain knowledge and intelligence, in addition to the right to preside and direct authority. A fullness of the authority of Heavenly Father has been delegated to his Son, Jesus Christ. Through him and his angelic servants, the Lord has conferred a portion of that authority and its attendant keys upon the heads of certain chosen vessels, such as Joseph Smith and his associates and successors.

Inherent in these keys for directing priesthood authority, administration, and government, the keys of knowledge and intelligence have been granted. This suggests an order to revelation in the kingdom of

48. It is common knowledge among Christians that Jesus Christ is our final judge. Most Christians believe and teach this idea. What the angel teaches King Benjamin in Mosiah 3:3–10 is why this is so. The Lord has the right to act as our final judge in part because of what he has experienced (Mosiah 3:5–9).

God. That is, leaders who magnify their callings may act as dispensers and facilitators of knowledge. This is not to say that Latter-day Saints cannot learn much, even *all* that their leaders know, through the gift of the Holy Ghost and personal revelation, for they can. However, it does suggest that until one with keys to direct the performance of certain ordinances by proper authority performs his part, even that superlative gift—the formal gift of the Holy Ghost—cannot be enjoyed. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are made available through the authority of God, as that authority is directed by keys of presidency. Furthermore, those who preside may also receive revelation pertaining to those for whom they have stewardship. In addition, they may wish to teach principles (or “conceptual keys”) when teaching, which can help the Saints exponentially acquire more understanding. Joseph Smith often demonstrated this vital dimension of priesthood leadership.

Finally, I have attempted to show that certain keys and authority have been retained by the Lord. For instance, he alone holds the keys of death and hell and of an entrance into the heavenly kingdoms of glory. He is “the keeper of the gate” and “he employeth no servant there” (2 Nephi 9:41). Without the Lord, we would not have the hope of a resurrection. Without the Lord, we would not have the expectation of a righteous judgment. Without the Lord, we would not have hope for a “better world” (Ether 12:4, 8, 32). The Lord Jesus Christ has prepared the way. In this, and in all other essential ways, he broke the ground and made ready all things for the children of God. This he assured his faithful disciples before his death (see John 14:1–6). Thus, he declared to them: “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:27).



Matthew Scott Stenson holds a PhD in English from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. His dissertation work centered on John Milton's intertextuality in *Paradise Lost*. Scott teaches Composition and Literature at Tennessee Tech University and serves on his stake's high council. In addition to his articles published in *Interpreter*, he has published articles in such journals as *BYU Studies Quarterly*, *Christianity and Literature*, and *The Religious Educator*.

Dynastic Dynamics: Competing Bloodlines and Political Legitimacy in the Book of Mormon

Noel Hudson

Abstract: *This study reinterprets the political and military upheavals of the book of Alma through the lens of dynastic competition among Nephite, Mulekite, and Jaredite lineages. It builds on the work of Hugh Nibley, John Sorenson, Noel Reynolds, and more recently, Val Larsen and Lyle Hamblin, among others. Their research suggests that hereditary legitimacy and rival bloodlines shaped later Nephite history as deeply as did religious conviction or moral struggle. The merger of the Nephite and Mulekite peoples appears to have produced a fragile political order that fractured when traditional royal authority was replaced by the reign of judges. Alma₂'s abdication, the apparent weakness of Nephihah and Pahoran as executives, and the appointment of Captain Moroni are examined as deliberate efforts to stabilize a government suffering from dynastic instability. Tracing the intersection of lineage, legitimacy, and divine favor illuminates how the Book of Mormon frames its wars not merely as moral conflicts but as struggles to preserve righteous authority amid inherited divisions.*

In every age, the stability of a people depends on the perceived legitimacy of its leaders. As Noel Reynolds observes, societies require stories that validate the authority of their leaders and laws.¹ Political legitimacy—the moral right to rule—is often grounded in tradition

1. Noel B. Reynolds, "The Political Dimension in Nephi's Small Plates," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (1987): 15, byustudies.byu.edu/article/the-political-dimension-in-nephis-small-plates.

and dynastic continuity.² Across the ancient world, from Egypt to China, long-standing royal lineages symbolized divine sanction³ and stability.⁴ In some cases the lineage was and continues to be of such supreme importance that individual identity is of much lesser cultural significance than the bloodline to which the individual belongs.⁵

Legitimacy and Dynastic Context in the Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon appears to also emphasize the importance of bloodlines. As John Sorenson notes, this scripture is “a partial record of events, emphasizing what happened to one group of people, put in their own ethnocentric terms.”⁶ Its narratives are shaped by the rival memories of distinct lineages. Although the text never states this directly, evidence from naming patterns, political crises, and social dissensions suggest that Nephite history was marked by competing dynastic claims.⁷

This paper presents evidence for the hypothesis that much of the wars and political unrest recorded in the book of Alma reflect the interplay of Nephite and Mulekite bloodlines vying for legitimacy. Viewing the record through this lens provides a possible explanation for the abdication of Alma, the perceived weakness of Nephiah and

2. Emily Lange da Silva, “Ideological Transitions: A Theory Based on Martin Wight’s Three Doctrinal Conflagrations,” *Universidade Nova de Lisboa* (2023): 166–67, run.unl.pt/bitstream/10362/161130/1/20231015_TeseDout_Ideological%20Transitions_v.corrigida_e.lange.pdf.pdf.

3. John van Seters, “Sacral and Not-so-Sacral Kingship in the Ancient Near East,” in *Kingship In Asia and Early America: 30. International Congress of Human Sciences In Asia and North Africa*, ed. A. L. Basham (Mexico City: El Colegio de Mexico, 1981), 13–14, doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvcwp01n.6.

4. Andrej Kokkonen and Anders Sundell, “Delivering Stability—Primogeniture and Autocratic Survival in European Monarchies 1000–1800,” *The American Political Science Review* 108, no. 2 (2014): 438–53, [jstor.org/stable/43654382](https://www.jstor.org/stable/43654382).

5. Meyer Fortes, “The Structure of Unilineal Descent Groups,” *American Anthropologist* 55, no. 1 (1953): 26, [jstor.org/stable/664462](https://www.jstor.org/stable/664462).

6. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 55, archive.org/details/ancientamericans0000sore/.

7. Noel B. Reynolds, “Nephite Kingship Reconsidered,” *Faculty Publications* (1997): 151–89, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/1488. See also Lyle H. Hamblin, “Proper Names and Political Claims: Semitic Echoes as Foundations for Claims to the Nephite Throne,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 60 (2024): 409–44, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/proper-names-and-political-claims-semitic-echoes-as-foundations-for-claims-to-the-nephite-throne/.

Pahoran, and the rise of captain Moroni as both a military and political figure.

The Nephite–Mulekite merger and its consequences

Dynastic conflict has historically been among the most violent forms of political rivalry. Kokkonen and Sundell note that “violence is the ultimate arbiter of political conflicts in autocracies,” a principle evident throughout history whenever rival royal lines met.⁸ Marriage between dynasties was often the only means of avoiding or ending bloodshed, as in the British War of the Roses that was concluded through the unification of the Houses of Lancaster and York in the marriage of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York.⁹ Val Larsen proposes a similar event in Nephite history: the merger of Mosiah₁’s Nephites with the people of Zarahemla through a dynastic marriage linking Nephite and Mulekite elites. Larsen states:

As part of the merger of the two peoples, Mosiah₁ would likely have arranged a marriage between one or more of his children and those of Zarahemla. If Benjamin, his heir, was thus married (a reasonable hypothesis), then Mosiah₂ would be half Mulekite.¹⁰

The use of marriage to diffuse political tensions and allow for the merging of two separate peoples is a time-honored strategy that makes sense in this situation. John Sorensen notes that Ammon₁ in the book of Mosiah, is likely the product of early intermarriage between Nephites and Mulekites. He suggests that is why Ammon is described as a descendant of Zarahemla and yet also calls the people of Zeniff his “brethren” (Mosiah 7:13). Sorensen says that this dual claim “seems to imply some sort of descent for Ammon from both Nephite and Zarahemla ancestors.”¹¹

If the leading families of both the Nephites and the people of Zarahemla mixed in this fashion, then Mosiah₂ would have been of mixed descent, and his kingship would have embodied both royal

8. Andrej Kokkonen and Anders Sundell, “The King is Dead: Political Succession and War in Europe, 1000–1799,” *University of Gothenburg* (2017): 2, academia.edu/80453561.

9. R. A. Griffiths, “Henry Tudor: The Training of a King,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (1986): 205. doi.org/10.2307/3817121.

10. Val Larsen, “In His Footsteps: Ammon₁ and Ammon₂,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 3 (2013): 90–93, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/journal/in-his-footsteps-ammon-and-ammon/.

11. John L. Sorensen, “The ‘Mulekites,’” *BYU Studies* 30, no. 3 (1990): 22n23. scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol30/iss3/8.

lines. This intermarriage would have created a dynasty that was supported by both Nephites and Mulekites, and indeed, the record notes that Mosiah₂ was an extremely popular king: “And they did wax strong in love towards Mosiah; yea, they did esteem him more than any other man” (Mosiah 29:40).

Jaredite influences and the persistence of rival traditions

John Sorenson and Hugh Nibley have both demonstrated that the people of Zarahemla were a composite group, combining descendants of Mulek with remnants of the Jaredite civilization.

Sorenson observes that such syncretism would have transmitted Jaredite cultural elements into the new society.¹² The primary evidence for the cultural continuity of the Jaredites, beyond the collapse of their civilization, is the onomastic influence clearly present among the Mulekites and Nephites.

Nibley explains that a striking number of Jaredite names reappear among the Nephites, especially among dissenters. The name *Coriantumr* refers to both a Jaredite king and a Nephite dissenter who led a Lamanite army. Similarly, the name *Corihor* was likely related to the better-known *Korihor*. These are just two of many examples that illustrate how this older tradition may have survived through the Mulekite line. Nibley observes that many Nephites bearing Jaredite names belonged to a faction opposed to Nephite orthodoxy, a pattern that underscores interactions between royal and religious legitimacy.¹³ Naming traditions do not necessarily indicate genetic heritage, of course. However, the relationship between onomastics and ethnic identity has such great explanatory power¹⁴ that it has even been used to reconstruct poorly attested languages.¹⁵ Because of its explanatory power, this speculative approach will be frequently employed throughout this paper.

The notion that Jaredite bloodlines survived and mixed with

12. Sorenson, “The ‘Mulekites,’” 17.

13. Hugh W. Nibley, “The World of the Jaredites, Part IX,” *Improvement Era*, May 1952, 317–18, scripturecentral.org/archive/periodicals/magazine-article/world-jaredites-part-ix.

14. M. Depauw and W. Clarysse, “How Christian Was Fourth Century Egypt? Onomastic Perspectives on Conversion,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 67, no. 4 (2013): 407–35, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42003515>.

15. I. J. Gelb, “Ethnic reconstruction and onomastic evidence,” *Names* 10 (1962): 45–52, [researchgate.net/publication/275494396_Ethnic_Reconstruction_and_Onomastic_Evidence](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275494396_Ethnic_Reconstruction_and_Onomastic_Evidence).

the later inhabitants is an idea that dates back nearly a century in Mormon scholarly publications. J. M. Sjodahl proposed the idea in the *Improvement Era* in 1927 based on the reasoning that the destruction of a civilization does not mean that every last member of that people is annihilated.¹⁶ The appearance of Jaredite names among the Nephites only after they had fused with the Mulekites is an indication that the Mulekites likely mixed with the remnants of Jaredite peoples in the land.

The cultural affinity of dissenters among the Nephites can frequently be discerned based on their names, as Lyle Hamblin points out for names containing the *mlk* Hebrew element.¹⁷ In addition to a strong affinity for “kingly” names, Mulekites also seem to frequently bear names that were popular among the Jaredites. John Welch explains that the Jaredite names borne by many of the chief troublemakers in the Book of Mormon narrative suggests that “some of the political turmoil and civil wars that arose in the land of Zarahemla in the first century BC were instigated by disgruntled Mulekites who had grown weary of Nephite rule.”¹⁸ John Tvedtnes speculates that the Mulekites may have carried Jaredite cultural traditions across generations up to the era of the Gadianton robbers.¹⁹

For these reasons, the remainder of the paper builds upon the speculation that those who bear Jaredite names in the Book of Mormon are likely to have a Mulekite genetic heritage. The effect of that heritage on the actions and political affiliations of its bearers may help explain why the constitutional order of the Nephites changed in the specific ways narrated in the record.

16. J. M. Sjodahl, “Have the Lamanites Jaredite Blood in Their Veins,” *The Improvement Era*, November 1927, 56–57, scripturecentral.org/archive/periodicals/magazine-article/have-lamanites-jaredite-blood-their-veins.

17. Hamblin, “Proper Names and Political Claims.”

18. John W. Welch, “Benjamin, the Man: His Place in Nephite History,” in *King Benjamin’s Speech: “That Ye May Learn Wisdom,”* ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies [FARMS], 1998), 23–53, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/46.

19. John A. Tvedtnes, “Book of Mormon Tribal Affiliation and Military Castes,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Provo, UT: FARMS; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 165, archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/sites/default/files/archive-files/pdf/tvedtnes/2021-07-12/14_john_a._tvedtnes_book_of_mormon_tribal_affiliation_and_military_castes_296-326.pdf.

Bloodlines and the Right to Rule

Questions of rightful rule pervade the Book of Mormon. Noel Reynolds has proposed that Nephi's own writings function as a "lineage history" intended to justify his claim to lead and to teach.²⁰ Nephi was highly sensitive to issues of political legitimacy, and he used a number of strategies common to the culture of the Ancient Near East to bolster his claims to the legitimate leadership of his group.²¹ That same anxiety over legitimacy resurfaces generations later in the wars of Alma₂'s time.

For example, Zerahemnah's invasion sought to impose Lamanite dominion on the Nephites, a claim explicitly tied to ancestral rights (Alma 44:3–7). Later, Ammoron, a Zoramite with a Jaredite-derived name, accused the Nephites of usurping the "right to the government when it rightly belonged unto them" (Alma 54:17–18). His genealogy and rhetoric show the complex intermingling of rival claims. Names such as Ammoron (possibly "people of Moron," the Jaredite capital) suggest deep cultural memory derived from Jaredite roots.²² The complex interplay of different groups and tribes within the Nephite polity—including a Jaredite remnant, the Mulekites, the Zoramites, the Zeniffites, converted Lamanites, and the heterogeneous tribes labeled generically as Nephites—indicates the presence of many different cultural heritages vying for supremacy within the group. This complex interplay, Daniel Belnap suggests, points to evidence of enduring contention over "Nephite identity."²³

A subset of the Mulekites seem to have looked to their ancient Jaredite heritage for legitimacy and cultural inspiration in direct opposition to the dominant Nephite cultural tradition that hearkened back to ancient Hebrew customs. However, it is clear that not all Mulekites looked to Jaredite traditions for their religious and cultural cues. The record shows that some of the staunchest supporters of the Nephite traditions had Jaredite-derived names. Moroni and Teancum are

20. Reynolds, "The Political Dimension," 15.

21. Noel Hudson, "Irregular Kings and Precious Things," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*, forthcoming.

22. Book of Mormon Onomasticon, s.v. "Ammoron," onoma.lib.byu.edu/index.php?title=AMMORON.

23. Daniel L. Belnap, "'They are of Ancient Date': Jaredite Traditions and the Politics of Gadianton's Dissent," *Illuminating the Jaredite Records*, ed. Daniel L. Belnap (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2020): 5, rsc.byu.edu/illuminating-jaredite-records/they-are-ancient-date-jaredite-traditions-politics-gadiantons-dissent.

examples of men with likely Jaredite roots who nonetheless adopted the Nephite explanation of history.

Given the tensions between competing cultural identities among the Nephites, were violent contentions between the various groups inevitable? The Nephite kings who ruled the heterogeneous groups appear to have thought that integration and peaceful coexistence was possible. Benjamin and Mosiah₂ both implemented extensive measures to try to minimize conflict.²⁴ Their efforts at integration were largely, although not completely, successful.²⁵ King Benjamin's public promulgation of a theology of unity accompanied by a covenant of loyalty indicates that the project of integration was strongly supported by the throne and was well on its way to a successful conclusion by the time of the coronation of Mosiah₂.²⁶ However, when all of Mosiah₂'s heirs refused the throne and left the kingdom, a succession crisis threw the entire project into commotion.²⁷

Val Larsen identifies Aaron, the son of Mosiah₂, as the last potential bridge between the Nephite and Mulekite lines. Aaron's refusal of the throne removed the last figure capable of uniting the two peoples through shared descent. His decision set the stage for Alma₂'s troubled judgeship. Mosiah₂ seems not to have recognized just how important the issue of bloodlines was to his partially integrated polity. Larsen points out that:

Evidence suggests that the sons of Mosiah₂ were direct descendants of Zarahemla, the last Mulekite king, and were at least half and, possibly, as much as three-quarters Mulekite. Bloodlines probably explain, in part, the explosion of unrest that occurs when Alma₂, a pure-blooded Nephite with Zeniffite roots, is appointed as first chief judge.²⁸

24. Scripture Central, "Why Were Benjamin and Mosiah Such Beloved and Effective Leaders?" KnoWhy #84, 9 September 2019, scripturecentral.org/knowwhy/why-were-benjamin-and-mosiah-such-beloved-and-effective-leaders.

25. Andrew Miller, "King Benjamin's Sermon as a Type of Temple Endowment," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 61 (2024): 30–31, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/king-benamins-sermon-as-a-type-of-temple-endowment/.

26. Welch, "Benjamin, the Man," 58.

27. Dan Belnap, "'And it came to pass...': The Sociopolitical Events in the Book of Mormon Leading to the Eighteenth Year of the Reign of the Judges," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 23, no. 1 (2014): 104–5, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol23/iss1/7.

28. Larsen, "In His Footsteps," 100.

With the removal of the leaders that had likely embodied both the Nephite and Mulekite bloodlines, the Mulekite-majority subpopulation quickly grew restless. Lyle Hamblin has described how the Mulekite dissenters led a series of rebellions beginning with the Amlicite uprising and continuing all the way to the founding of the Gadianton Robbers. These dissenters had as their purpose recovering the “rights of government” (3 Nephi 3:10) that they perceive had been taken from them.²⁹

The Crisis of Legitimacy Under the Judges

Legitimacy profoundly shaped the success of leaders in the Nephite record.³⁰ Mosiah₂, heir to centuries of royal tradition and sacred relics such as the Liahona and the sword of Laban, reigned during a period of relative unity and peace.³¹ Alma₂ by contrast, as the head of a newly introduced form of government lacking the weight of historical precedent as well as royal pedigree, seems to have suffered from a deficit of legitimacy. In addition, this transition of government came at a time of profound social ferment as the merging of multiple cultures caused religious and social upheaval.³² For this reason, his years as chief judge were characterized by unrest and civil war.³³

The instability of the new system

There are several hints throughout the record that the office of chief judge lacked prestige and therefore depended on the monarchy that preceded it for its legitimacy. For example, in pronouncing his sentence after determining that Nehor was guilty of murder and priestcraft, Alma₂ said:

Therefore thou art condemned to die, according to the law which has been given us by Mosiah, our last king; and it has

29. Hamblin, “Proper Names and Political Claims,” 435.

30. Christopher J. Peterson, “‘Our Leaders Were Mighty’: Identifying Modern Leadership Philosophies in the Book of Mormon,” *Theses and Dissertations*, (2019): 7581, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/7581.

31. George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, Volumes 1–7 (2016): 21, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/wordcruncher/10.

32. Scripture Central, “Why Did Alma Face Such Great Political Challenges as the Chief Judge?” *KnoWhy* #563, 1 June 2020, scripturecentral.org/knowwhy/why-did-alma-face-such-great-political-challenges-as-the-chief-judge.

33. John W. Welch, “The Testimony of Alma: ‘Give Ear to My Words,’” *Religious Educator* 11, no. 2 (2010): 67–87, rsc.byu.edu/vol-11-no-2-2010/testimony-alma-give-ear-my-words.

been acknowledged by this people; therefore this people must abide by the law. (Alma 1:14)

Why did Alma₂ feel it necessary to appeal to both the authority of the previous king and the will of the people when pronouncing this sentence? John Welch comments:

One may wonder why Alma appended this additional justification for the sentence he imposed. Alma's reminder may have been designed to quell the protests from Nehor's followers that surely were to follow. Alma's resort to popular authority may also have served to reinforce the power of the newly arranged system of judges to impose the death penalty.³⁴

Welch suggests that when Alma₂ decided to execute Nehor (Alma 1:15), this ruling likely contributed to the polarization of Nephite society noted in succeeding verses.³⁵ The newly formed government was ineffective in stemming the spread of priestcraft, as noted in Alma 1:16. Such an effort would certainly be difficult to enforce in an experimental system that was designed to allow for unprecedented religious freedom (an aspect of Mosiah's reforms mentioned in Alma 1:17 and 30:7–9); however, the lack of legitimacy for the system of judges meant that the government was ineffective not only in controlling the rapidly spreading religious innovations but also in maintaining social order in the face of the religious schism (Alma 1:19–20).

In an effort to get things under control, Alma₂ and the other judges seem to have had to engage in a judicial crackdown (Alma 1:32–33). This temporarily restored order, but the effect was short lived. Within three years of Nehor's execution, the social unrest that began in the first year of the rule of Alma₂ as chief judge erupted into full-scale civil war, with Amlici leading the reactionary elements of Nephite society in a bid to overturn the reforms put in place by Mosiah₂, Alma₁, and Alma₂.³⁶ The newly minted king, Amlici, sought to eliminate the system of judges (Alma 2:2), to destroy the Church (Alma 2:4), and likely to enact the reactionary agenda championed by Nehor (Alma 2:1).

The success of Amlici in raising a rebellion that bid fair to destroy both the Church and the system of judges is a strong indication that

34. John W. Welch, "The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon," *Maxwell Institute Publications* (2008): 233–34, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/49/.

35. Welch, "The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon," 233–34.

36. Welch, "The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon," 234.

these two newly formed entities suffered from a lack of political legitimacy. Social unrest, military conflict, and economic disaster are a common outcome when a government that suffers from a deficit of legitimacy takes power.³⁷

One great weakness of the new government of the judges was that it replaced the king with a man who had all the same responsibilities as the king but who no longer had the dynastic structure to support him. Alma₂ had to deal with religious challenges (Alma 1:16), military challenges (Alma 2:16), economic challenges (Alma 3:2), and judiciary challenges (Alma 1:14), all while having to work out the nature of the relationships between the new government elements, such as the different tiers of judges, and the existing structures such as the chief captains (Alma 2:16). Welch notes that:

When Nehor was brought before Alma to be judged, his trial was a major test of Alma's political and judicial power in the fledgling reign of the judges. How would the new system of judges work? What would the power of the chief judge be? Would Alma be able to enforce his verdicts? Did the lower judges or the voice of the people (Mosiah 29:28–29) have jurisdiction over a landmark case such as this, or did the chief judge have authority to hear this case entirely on his own?³⁸

The stated purpose of the creation of the system of the judges was avoiding the evils of a monarchical system with its concentration of power in the hands of a single man (Mosiah 29:16–23). However, the new system had concentrated arguably even greater power in the hands of the chief judge, while simultaneously removing some of the structures that would enable the effective use of that power. For example, King Mosiah apparently had a privy council of full-time priests who advised him (Mosiah 27:1). Alma, however, could only interact with part-time priests who more than likely had to work a day job to support themselves and their families, and who seem to have been entirely focused on the ecclesiastical ministry at the local level (Alma 1:26). It seems Alma₂ even had to labor for his own support while

37. Noel Hudson, "Irregular Kings and Precious Things: Viewing Nephi and Joseph Smith through the Lens of Ancient Near Eastern Kingship," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 67 (2025): 229, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/irregular-kings-and-precious-things-viewing-nephi-and-joseph-smith-through-the-lens-of-ancient-near-eastern-kingship.

38. Welch, "The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon," 220.

performing all of these functions (Alma 30:32). Despite these handicaps, Welch notes that the actions of Alma₂ early in his tenure as chief judge "claimed or expanded the power of the highest judge beyond anything stated explicitly in the reforms of Mosiah."³⁹ It seems that in his attempt to establish order and deal with all of the many social, religious, economic, and military crises that arose, Alma₂ was spreading himself too thin.

In addition to the juridical power that he wielded as chief judge, and the ecclesiastical power he wielded as high priest, Alma₂ also wielded supreme military power. Like many of his monarchical predecessors, Alma₂ seems to have been skilled in gathering and leading troops. This was an especially critical skill for one with a perceived lack of legitimacy, since for such a ruler, successful military action is frequently the only way to retain control of the government.⁴⁰ Thus, not long after Alma₂ was elected chief judge, he personally led the Nephite armies in putting down both the civil wars and Lamanite incursions that erupted during his administration. Such military leadership seems to have been an inherent duty of the office of chief judge:

Now Alma, being the chief judge and the governor of the people of Nephi, therefore he went up with his people, yea, with his captains, and chief captains, yea, at the head of his armies, against the Amlicites to battle. (Alma 2:16)

Thus, the initial attempt of the system of judges to address the danger of monarchy—the concentration of power in the hands of a monarch—had, in fact, resulted in a system with the power concentrated in the hands of a chief judge who wielded even more power than the previous king.⁴¹ Yet at the same time, the end of the monarchy had stripped the chief judge, and the government that he represented, of the prestige and the weight of history and tradition that stabilized the earlier monarchy. In fact, it led to shocking disrespect in some quarters. This disrespect is illustrated by the reaction of the people of Ammonihah when they saw that Alma₂ was no longer the chief judge but "only" the high priest. They "reviled him" by saying,

39. Welch, "The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon," 223.

40. Andrew Knapp, *Royal Apologetic in the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta, SBL Press, 2015), 4:51.

41. Mosiah₂ had given Alma₁ the ecclesiastical control over the Church (Mosiah 25:19), and therefore he did not embody the juridical, military and ecclesiastical powers as Alma₂ did.

Behold, we know that thou art Alma; and we know that thou art high priest over the church . . . And now we know that because we are not of thy church we know that thou hast no power over us; and thou hast delivered up the judgment-seat unto Nephihah; therefore thou art not the chief judge over us. . . . Now when the people had said this, and withstood all his words, and reviled him, and spit upon him, and caused that he should be cast out of their city. (Alma 8:11–13)

The combination of power concentrated in the hands of the chief judge and the lack of respect for the new government across a broad range of religious and political dissenters would have made for an unstable situation in the Nephite government. It is likely that the recognition of the instability of the system led Alma₂ to take steps to restore balance by dividing the power he wielded among multiple leaders. The record clearly indicates how ecclesiastical and juridical power were divided when Alma₂ appointed Nephihah as his successor to the office of chief judge (Alma 4:15–20). However, the transition of military power is not addressed in the record with the same clarity. The next section will attempt to identify the steps that were taken in establishing the relationship of the military organization to the other branches of Nephite government at this time.

The question of military leadership

The tradition of Nephite heads of state personally leading the troops into battle follows a precedent set by Nephi (Jacob 1:10). Such military leadership was, of course, the norm for rulers in the Ancient Near East (and elsewhere),⁴² and this tradition was still followed hundreds of years later by Nephite kings (Words of Mormon 1:13). Even Zeniff, “in my old age” (Mosiah 10:10), led his troops against the Lamanites (around 178 BC). And yet, by the reign of Nephihah (around 83 BC), the Nephite head of state no longer personally led the military.⁴³ With hundreds of years of tradition requiring even elderly Nephite leaders to lead their troops, what might have been the motive for the sudden change during the reign of Nephihah?

42. Harry Hagan, *A Literary Study of Battle Narrative in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible* (Indianapolis: Palni Press, 1993), 65–69, pressbooks.palni.org/mightyinbattle/front-matter/introduction/.

43. David L. Rockwood and J. Gordon Daines III, “Contrasting the Leadership Styles of Moroni and Amalickiah,” *Religious Educator* 21, no. 2 (2020): 120, rsc.byu.edu/vol-21-no-2-2020/contrasting-leadership-styles-moroni-amalickiah.

After the war with the Amlicites and Lamanites, Alma₂, who had embodied the offices of high priest, chief judge, and military leader, relinquished the judgment seat and designated Nephihah as his successor. This designation occurred in the eighth year of the reign of the judges. By the eleventh year of the reign of the judges, when the city of Ammonihah was destroyed, it was the chief captain, Zoram, and not Nephihah, who led the troops against the Lamanites in response.

Since hundreds of years of tradition are not set aside lightly, it seems likely that more was involved in Alma₂ stepping down than a mere transfer of executive power. The withdrawal of Alma₂ appears to have precipitated a broader constitutional reform. The record notes that Nephihah "sat in the judgment-seat to judge and to govern the people," but that Alma₂ "did not grant unto him the office of being high priest" (Alma 4:17–18). Concurrent with the changes in the executive office, John Welch also sees an evolution in how the military affairs of the Nephites were administered occurring at this same period:

The change from kingship to judgeship was put into effect by the law of Mosiah promulgated and acknowledged in Mosiah 29. It appears from the record that the law of Mosiah did not contain any concrete provision establishing the office of a military leader, but rather the law anticipated that the chief judge would assume military leadership as occasions demanded. Over time, the position of chief captain evolved among the Nephites.⁴⁴

The division of ecclesiastical and civil power appears to have been accompanied by the separation of military command as well. The creation of a military leader who operated independently of the chief judge is first mentioned in the case of Zoram (Alma 16:5; around 81 BC). These changes seem likely to have been related to the unrest that plagued the administration of Alma₂, with the innovations in military affairs also being driven by the civil unrest that may have been responsible for driving the ecclesiastical and juridical changes.

To repair this weakness, two steps were taken. First, the new chief judge was likely selected based on his ability to restore some measure of the lost legitimacy of the office of chief judge. Nephihah's name itself, echoing the line of Nephi, may imply descent from a recognized

44. John W. Welch "Law and War in the Book of Mormon," in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, 53.

royal branch, lending symbolic weight to his appointment.⁴⁵ Second, the office of chief captain seems to have been created as an independent entity that was no longer subject to the chief judge. Welch, speaking of the office of chief captain, states:

This office was legally constituted as a result of the division of governmental powers that resulted when Alma relinquished the judgment seat . . . Evidently, military power was given to the chief captain. Neither Nephihah nor any subsequent chief judge is ever mentioned as leading the Nephite military.⁴⁶

Such fundamental constitutional changes may explain some of what commentators such as John and Greg Welch and OraLyn Moran see as the weakness or ineffective wartime leadership of both Nephihah⁴⁷ and Pahoran. Moran muses “We have to wonder why [Pahoran] was able to respond quickly to a threat from Moroni but not to appeals for assistance.”⁴⁸ This apparent lack of ability on their part may, in fact, have been due to a flaw, or perhaps even an intentional feature, of the revamped constitutional order, as will be discussed below.

The balance of power

As mentioned above, the primary reason for the creation of the system of the judges was the premise that concentrating power in the hand of a monarch made the entire system unstable and susceptible to the whims of a single man (Mosiah 29:16–18). Given this premise, the first chief judgeship could be viewed as a failure in rebalancing the system. As pointed out earlier, if anything, Alma₂, as chief judge, high priest, and military supreme commander had *more* power and responsibility than the king he replaced, making it difficult for Alma₂ to be effective in performing all of his required duties. Brent Merrill suggests that “a need to relieve Alma the Younger of this responsibility might have

45. There is some debate about the exact meaning of the *-ihah* suffix, but it may indicate some form of kinship bond with the principle name, such as indicating that Nephihah is a relative of Nephi. See for example, Book of Mormon Onomasticon, s.v. “Ammonihah,” onoma.lib.byu.edu/index.php?title=AMMONIHAH.

46. Welch, “Law and War,” 53–54.

47. John W. Welch and Greg Welch, *Nephihah as Chief Judge: Years 9–24 of the Reign of the Judges* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 3–36, scripturecentral.org/archive/media/chart/nephihah-chief-judge-years-924-reign-judges.

48. OraLyn Moran, “Moroni and Pahoran,” *Religious Educator* 15, no. 3 (2014): 103–15, rsc.byu.edu/vol-15-no-3-2014/moroni-pahoran.

prompted Zoram₂'s appointment."⁴⁹ (Zoram₂ was "the chief captain over the armies of the Nephites in 81 B.C.").⁵⁰

Alma₂ retained the office of high priest because he believed that devoting himself to the preaching of the word rather than dividing his attention would allow him to maintain the greatest influence among his people. This conclusion is made clear in Alma 31:5:

And now, as the preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just—yea, it had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else, which had happened unto them.

When this realization struck Alma, and perhaps other Nephite leaders involved in the constitutional reformation, they seem to have decided to "balance the ticket"⁵¹ in a bid to win over some of the detractors of the system of judges. They appear to have done this by appointing Nephihah (likely of Nephite royal lineage) to appeal to monarchist Nephites who longed for the previous regime, and by appointing Zoram₂ to appeal to those who considered themselves outsiders to the Nephite social order.

The failure of the new constitutional order

The Amlicite civil war violently demonstrated just how dissatisfied many of the Mulekites had become with the constitutional reforms that created the reign of the judges. The Zoramites likewise seem to have felt detached from the Nephite government in Zarahemla. Indeed,

49. A. Brent Merrill, "Nephite Captains and Armies," in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, 150.

50. See *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), s.v. "Zoram," archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/sites/default/files/zoram.pdf. Ellis has speculated that Zoram₂ may have apostatized and became the same person as Zoram₃ of the Zoramites. See Godfrey J. Ellis, "The Rise and Fall of Korihor, a Zoramite: A New Look at the Failed Mission of an Agent of Zoram" *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 48 (2021): 92n57, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/the-rise-and-fall-of-korihor-a-zoramite-a-new-look-at-the-failed-mission-of-an-agent-of-zoram.

51. US presidents frequently choose vice presidents as their running mates based on their appeal to certain subsegments of the United States. In many cases the vice president is selected from an important subpopulation among whom the president is weak in order to increase the appeal of the political party to that subpopulation, a practice known as "balancing the ticket." Elaine C. Karmack, *Picking the Vice President*, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Picking-the-Vice-President.pdf.

both groups united in their opposition to Nephite leadership a few years later.⁵²

The political opposition of the Zoramites and Mulekites reflected their religious and cultural heterodoxy in opposition to the Nephite orthodoxy. It was rare in the ancient world to have any sort of separation between church and state. There is a good reason why it was rare. Such a separation “created societal strains that were difficult to manage within ancient worldviews,”⁵³ and in the case of the Nephites, it seems to have served to detach a segment of the people from not only their religious beliefs but also from their loyalty to the government, as illustrated in the case of Amlici (Alma 2:4).

Throughout the record, Nephite authors seem to have taken the position that political dissent was equivalent to spiritual rebellion.⁵⁴ This position was a natural consequence of ancient worldviews in which politics and religion were inextricably intertwined. Prior to the creation of the system of judges, the Nephite king had also been the head of the Church.⁵⁵ The government of the judges was identified so closely with the state religion that dissidents were also seen as unbelievers.⁵⁶

When Alma₂ decided to devote his time to the preaching of the gospel, he was likely also hoping to resolve the underlying issues leading to political dissent. Converting a Mulekite to Christianity would have also converted him to support for the government of the judges, which was seen as ordained of God (Alma 46:10–18). Likewise, conversion of the followers of Nehor might address some of the unrest that erupted earlier, after the execution and humiliation of that religious leader.⁵⁷ Of course, there were also unforeseen consequences involved with this approach. Alma₂ himself would likely have struggled to establish

52. Belnap, “And it came to pass,” 126.

53. Scripture Central, “Why Did Alma Need to ‘Establish the Order of the Church’ in Zarahemla Again?” KnoWhy #113, 19 May 2017, scripturecentral.org/knowwhy/why-did-alma-need-to-establish-the-order-of-the-church-in-zarahemla-again.

54. Val Larsen, “Prophet or Loss: Mosiah1/Zeniff, Benjamin/Noah, Mosiah2/Limhi and the Emergence of the Almas,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 60 (2024): 395, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/prophet-or-loss-mosiah1-zeniff-benjamin-noah-mosiah2-limhi-and-the-emergence-of-the-almas/.

55. Gregory Steven Dundas, “Kingship, Democracy, and the Message of the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 56, no. 2 (2017): 8–9, byustudies.byu.edu/article/kingship-democracy-and-the-message-of-the-book-of-mormon.

56. Hamblin, “Proper Names and Political Claims,” 422.

57. Welch, “The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon,” 232.

a relationship of trust with the followers of Nehor and so he might have been seen as a polarizing personality when he went out to preach.⁵⁸

Alma₂ and his companions were overwhelmingly successful in their efforts to employ "the word" (Alma 31:5) to convert many of the poorer Zoramites. However, arguably the primary goal of their intervention and mission was aimed at retaining all the Zoramites within the Nephite Empire and thereby avoiding impending dissension and war if they joined the Lamanites (Alma 31:4). Unfortunately, they failed to resolve the fracturing social order.

Additionally, the record suggests that the Zoramite wealthy benefited from free labor by maintaining a portion of their populace in poverty (Alma 32:5). No doubt the loss of this resource, due to conversion and being taken out of their society, exacerbated the way in which the Zoramites viewed Alma₂ and his companions. The wealthy Zoramites simply could not countenance the religious conversion and physical departure of members of their populace. When their demands that Alma₂ return the converts, now called the people of Ammon, were refused, "this did stir up the Zoramites to anger" (Alma 35:8–9). Joining the Church had had the effect of tying the converts to the Nephite government at a time when the Zoramite elites were actively working to align themselves with the Lamanites. All these social, political, and economic dynamics resulted in the defection of the Zoramites. The greatest fears of the Nephite's came to pass when serious conflict still erupted despite the best efforts of Alma₂.

If the purpose of the restructuring of the government was to stem the tide of dissension and civil dispute among the Nephites, the new structure proved unequal to the task. Despite his success in preaching the gospel, the privileged class of the Zoramites rejected the teachings of Alma₂ and dissented en masse from the Nephites to join the Lamanites (Alma 43:4). The Zoramites seem to have been accompanied by a contingent of Mulekites as well, for the war leader who came against the Nephites in the battle that followed was a man by the name of Zerahemnah (v. 5) who likely was a descendant of Zarahemla.⁵⁹

58. Kylie Turley, "Alma's Hell: Repentance, Consequence, and the Lake of Fire and Brimstone," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 28, no. 1, (2019): 3, scholars.archive.byu.edu/jbms/vol28/iss1/2.

59. Matthew L. Bowen, "'He Is God, and He Is with Them' Helaman 8:21–23 and Isaiah's Immanuel Prophecy as a Thematic Scriptural Concept," *BYU Studies* 62, no. 1 (2023): 151–52, byustudies.byu.edu/article/he-is-god-and-he-is-with-them.

He “appointed chief captains over the Lamanites, and they were all Amalekites and Zoramites” (v. 6).

Even worse, scarcely had the battle with Zerahemnah and the Zoramites ended before Amalickiah began stirring up the Mulekites who had remained in the land in a bid to capture the government. This unrest was likely a continuation of the hostilities initiated during the Amlicite rebellion.⁶⁰ Perhaps Amalickiah believed that the earlier Nephite battle with the Zoramites had significantly weakened the Nephites to the point that a takeover was now possible. And indeed, the paralysis in the Nephite government that accompanied the rise of Amalickiah suggests that his analysis was largely correct.

Captain Moroni as a Savvy Political Appointee

Alma 46:34 makes it clear that Moroni was appointed as chief captain “by the “voice of the people,” just as the judges had been. However, there is no context given for understanding the *reason* for his appointment. The fact that Captain Moroni was appointed at the age of twenty-five (Alma 43:17) makes it highly likely that factors other than battle-field experience led to his selection. The political turmoil that rocked the Nephite polity during this time hints that the major consideration for such a powerful office would be loyalty to the regime. This was a characteristic Moroni clearly demonstrated early in his career as he fought to defend the system of the judges when even some of those who served as judges were defecting (see Alma 46:4, 24). If the office of chief captain were vacant for some reason, such loyalty would be doubly important in the new appointee.⁶¹

Nearly as important as loyalty to the regime would be the ability to bridge the cultural divides that were leading to so much dissension. Possessing broad appeal would have been critical for the military leader in order to recruit and lead soldiers from the large Mulekite sub-population. During a time when armed conflicts between Mulekites

60. 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): 113, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol14/iss1/12.

61. If the office of chief captain was a standing duty, Moroni’s appointment would have been caused by a vacancy in the office. This vacancy may have been caused by the death of Zoram₂ or even apostasy and defection (becoming Zoram₃) as speculated by Ellis, “The Rise and Fall of Korihor, a Zoramite,” 48n57. Alternatively, Welch has suggested that chief captains may have been only assigned in times of war, so defection of the former chief captain may not have been an issue. See Welch, “Law and War in the Book of Mormon,” 29.

and Nephites were far too common,⁶² the Mulekites would almost certainly be wary of a chief captain who was a pure-blooded Nephite. Such an appointment could be interpreted as sending a message that the Nephite rulers intended to use violence to deal with the civil unrest. On the other hand, appointing someone of Mulekite heritage to the position would likely be seen as offering an olive branch to the incensed Mulekites. Because of this friction between the Nephites and the Mulekites, the political considerations for the selection of the chief captain at this time would be critical. Indeed, the political acceptability of any candidate for the position would need to consider a number of factors rather than military prowess alone, as discussed in greater detail below.

Captain Moroni's likely Mulekite connections

One possible reason for Moroni's elevation to the leadership of the Nephite armies, then, would have been his association with the Mulekite bloodline and cultural tradition. As with the Jaredite and Mulekite cultural affiliations mentioned earlier, the linking of captain Moroni to a Mulekite cultural tradition may be done through onomastics. The name "*Moroni*" likely means "of Moron,"⁶³ indicating a possible affinity with the ancient Jaredite capital city.

John Tvedtnes identified the likely link between the name Moroni and the land of Moron, which he says is "where, I assume, Moroni was born."⁶⁴ If Moroni was chosen because of his Mulekite bona fides, such a move would have allowed for the use of military force in situations that would have been politically fraught for a Nephite.

Sending troops into unstable political situations

The complete lack of a response from the judges when the people of Morianton took up arms against the city of Lehi (Alma 50; around 68 BC) is strange. One possible explanation is that the Nephite central government may have been walking on eggshells for fear of provoking a backlash from the Mulekites in the immediate aftermath of the recent Mulekite and Zoramite conflicts. Recall that beginning in

62. Tvedtnes, "Book of Mormon Tribal Affiliation and Military Castes," 161–62.

63. Book of Mormon Onomasticon, s.v. "Moroni," onoma.lib.byu.edu/index.php?title=MORONI

64. John A. Tvedtnes, "What's in a Name? A Look at the Book of Mormon Onomasticon," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 8, no. 2 (1996): 41, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol8/iss2/6.

about 87 BC the Amlicites rose up in civil war against the Nephites (Alma 2). Then in about 74 BC an army led by Zerahemnah, made up of Lamanites, Zoramites, Amalekites and other dissenters, came against the Nephites (Alma 43). Just two years later, in about 72 BC, Amalickiah led a combined army of Lamanites and Mulekite dissenters against the Nephites (Alma 49). All three of these conflicts were existential threats to the Nephites, so when Morianton fomented another conflict that threatened the peace between the Mulekite and Nephite subpopulations just five years later, in about 67 BC, the government would naturally be hesitant to engage in violence.

An armed intervention by the Nephite government, which would inevitably result in Mulekite deaths, could be used as a pretext for another civil war. Indeed, the naming conventions that are so evident throughout the book of Alma can once again provide clues about the nature of the conflict between Morianton and Lehi. The people of Morianton seem likely to have been members of the Mulekite cultural tradition (Morianton is a Jaredite name; see Ether 10:9–13) while the people of Lehi, based on the name of their city, seem most likely to have been ethnic Nephites. In other words, the conflict between these two cities was likely a reflection of the broader conflict between Mulekites and Nephites that had been taking place throughout the polity for over a generation.

With the central government possibly afraid to act for fear of provoking a broader conflict, Morianton may have thought he was in a position to literally get away with murder. However, if Morianton thought that he could count on cultural tensions to give him cover for his land grab, he failed to account for the possibility of interference from Moroni. The people of Lehi showed great wisdom in appealing to Moroni, rather than to Nephihah. Due to the actions of the people of Lehi, Morianton could no longer count on the culture war to give him cover.

Morianton's decision to flee makes complete sense when Moroni, rather than a general of pure Nephite ancestry, became the arbiter of the land dispute. The record provides additional evidence that the Mulekite/Nephite divide was a major factor in Morianton's plans. Supporting this conjecture is the observation that, when his machinations went awry, Morianton decided to flee northward, to the Jaredite heartland near Bountiful and Desolation (Alma 50:32–33).⁶⁵

65. Jerry D. Grover Jr., *The Swords of Shule: Jaredite Land Northward Chronology*,

The record notes the potential for major negative consequences if Morianton were to be successful in his flight, stating that if Morianton had been able to carry out his plans, it would have been a "cause to have been lamented" (v. 30). This is because Morianton would have endeavored to stir up the Mulekites in that area against the Nephite government (v. 32) or, at the very least, remained as a potentially threatening conclave of separatist sentiment for generations.

Moroni's assignment of Teancum (Alma 50:35; around 67 BC), another man of likely Mulekite heritage,⁶⁶ to round up the people of Morianton provides additional evidence that political considerations were a factor in the handling of this delicate matter. As a man of Mulekite heritage, Teancum would be free to employ force while a Nephite in the same situation might have been hesitant to do so. Teancum likely also would have known the geography and the people of the area, as suggested by the proximity of the later city, *Teancum*, to the land of Desolation (Mormon 4:3). Perhaps the reason that Teancum was later eulogized as a "true friend to liberty" (Alma 62:37) rather than as "a just man" who "did walk uprightly before God" (Alma 63:2) was based on the fact that he was a Mulekite who remained loyal to the Christian Nephite government, while perhaps he was not a Christian himself.

Captain Moroni's likely Nephite connections

The high praise lavished on Captain Moroni by Helaman (Alma 48:11–13), and his broader acceptability to the government leaders, suggests that he likely had Nephite bona fides in addition to his clout among the Mulekites. Certainly, he was loyal to the Nephite-dominated central government and considered himself a Christian (Alma 46:13–16). Those were two attributes that many of those with Jaredite names seem to have lacked. Captain Moroni's oath to defend his people, country, rights, and the Christian religion also place him firmly within the Nephite cultural tradition. When he raised the Title of Liberty, Captain Moroni demonstrated an intimate knowledge of the key events that had shaped Christianity among the Nephites over the previous generation, suggesting that he was quite familiar with Nephite Christian traditions.⁶⁷

Geography, and Culture in Mesoamerica (Provo, UT: Challex Scientific Publishing, 2018), 149–93.

66. Book of Mormon Onomasticon, s.v. "Teancum," onoma.lib.byu.edu/index.php?title=TEANCUM.

67. Noel Hudson, "The Title of Liberty as a Response to Generations of Trauma," unpublished.

In addition to these indirect clues about Captain Moroni's affiliation with the Nephite cultural tradition, his words to those who flocked to his banner when he raised the Title of Liberty indicate that he considered himself a Nephite by blood as well as by loyalty. He says:

Behold, we are a remnant of the seed of Jacob; yea, we are a remnant of the seed of Joseph, whose coat was rent by his brethren into many pieces; yea, and now behold, let us remember to keep the commandments of God, or our garments shall be rent by our brethren, and we be cast into prison, or be sold, or be slain. Yea, let us preserve our liberty as a remnant of Joseph. (Alma 46:23–24)

This assertion of affiliation with Joseph, the Hebrew cultural hero for the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, and the famous ancestor of Lehi, indicates that Captain Moroni also likely possessed a Nephite bloodline. While it is not clear exactly where Moroni made this speech, nor the ethnic composition of his audience, what is clear is that he was speaking to a group who considered themselves to be descendants of Joseph, and that he, too, considered himself to be a descendant of Joseph.

As a man of possibly mixed Nephite and Mulekite heritage, Captain Moroni may have been much more capable of commanding the loyalty and obedience of all the Nephite populace than someone who had bloodlines from only one or the other of the two major component peoples. The various generals who were subordinate to Moroni might have been either exclusively Nephite (Helaman, Lehi) or exclusively Mulekite (Teancum) and therefore were unable to command the loyalty of the entire populace. This use of leaders from both bloodlines suggests that Captain Moroni was an effective political general, attuned to the ethnic sensitivities of his army. It suggests that he was acting, within his scope of influence, to make one people out of two by affirming both ethnicities as integral parts of the larger whole defending their shared rights.

Another Challenge to the Government of the Judges

As we have seen, the perceived lack of legitimacy of the system of the judges by some of its citizens led to internal conflict and civil war shortly after the creation of the institution. Reforms in the wake of the Amlicite rebellion were unable to prevent the defection of the Zoramites together with a second contingent of Mulekites, a fact that

led to a second civil war. The appointment of Moroni as chief captain of the armies allowed for the successful conclusion of the civil unrest stirred up by Morianton and the much more significant revolt of Amalickiah, but a lacuna in the new constitutional order led directly to the success of a man named Pachus (Alma 62:6) and the king men.

The oversight in the constitutional order that allowed Pachus to take the city of Zarahemla and expel the unpopular Pahoran, apparently without the shedding of blood (Alma 61:3–5; about 62 BC), was the serious problem of designating to the chief judge the task of recruiting men and gathering arms for the army. As stated in Alma 60:2: "Ye yourselves know that ye have been appointed to gather together men, and arm them with swords, and with cimeters, and all manner of weapons of war of every kind." Additionally, though the details of how it was carried out are lacking, it appears that the chief judge was charged with requisitioning other supplies to support the army ("But behold, this is not all—ye have withheld your provisions from them"; Alma 60:9).

Such a division of labor made sense as the chief captain of the armies would necessarily be sent to the fringes of Nephite territory to direct the battles against the Lamanites while the chief judge would reside in the center of their lands where supplies and manpower were much more plentiful. However, this also meant that the Nephite chief judge would have the unenviable task of drafting men and requisitioning food and other supplies from the majority Mulekite population.⁶⁸ (Zarahemla was originally a Mulekite city and likely continued to be the center of Mulekite culture at this time.)⁶⁹ While Moroni or Teancum might have been capable of performing such a task without stirring up significant resentment, Pahoran clearly was not.

Why, then, did Pahoran not apprise the generals of the situation and ask for their help? In her study, Oralyn Moran examines the ignorance

68. Mosiah 25:2 indicates that the Nephite polity in fact consisted of a majority Mulekite population. The percentage of the people that were Mulekites would have shifted after the many dissensions that took place throughout the book of Alma, but different ethnic groups would likely have continued to form enclaves in different parts of the land for as long as they existed as a separate entity. See John Sorenson, "Religious Groups and Movements among the Nephites, 200–1 B.C.," in *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen Ricks, Donald Parry, and Andrew Hedges (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 163–208, scripturecentral.org/archive/books/book-chapter/religious-groups-and-movements-among-nephites-2001-bc.

69. Sorenson, "The Mulekites," 17.

of Helaman and Moroni about the perilous state of politics in the Nephite heartland while they and their men were fighting and dying due to the lack of reinforcements and supplies. Moran concludes that this situation could have easily been remedied by a quick message from Pahoran.⁷⁰ However, Pahoran's reticence might have a different explanation than the fecklessness that Moran attributes to him. If word spread of a successful coup in Zarahemla, it could easily have led to additional uprisings across the polity. Likewise, if the office of chief captain had become vacant due to the defection of Captain Zoram₂ (a possibility that is clearly speculative but that other scholars have also posited),⁷¹ Pahoran might have wondered if he could trust the half-Mulekite Moroni with detailed knowledge of just how dire affairs had become in Zarahemla. In his epistle to Pahoran, Moroni makes his loyalty to the principle of freedom and to the cause of the Christians abundantly clear. This clear signaling may have helped resolve any doubts Pahoran might have had about Moroni's loyalty.

Another possibility is that Pahoran was aware of the difficulties faced by Helaman and Moroni at the battlefield. He might have believed he was capable of resolving the situation, and he might have been hesitant to request aid at a time when the need for troops at the front was already critical. It was not until Moroni's letter convinced him that time had run out, and that the dire situation necessitated an emergency response, that he acted.

Despite many efforts to address the problem of integration, the Nephite government seems to have continued to struggle with an unhappy and contentious subpopulation of Mulekites up until the coming of Christ.⁷² Even Moroni's vigorous response to the king men was not sufficient to deter a Lamanite attack inspired by dissenters. These Mulekite dissenters, together with an army of the Lamanites, were successful in taking the city of Zarahemla and placing a descendant of Zarahemla on the throne (Helaman 1:15–22, about 50 BC).

Even after Coriantumr was defeated, the problem of Mulekite dissenters did not go away. Daniel Belnap and Lyle Hamblin both suggest that the Gadianton robbers were following Jaredite philosophies and may have been an alternative way for Mulekite dissenters to fight back against the Nephite government.⁷³

70. Moran, "Moroni and Pahoran," 12.

71. Ellis, "The Rise and Fall of Korihor, a Zoramite," 48n57.

72. Sorenson, "The Mulekites," 18.

73. Belnap, "'They are of Ancient Date': Jaredite Traditions and the Politics of

Summary and Conclusion

This paper advances the argument that the wars, rebellions, and political turmoil in the book of Alma are best understood as manifestations of dynastic rivalry between the Nephite and Mulekite bloodlines, complicated by the aspirations of other groups present in the heterogeneous Nephite polity. It interprets the frequent dissensions and leadership changes as struggles for legitimacy rooted in ancient traditions of hereditary rule.

Following the transition from monarchy to the government of the judges, Alma₂ inherited a political structure that lacked dynastic legitimacy. The subsequent unrest, including the Amcrite rebellion, the Zoramite dissension, the rise of Amalickiah, the advent of the king-men, and continuing civil discord, reflects a deep cultural and genealogical division between Nephite and Mulekite factions. The abdication of Alma₂ and the separation of ecclesiastical, judicial, and military powers may be seen as a deliberate political reform designed to stabilize a fragile system.

The study has attempted to highlight how naming patterns, cultural intermixing, and bloodline associations may provide clues to underlying tensions. The mixed Nephite–Mulekite heritage of figures such as Captain Moroni may explain their political utility and capacity to unify divided constituencies. Moroni's possible Jaredite or Mulekite connections would have strengthened his acceptability among Zarahemla's population while his Nephite descent and Christian faith preserved his legitimacy with the ruling class. In this reading, the "Title of Liberty" episode, the campaigns against the Amalickiahites, and the handling of dissensions like Morianton's rebellion reveal careful efforts to reconcile lineage-based rivalries through shared religious and national ideals.

Viewing the book of Alma through the framework of dynastic dynamics reveals a deeper political and theological logic behind its wars and leadership crises. What might otherwise appear as sporadic rebellions emerges instead as a sustained negotiation of legitimacy between the competing hereditary lines of the Nephites and the Mulekites.⁷⁴ The shift from monarchy to judgeship did not erase these rivalries but reconfigured them within new constitutional structures.

By examining bloodlines, naming conventions, and the distribution

Gadianton's Dissent," 1–42, Hamblin, "Proper Names and Political Claims," 435.

74. Hamblin, "Proper Names and Political Claims," 409–44.

of authority, this study has further attempted to show that the abdication of Alma², the reduction in the powers that Nephihah and Pahoran could exercise as chief judge, and the elevation of Captain Moroni by the voice of the people all served to balance the competing claims of royal descent and divine approval. These changes in the government are important to recognize because they strongly suggest that the Book of Mormon preserves not only a record of spiritual conflict but a sophisticated portrait of political theology in which faith, lineage, and legitimacy intertwine. Ultimately, the Nephite struggle mirrors the universal human challenge of establishing righteous authority amid inherited divisions. That is a challenge that continues to resonate into our own day.



[Author's Note: *I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and editorial staff of Interpreter for their assistance in editing this article. I would like to specifically thank Allen Wyatt and Godfrey Ellis for their help in formatting, structuring, and improving the wording of this article.*]

Noel Hudson was born in Idaho Falls, Idaho, and raised in Provo, Utah. He served a Portuguese-speaking mission in São Paulo, Brazil. He earned a BS in Zoology from BYU, an MS in Engineering Technology from BYU, and an MBA in marketing from BYU. While working as an Electrical Engineer in Salt Lake City, he published eight books of historical and science fiction and has written articles on the Book of Mormon. He and his wife, Luciana, are the parents of three children.

A Scientific Evaluation of the Zeph Revelation

Jerry D. Grover Jr.

Abstract: *Members of the 1834 Zion's Camp expedition inspected a large mound along the Illinois River where a skeleton was uncovered and Joseph Smith had a revelatory experience identifying the individual as Zeph. Recent archeological excavations place the revelation in a chronological and ancient cultural context that now allows additional verification and interpretation of this revelatory event. In addition, with this new information, it is possible to determine whether the individual and location can be interpreted as being a part of the Book of Mormon culture and geography.*

On 3 June 1834, Joseph Smith and others in the Zion's Camp expedition stopped at a large mound in Illinois one mile south of the current Valley City along the Illinois River. In inspecting and digging into the mound, human bones and an arrowhead were encountered at a shallow depth below the surface. These remains were the catalyst for an apparent revelation by Joseph Smith of the past relating to the person whose remains were found, with the vision identifying him as Zeph.

Record of the Zeph Vision

Six people recounted a vision apparently received at that time by Joseph Smith regarding the individual found buried in the mound, which mound is now identified as Naples-Russell Mound Number 8, Pike County (see figure 1).¹ These are the only known primary sources,

1. Kenneth W. Godfrey, "The Zeph Story," *BYU Studies* 29, no. 2 (1989): 31,



Figure 1. The Naples-Russell Mound Number 8. (Wikimedia Commons, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Naples-Russel_Mound_8.jpg.)

upon which other later recountings are based. Kenneth Godfrey² notes that the experience of historians and experiments of psychologists have established that precise recall of details about an event fades rapidly, so it is important to base a reconstruction of an event on primary sources, although the primary sources also suffer some inconsistencies between them.

The purpose of this inquiry is not to recount all the historical particulars but to evaluate whether the vision that Joseph Smith was indicated to have had is consistent with the known archeological and scientific information currently available. As is typical with separate accounts of a historical event, no two accounts of what occurred and what Joseph Smith purportedly said are exactly the same, and some have contradictory details. Godfrey³ provided an analysis of the different historical sources for the vision and organized each account, along with their differences, into a comparative matrix. Because not all details in these narratives are relevant to evaluating the event

scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol29/iss2/3/.

2. Godfrey, "Zelph Story," 46.

3. Godfrey, "Zelph Story," 49–52.

scientifically, the discussion here focuses only on the elements that matter, following Godfrey's descriptions of each account.

A summary of each account of the members of the Zion's Camp group is as follows, in chronological order:

- **Reuben McBride.** This report is considered a primary source, as it is from his diary, and may have been the first one recorded, possibly written on the day the find occurred.
- **Moses Martin.** This report is considered a primary source, as it is from his diary.
- **Wilford Woodruff.** This report is considered a primary source, as it is from his diary. However, based on the entry, it does not appear that he was with the original party on the mound that discovered the remains of Zeph. Wilford Woodruff made later reports, but none conflicted with his original diary entries.
- **Levi Hancock.** This report is considered a primary source, as it is from his diary. However, based on the entry, he was not with the original party on the mound that discovered the remains of Zeph but saw the bones and arrowpoint that were brought back to camp. Hancock indicates that "Onendagus [sic] was the king and . . . in that mound did he bury his dead and did not dig holes as the people do now but they brought there [sic] dirt and covered them."⁴
- **Heber C. Kimball.** An account of the discovery of Zeph was published in 1845 in the *Times and Seasons* under the title "Extracts from H. C. Kimball's Journal." An identical unedited account is found in the autobiography Kimball dictated to James Sloan after the Saints arrived in the Salt Lake Valley. Although not a "direct" journal entry, based on the corroboration of both accounts, this would be considered equivalent to a primary source. Heber C. Kimball was also present on the mound.
- **George A. Smith.** George A. Smith was present on the mound, and in a history written in 1857, he included a very brief amount of information regarding the Zeph incident.

All essentially agree (or some were silent) on the following points:

- The individual was named Zeph

4. Godfrey, "Zeph Story," 37.

- Zelph was a warrior
- Zelph was a captain
- Zelph was a man of God
- Zelph was a prophet
- Zelph was a white Lamanite
- Zelph fought under Onandagus (some spelling differences)
- There were great battles and Zelph was killed by an arrow in battle
- Onandagus was a king, good man, leader, and prophet
- Onandagus was known from the Rocky Mountains to the Atlantic Sea or Hill Cumorah
- The mound was built by ancient inhabitants of this country; specifically, Onandagus had the mound constructed

Some differences in the various accounts may be related to attempts to align the vision with the Book of Mormon text involving periods of warfare and geography, introducing some uncertainty to the details of the vision:

- Four primary witnesses to the event do not indicate the nature of the death other than by an arrow. Reuben McBride wrote in his journal contemporaneous to the event that Zelph “was killed in battle.”⁵ Heber C. Kimball records nine years after the event that Zelph was killed “in the last destruction among the Lamanites.” George A. Smith, twenty-three years after the event, indicates it was “a last struggle with the Nephites and Lamanites.”⁶
- Reuben Hancock’s near contemporaneous accounting of the event indicated that Joseph Smith, after returning to camp, later recounted to Sylvester Smith, a troublemaker in the camp, that “this land was called the land of desolation.”⁷ No other witness recounts this.
- Reuben McBride indicated that it was Zelph (as opposed to Onandagus) that was known from the Atlantic to the Rocky Mountains.

After Joseph Smith had identified the location where digging was to take place, Kimball and the others then dug into the side of the mound,

5. Godfrey, “Zelph Story,” 34.

6. Godfrey, “Zelph Story,” 38.

7. Godfrey, “Zelph Story,” 37.

having previously sent for a shovel and a hoe. Kimball describes what was discovered:

At about one foot deep we discovered the skeleton of a man, almost entire; and between two of his ribs we found an Indian arrow, which had evidently been the cause of his death. We took the leg and thigh bones and carried them along with us to Clay county. All four appeared sound.⁸

The Vision as Revelation

Not every statement or comment by Joseph Smith has been canonized as revelation. For example, Doctrine and Covenants 121, 122, and 123 are extracts from a letter Joseph Smith wrote while imprisoned in Liberty Jail. This letter was addressed to the Saints in Illinois and elsewhere, as well as to Bishop Edward Partridge, and was dictated between 20 and 25 March 1839. These sections were not included in the Doctrine and Covenants until 1876 when they were added by Orson Pratt under the direction of President Brigham Young. The rest of Joseph Smith's letter from Liberty Jail contains further words of advice and inspiration, but only excerpts have been canonized and recognized as official revelation by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Of course, others outside of the Church structure likely have different points of view in regard to Joseph Smith's comments and qualifying revelatory criteria.

In the case of Zeph, unlike advice or even doctrinal commentary, the evidence of witnesses is that Joseph Smith had a vision, which by its nature, if accurate and factual, requires a revelatory experience. It has not been canonized by the Church, but others consider it to be a revelation, as it was recorded as such. Of course, some visions may be instructive or representative as opposed to the observation of actual events, such as Lehi's vision of the Tree of Life found in the Book of Mormon. Given the specificity of individuals and locations and given the fact that there is essentially no doctrinal or allegorical information included, the Zeph vision is classified as a vision of actual historical persons, places, and events and is not in the nature of an allegory, commentary, or opinion by Joseph Smith.

8. Godfrey, "Zeph Story," 38.

Consistency of the Vision with Known Archeology

The vision has some consistencies with what is known of the Hopewell culture, which is known to have existed in that area anciently from approximately 100 BC to AD 400. The Hopewell Interaction Sphere consisted of the long-distance sharing of certain artifact styles and raw materials. The center of the Hopewell tradition is found in Ohio, and items found there include fossilized shark's teeth from the Gulf Coast (east sea), copper and silver from the Great Lakes region, mica from the Appalachian Mountains, and spear points made of obsidian from the Montana portion of Yellowstone National Park (see figure 2).

Hopewell archeologists indicate that these big earthwork centers in Ohio were probably widely known. They were built over a period of hundreds of years and are significant structures, so people knew about them. Bret Ruby, an archaeologist at Hopewell Culture National Historic Park in Chillicothe, Ohio, indicates that some of the trade going on consisted of direct trade (meaning the traders traveled all the way to Ohio from the Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and the Rocky Mountains) and also likely consisted of pilgrims from distant places, coming to Ohio to visit these great religious centers and bringing objects with them.⁹ Brad Lepper, curator of archaeology at the Ohio Historical Society in Columbus, stated, "I think that during the Hopewell era in the Middle Woodland period (100 BC to AD 400), Ohio was this nexus, this cultural center for much of eastern North America."¹⁰

This does allow the possibility that Onandagus, if considered a significant leader among one of the Hopewell groups, especially if present in Ohio at some point, could have been known from the Atlantic to the Rocky Mountains, as indicated in the vision, by virtue of trade or a centralized pilgrimage of people from various locations.

Lamanite is a generic name, as indicated by Jacob 1:13–14, where it is used as a collective term as opposed to a tribal term.¹¹ Native Americans of the Hopewell culture may thus qualify as Lamanites under Book of Mormon terminology, regardless of genetic lineage or the geography in which they are located. The Book of Mormon describes northward migrations from its core region, with some

9. Stuart Thornton, "Intriguing Interactions," *National Geographic*, education. nationalgeographic.org/resource/intriguing-interactions.

10. Thornton, "Intriguing Interactions."

11. Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon, Volume Two, Second Nephi through Jacob* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 478.



Figure 2. Hopewell Exotic Materials. (National Park Service, nps.gov/hocu/learn/historyculture/hopewell-exotic-materials.htm.)

groups never heard from again. Although the Hopewell culture is not known to have originated from Mesoamerican peoples, it could have absorbed migrants from the south. If so, there may have been integration of some Lamanite persons from Mesoamerica.

The vision also indicated that King Onandagus built the burial mound (or at least a significant portion of the mound) for the burial of "his dead," which could either mean his family or more broadly for at least some of his subjects. The archeological investigation of the Napoleon Hollow sites determined that the mortuary facilities likely served the occupants of numerous Middle Woodland hamlets located away from the mortuary precinct from a large area along twelve miles of the river and up into tributary valleys, so is consistent with this portion of the vision.¹²

Analysis of Issues Related to Book of Mormon Geography

It is noteworthy that a prophet as prominent as Onandagus (and Zelfh) would likely have been mentioned by Mormon or Moroni if he had

12. Kenneth B. Farnsworth and Karen A. Atwell, *Excavations at the Blue Island and Naples-Russell Mounds and Related Hopewellian Sites in the Lower Illinois Valley* (Champaign: Illinois State Archaeological Survey, 2015), 185.

lived within their geographic sphere. Their silence suggests that he was not residing in the core lands described in the Book of Mormon during their era. Also, if Zelph and Onandagus existed at the time of the final battles between the Lamanites and Nephites, as some have suggested, it becomes difficult to reconcile their supposed righteousness with Mormon's statements that no righteous Nephites remained except himself and Moroni (Mormon 1:17, 3:3, 4:10-12, 5:2; Moroni 9:3-5, 18-19). Because Zelph is described as a Lamanite fighting on behalf of the Nephites under the direction of Onandagus as part of the vision, it is reasonably inferred that Onandagus was a Nephite.

The Church on its official website has recognized the Zelph vision as a revelatory "open vision."¹³ With regard to the position of the Church on the location for Book of Mormon geography being revealed, it has formally stated that "the Church's only position is that the events the Book of Mormon describes took place in the ancient Americas" and "the Church does not take a position on the specific geographic locations of Book of Mormon events in the ancient Americas."¹⁴

Since the Church has recognized the Zelph revelation as an "open vision," and considering that there is no recognized revelation from the Church involving the specific location of the Book of Mormon, it is a reasonable inference that the Zelph revelation is not considered to involve Book of Mormon locations. Of course, there are other churches, organizations, and individuals that retain a belief in the Book of Mormon that are not part of the Church who may see things differently.

The Naples-Russell Mound 8 is part of the Napoleon Hollow Archeological District, which consists of twenty-six burial mounds and two possible burial knolls known collectively as the Russell Mound Group (see figure 3).

In 1990, the Naples-Russell Mound Number 8 underwent an archeological investigation. It was determined that Mound 8 was constructed atop an earthen platform supporting two ramped log tombs—presumably for processing the dead—that had been capped by an "earthen saddle." Burial 1 Skeleton 1 (QL-4904) was

13. Church Educational System, "Zion's Camp," in *Church History in the Fulness of Times: Student Manual, Religion 341 through 343* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2025), 145, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/church-history-in-the-fulness-of-times/chapter-twelve](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/church-history-in-the-fulness-of-times/chapter-twelve).

14. "Book of Mormon Geography," Topics and Questions, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/book-of-mormon-geography](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/book-of-mormon-geography).

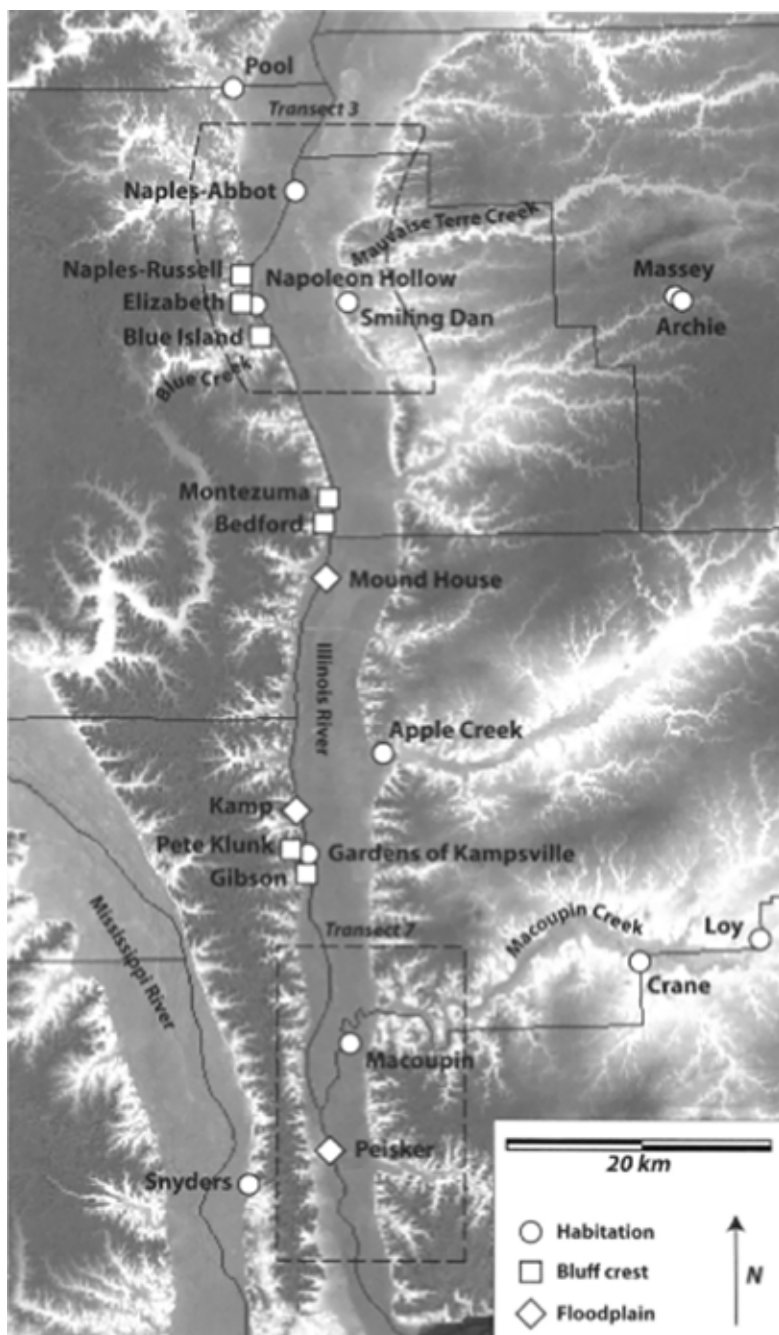


Figure 3. The Napoleon Hollow Archeological District and Illinois Valley Archeological Sites. (King, Buikstra, and Charles, *Time and Archaeological Traditions*, 501.)

interred on the upper west side of the tumulus and was one of the last burials in the mound. QL-4904 was thus determined to represent the end use of the structure. Using radiometric dating, it was determined that QL-4904 was interred in AD 91 (Calibrated Range (2 σ) AD 58–127).¹⁵ No intrusive burials (burials after completion of the mound) were observed by archeologists investigating the mound.¹⁶ During the 1990 archeological excavation of the mound, two areas about halfway down the hill were noted as having looter disturbance, with either location consistent with the 1834 description of the digging¹⁷ (see figure 4).

Occupation and burials in the Napoleon Hollow Archeological District existed from 50 BC to AD 100, as determined by extensive radiometric dating.¹⁸

Heber C. Kimball, in a later recollection written in 1843 and published in 1845, indicated that several of the group, along with Joseph Smith, walked first to the top of the mound. Kimball states, “On the top of this mound there was the appearance of three altars, which had been built of stone, one above another, according to the ancient order; and the ground was strewn over with human bones.”¹⁹

Wilford Woodruff similarly indicated that they had gone to the top of the mound and then, while descending, halfway down the mound, Joseph Smith pointed to a location that was then excavated where the Zeph skeleton was then found.²⁰

The Zeph skeleton was located further down the hill, indicative of an earlier or middle time frame (circa AD 25), and so could not be a candidate to be involved in any final battle of the Nephites and Lamanites, which according to the Book of Mormon, occurred much later, in the late fourth century AD.

Furthermore, around AD 91—approximately year 85 in the Book of Mormon calendar—the text indicates that there were no Nephites or Lamanites and it was a period of peace. From the time of Christ’s

15. Jason L. King, Jane E. Buikstra, and Douglas K. Charles, “Time and Archaeological Traditions in the Lower Illinois Valley,” *American Antiquity* 76, no. 3 (2011): 502, 508.

16. Kenneth B. Farnsworth, “Lamanitish Arrows and Eagles with Lead Eyes: Tales of the First Recorded Explorations in an Illinois Valley Hopewell Mound,” *Illinois Archeology* 22, no. 1 (2010): 36.

17. Farnsworth and Atwell, *Hopewellian Sites*, 125–6.

18. Farnsworth and Atwell, *Hopewellian Sites*, 13–14.

19. Godfrey, “Zeph Story,” 44.

20. Godfrey, “Zeph Story,” 41.

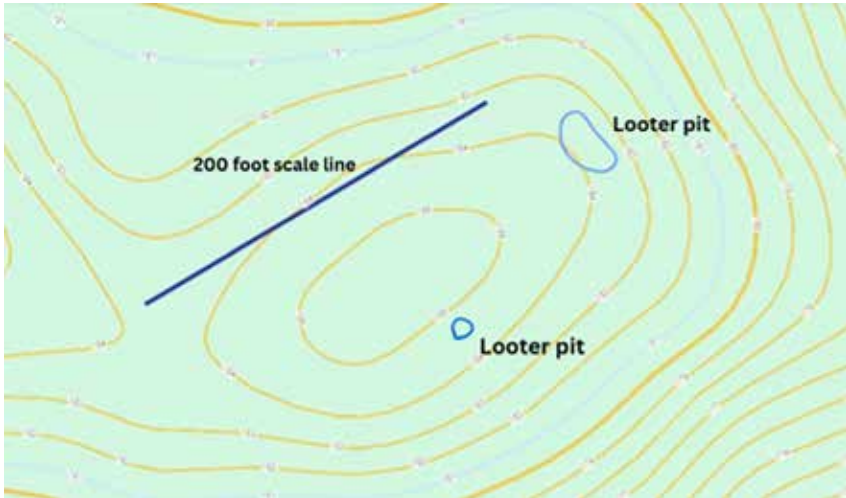


Figure 4. Two areas of historic looter disturbance on Naples-Russell Mound 8 observed in 1990. (Illustration by the author on a Google Earth Pro template, 2025 Airbus.)

appearance (circa AD 29–33) onward, the record states that there was “no contention among all the people, in all the land” (4 Nephi 1:13). According to the Book of Mormon, there were no Lamanites or “-ites” of any kind from AD 29–104 (110th year; 4 Nephi 1:17). Sometime, apparently toward the end of the period between AD 104 and AD 188, a small part of the people left the Church and took upon themselves the name Lamanite (4 Nephi 1:20). No battles started until year 321 (approximately AD 315; Mormon 1:6). Assuming that Mormon didn’t ignore wars when he declared that there was peace, the warrior Zelfh who was killed in battle and the mound he was buried in cannot be a part of Book of Mormon lands. As the archeologists determined there were no later burials in the mound (or any other mounds in the district) after its completion, there is no scientific support for a later Zelfh burial.

Further, part of the vision indicates that Onandagus (under whom Zelfh served) was the one who directed the construction of the mound (or at least a significant portion of the mound), which does not allow for Zelfh to be buried long after the mound was completed. Even if Zelfh died later than Onandagus, Zelfh’s burial could not be later than approximately 50 years after completion of the mound. Even if one uses the latest radiometric date within the date range of

AD 127, the latest date for Zeph would be AD 177, centuries short of the final Nephite/Lamanite battles.

Thus, based on all of the various avenues of independent evidence, it is not possible that any Lamanite, let alone a warrior captain/prophet named Zeph, serving a larger leader named Onandagus, could have existed in Book of Mormon lands in the archeological time frame specified.



Jerry D. Grover Jr. *is a licensed professional structural and civil engineer and a licensed professional geologist. He has an undergraduate degree in Geological Engineering from BYU and a Master's Degree in Civil Engineering from the University of Utah. He speaks Italian and Chinese and has worked as a freelance translator off and on for the past twenty-five years. He is the author of books related to scientific and linguistic research of the Book of Mormon, including Translation of the "Caractors" Document: Revised and Updated, Calendars and Chronology of the Book of Mormon, The Swords of Shule, Evidence of the Nehor Religion in Mesoamerica, Sumerian Roots of Jaredite-Derived Names and Terminology in the Book of Mormon, Geology of the Book of Mormon, and Ziff, Magic Goggles, and Golden Plates.*

A Proposed Kinship between Alma₂ and Nephihah

Brant A. Gardner

Abstract: *The Book of Mormon presents a wealth of important information related to how we should understand our lives and relationship with God. Frustratingly, it leaves unwritten a large body of information that we would like to know. This note tries to read between the lines to suggest the reason Nephihah became chief judge after Alma₂ abdicated that position.*

At the beginning of the book of Alma, Alma₂ is both the chief judge and the chief high priest. In the beginning of his ninth year as chief judge (ninth year of the reign of the judges, Alma 4:11), Alma₂ relinquished the chief judge seat and retained the position of chief high priest (Alma 4:17–18). The seating of the next chief judge is described, but with perhaps confusing details:

And he [Alma₂] selected a wise man who was among the elders of the church, and gave him power according to the voice of the people, that he might have power to enact laws according to the laws which had been given, and to put them in force according to the wickedness and the crimes of the people. Now this man's name was Nephihah, and he was appointed chief judge; and he sat in the judgment-seat to judge and to govern the people. (Alma 4:16–17)

The appointment of Nephihah followed two procedures. First, Alma₂ selected him. Second, the voice of the people gave him power. Richard Bushman once tried to examine the Book of Mormon for political principles that might hold lessons for our modern Republic.

Instead, he found a very different type of political system.¹ He noted the differences between succession under the Judges and what might have been expected of the Republicanism of Joseph's time:

The Nephite government was no more resistant to monarchy in practice than it was in theory, and in fact came to occupy the very middle ground which, according to the Boston orator, could not exist. The institution of judgeships, rather than beginning a republican era in Book of Mormon history, slid back at once toward monarchy. The chief judge much more resembled a king than an American president. Once elected, he never again submitted himself to the people. After being proclaimed chief judge by the voice of the people, Alma enjoyed life tenure. When he chose to resign because of internal difficulties he selected his own successor (see Alma 4:16). That seems to have been the beginning of a dynasty. In the next succession, the judgeship passed to the chief judge's son and thence "by right" to the successive sons of the judges (see Alma 50:39; Helaman 1:13). Although democratic elements were there—the judges were confirmed by the voice of the people—the "reign of the judges," as the Book of Mormon calls the period, was a far cry from the republican government Joseph Smith knew. Life tenure and hereditary succession would have struck Americans as only slightly modified monarchy.²

1. Richard L. Bushman, *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, comp. and ed. Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 25.

I decided to examine the political principles embodied in the Book of Mormon and make some application to our Revolution and Constitution. I thought this would be simple enough because of the switch from monarchy to a republic during the reign of Mosiah. I was sure that somewhere in Mosiah's statements I would find ideas relevant to the modern world. With that in mind, I accepted the invitation to talk, but not until a few months before I was to appear did I get down to work. To my dismay I could not find what I was looking for. Everything seemed just off the point, confused and baffling. I could not find the directions for a sound republic that I had expected.

2. Richard L. Bushman, "The Book of Mormon and the American Revolution," *BYU Studies* 17 no. 1 (1977): 14–15, byustudies.byu.edu/article/the-book-of-mormon-and-the-american-revolution. See also Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness*:

As Bushman noted, political positions appear to have been for life and were transmitted through genealogical lines. In this case, Alma₂ first selects Nephihah and then presents him for the voice of the people. This brings up the question of why Alma₂ selected Nephihah for chief judge. The text does not tell us. I suggest that Alma₂ made the selection, and it was seen as acceptable by the voice of the people because it also followed the tradition of genealogical transmission.

Mormon's edited text has ample evidence that positions would pass from father to son. The book of Omni indicates that passing the small plates to a brother rather than a son was a legitimate option. Amaron passed the responsibility for the small plates to his brother, Chemish (Omni 1:8). Chemish passed the plates to his son, Abinadom (Omni 1:10). The small plates typically passed from father to son, but brother to brother was an option.³ In the large plate tradition, Helaman₁ passed the plates to his brother, Shiblon (Alma 63:1).

Nephihah passed the position of chief judge to his son, Pahoran (Alma 50:39–40). That information was written right after Mormon noted that Alma₂ passed the large plates to his son Helaman₁. The principle of heredity of position worked in both the recordkeeper and ruler lines. With the principle of heredity established with the second generation, might it not have also worked when Alma₂ selected Nephihah?

The best textual evidence that Nephihah was related to Alma₂ is the subtle fact that no book is named for Nephihah. I have argued that book names change when dynasties change.⁴ That is the reason that the book of Lehi covered around four hundred years of rulers without a name change. The books of Mosiah, Alma, and Helaman all have recordkeepers who write without a change in the book name.

If we can accept that premise, then Nephihah must have been part of Alma₂'s dynasty rather than an unrelated ruler who should have then had a separate book. We know who Alma₂'s sons were. I therefore

Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 3: 486–90.

3. The first transmission of records to a brother was Nephi to Jacob. However, that example is not precisely the same, as Nephi split his two record traditions, with the large plates going to his unnamed son and the small plates going to Jacob.
4. Brant A. Gardner, "Labor Diligently to Write: The Ancient Making of a Modern Scripture," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 35 (2020): 37–45, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/labor-diligently-to-write-the-ancient-making-of-a-modern-scripture-1.

propose that Nephihah was Alma₂'s brother, probably a younger brother. Thus, it was the same family and same dynasty. It followed the allowable precedent of transmission of responsibility to a brother that we saw with Amaron and Chemish. When we get a new dynasty book, it is with Helaman₂, Alma₂'s grandson. The reason for the return to Alma₂'s lineage was the violence that removed all of Pahoran's sons, creating a need to find a new chief judge who was not in a direct line with Pahoran. Helaman₂ was second cousin to Pahoran's sons, and perhaps that relationship was sufficient to see Helaman₂ as the next chief judge but sufficiently distant that a new dynasty name and book began.

As a proponent of a Mesoamerican setting for the Book of Mormon, I note that among both the Maya and the later Mexica, there is evidence that rulership might pass to a brother and then from the brother's son for the next ruler.⁵ For the Maya, the rulership of Palenque passed from K'inich Kan B'alam II to his brother K'inich K'an Joy Chitam II. K'inich K'an Joy Chitam II was captured, and ten years later, Kinich Ahkal Mo' Naab' III ascended to the throne. His father was likely K'inich K'an Joy Chitam II's brother.⁶

Susan Gillespie describes the pre-Columbian visual representation of the kinship among the Aztec kings:

Each king takes the office of the dead king who preceded him and thereby replaces and replicates him. . . . Because of sibling relationships, some of the kings appear in the same generation, drawn together by this horizontal link.⁷

The sixth, seventh, and eighth Mexica kings were Axayacatl, Tizoc, and Ahuitzotl, frequently considered to be brothers.⁸

If Mesoamerica is the proper physical and cultural background for the Book of Mormon, the argument that Nephihah was Alma₂'s brother becomes even stronger.



5. I thank Kerry Hull for pointing me to these cases.

6. See Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens: Deciphering the Dynasties of the Ancient Maya* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 168–72.

7. Susan D. Gillespie, *The Aztec Kings: The Construction of Rulership in Mexica History* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989), 13.

8. Gillespie, *The Aztec Kings*, 14.

Brant A. Gardner *did his undergraduate work at Brigham Young University. He received a Master's in Anthropology from the State University of New York at Albany, specializing in Mesoamerican ethnohistory. He is an executive editor for Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship. He is the author of the six-volume Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon, as well as Traditions of the Fathers: The Book of Mormon as History and The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon. His most recent books are Engraven Upon Plates, Printed Upon Paper: Textual and Narrative Structures of the Book of Mormon and The Plates of Mormon: A Book of Mormon Study Edition Based on Textual and Narrative Structures in the English Translation, each published by Kofford Books. Gardner has also contributed a Book of Mormon Minute to the ScripturePlus app, a condensed commentary on two or three verses at a time from the Book of Mormon.*

Nephi's "Shazer": New Insights into an Arabian Pillar of the Book of Mormon

Warren P. Aston and J. Wanless Southwick

Abstract: *Shazer was a brief hunting stop, given that name by Lehi and Sariah's group journeying to the New World. It has the unique distinction of being a place in a real-world location that is clearly defined in Nephi's text using precise parameters. Because a highly viable location for the Valley of Lemuel has been established as a seemingly certain location, there is a solid anchor for further exploration. After reviewing earlier proposals, this paper presents the findings of a new research effort. While absolute certainty will likely remain elusive, the new information discussed here demonstrates the accuracy of Nephi's record-keeping. It shows his description to be significantly more literal and consistent than previous commentary has assumed. This can be illustrated primarily by examining travel distances and directions he recorded that embody geographical specifics that no one in 1830 could have known. This paper then presents a new candidate for Shazer and its adjacent hunting area, which appears to match Nephi's description much more closely than other proposals. This article thus refreshes the picture of this brief but highly significant part of the Old World crossing, with its implications for the route taken from Shazer deeper into Arabia.*

Throughout much of the last two centuries, many commentators — restricted to written sources that were often incomplete — could only approximately map the Old World journey from Jerusalem to Bountiful as recounted in the first eighteen chapters of the Book of Mormon. Understandably, the earliest commentaries essentially only restate Nephi's text. Their basic comments gave encouragement to

readers to see the characters as real people in real environments. However, with more recent research, it is possible to add the unfolding awareness of the actual Arabian setting. Combining new, on-the-ground field research along with the accuracy of Nephi's text in describing it, there is a fascinating process to trace.

And it came to pass that the voice of the Lord spake unto my father by night, and commanded him that on the morrow he should take his journey into the wilderness. And it came to pass that as my father arose in the morning, and went forth to the tent door, to his great astonishment he beheld upon the ground a round ball of curious workmanship; and it was of fine brass. And within the ball were two spindles; and the one pointed the way whither we should go into the wilderness.

And it came to pass that we did gather together whatsoever things we should carry into the wilderness, and all the remainder of our provisions which the Lord had given unto us; and we did take seed of every kind that we might carry into the wilderness. And it came to pass that we did take our tents and depart into the wilderness, across the river Laman.

And it came to pass that we traveled for the space of four days, nearly a south-southeast direction, and we did pitch our tents again; and we did call the name of the place Shazer. And it came to pass that we did take our bows and our arrows, and go forth into the wilderness to slay food for our families; and after we had slain food for our families we did return again to our families in the wilderness, to the place of Shazer. And we did go forth again in the wilderness, following the same direction, keeping in the most fertile parts of the wilderness, which were in the borders near the Red Sea. (1 Nephi 16:9–14)

Early Engagement by Believers in the Book of Mormon

George Q. Cannon, an early Apostle of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was one of the first writers to utilize non-scriptural sources in his 1888 book, *The Life of Nephi: the Son of Lehi*. He mentioned the travels through Arabia of an intrepid Finnish explorer named Georg Wallin, earlier that century. Traveling southward in the Tabuk Province, near where Lehi's group had commenced their trek, Wallin

recorded that his general travel direction was, interestingly, south-southeast, which the locals determined by “always [having] the polar star on his left shoulder-blade.”¹

Additionally, English convert and Church leader George Reynolds attempted the first analysis of names found in the Book of Mormon and proposed possible locations for places mentioned in the text. His prolific writings drew attention to the Book of Mormon in a period when it was little used within the Church.²

The first significant scholarly step forward came with the writings of Hugh W. Nibley in the 1950s. Nibley’s training in classical writing and ancient languages demonstrated that the Old World setting of the Nephite text fits into the real world in ways that neither Joseph Smith nor his peers could have envisioned. Nibley’s writings remain foundational to the present day.³ His studies opened new doors for other scholars to penetrate the ancient culture in which the Book of Mormon begins. Two decades later, the next stage began—moving beyond texts alone to actual exploration of Arabia in order to further bring the Book of Mormon out of obscurity.

The first attempt to visit the Arabian setting of the Book of Mormon did not come until early 1976, when Lynn and Hope Hilton traveled to Saudi Arabia and Oman in an effort to identify the locations of Lehi’s odyssey. The Hiltons had a background of business experience in Saudi Arabia, so that in preparing for this assignment from the *Ensign* magazine, they had the resources of Nibley and other scholars to help them. Their findings were first published in the *Ensign*⁴ and in two

1. George Q. Cannon, *The Life of Nephi: the Son of Lehi* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1883), 40, scripturecentral.org/archive/books/book/life-nephi-son-lehi/. Cannon came across this method of determining and maintaining direction while reading the report of Georg Wallin’s journey across Arabia.

2. George Reynolds, *A Dictionary of the Book of Mormon, Comprising Its Biographical, Geographical and Other Proper Names* (Salt Lake City: Joseph Hyrum Perry, 1891), archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/sites/default/files/archive-files/pdf/reynolds/2016-05-04/george_reynolds_a_dictionary_of_the_book_of_mormon_1891.pdf.

3. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites*, 2nd ed. ((Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies [FARMS], 1988), scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/50/.

4. Lynn M. Hilton and Hope A. Hilton, “In Search of Lehi’s Trail, Part 1: The Preparation,” *Ensign*, September 1976, 32–54, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/1ca7c9bd-d27f-47e5-890e-d9a07634cad9/0/36;LynnM.HiltonandHopeA.Hilton,“InSearchofLehi’sTrail,Part2:TheJourney,”Ensign,October

books, *In Search of Lehi's Trail* (1976),⁵ followed by an updated version in 1996 entitled, *Discovering Lehi: New Evidence of Lehi and Nephi in Arabia*.⁶ From the beginning, they saw the journey to Nahom as being along the Red Sea coast, rather than over an inland trade route. The Hiltons' original model located the Valley of Lemuel at the town of al Bad'a, centered in the large Wadi Ifal,⁷ with Shazer probably situated at Wadi Azlan (now usually identified as Wadi Aznam), on the coast of the Red Sea. In their 1996 book, the Hiltons changed this suggestion for Shazer to a place now known as al Muwaylih. They also adopted new findings to identify Nahom as being in the tribal area of Nihm, in modern-day Yemen.

Although based on actual visits to the Middle East, the Old World model presented to the Latter-day Saint community by the Hiltons was not universally embraced at the time. One example is a 1995 book that proposes a geography of the entire Book of Mormon but is not based on any actual exploration in Arabia. Moreover, it was written without reference to any previous studies such as those published by Nibley and the Hiltons.⁸ This book begins by proposing a location for the Valley of Lemuel at Wadi Nuwaybi in Jordan, and an indeterminate desert spot south-southeast for Shazer. From that starting point, the inconsistencies multiplied, ignoring both scriptural and geographical realities. The author suggests that the easterly travel from Nahom to Bountiful resulted in a proposed Bountiful in northeast Oman, then continued with a western sea crossing of the Atlantic and an arrival in the eastern United States. This is contrary to the Book of Mormon account.⁹ His version of the Book of Mormon New World geography

1976, 34–63, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/c2524583-c9f2-4f15-9dda-77b9e67b8d00/0/35.

5. Lynn M. Hilton and Hope Hilton, *In Search of Lehi's Trail* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), archive.org/details/insearchoflehist0000hilt/mode/2up.

6. Lynn M. Hilton and Hope A. Hilton, *Discovering Lehi: New Evidence of Lehi and Nephi in Arabia*, rev. ed. (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 1996), archive.org/details/discoveringlehin0000unse

7. The Arabic term *wadi* refers to a valley, ravine, or channel that is dry except in the rainy season.

8. Paul C. Hedengren, *The Land of Lehi: A Book of Mormon Geography* (Provo, UT: Bradford & Wilson, 1995). Unfortunately, he was not alone. For example, in 1998 Duane R. Aston (not related to Warren P. Aston) first published *Return to Cumorah: Piecing Together the Puzzle Where the Nephites Lived* (Sacramento, CA: American River Publications, 1998), advancing an Old World geography even further removed from scriptural and geographic realities.

9. Assuming that the place where Lehi landed in the New World is the same

proposes that the ancient Book of Mormon civilization lived in what is now the eastern and southern parts of the United States, rather than in Mesoamerica. This is a concept that some authors continue to support.

More information was soon forthcoming from extensive explorations by George Potter and Richard Wellington, a Latter-day Saint team working in Saudi Arabia. Building upon the pioneering visits of the Hiltons and conducting relevant background research, their 2003 study, *Lehi in the Wilderness*, was a watershed publication.¹⁰ It was the most thorough Old World analysis to that point. In 1995, Potter and Wellington were the first to locate Wadi Tayyib al Ism, now universally accepted as the only plausible candidate for the Valley of Lemuel. However, the authors applied Nephi's "nearly south-southeast" direction from the town of al Bad'a, in the center of the large drainage of Wadi Ifal, which is the same place the Hiltons proposed could have been the Valley of Lemuel. This assumption led them to Wadi Agharr, now known as Wadi esh Sharma, a long wadi in an east-west direction that they proposed as Shazer. In advocating for Wadi esh Sharma as the probable site of Shazer, they also suggested that this wadi allowed Lehi's group to turn eastward (inland) to reach the well-established trade route that ran roughly southeast toward Yemen. Although they did not undertake exploration in Yemen, they accepted the discovery of the tribal area of Nihm as *Nahom*, and proposed a location, Khor Rori, as Nephi's "Bountiful" in southern Oman.

In 2013, Kirk Magleby published an impressive series of posts on his blog, "Things Near and Far." He attempted to reconcile distances mentioned in the Book of Mormon with modern satellite maps of the earth.¹¹ He used Lehi's three-day trek from the northern tip of the Red Sea (Aqaba) to Wadi Tayyib al Ism to estimate that Lehi traveled

place they called "the place of their fathers' first inheritance" (Alma 22:28), then Lehi's landing site is on the western seashore of the New World.

10. George Potter and Richard Wellington, "Shazer and the Most Fertile Parts," *Lehi in the Wilderness: 81 New Documented Evidences that the Book of Mormon is a True History* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2003), 73–78. While key elements have since been superseded, this source nevertheless contains much valuable information, especially chapter 3, "The River of Laman and Valley of Lemuel," which also covers a proposed location for Shazer.
11. Kirk Magleby, "Things Near and Far," *Book of Mormon Resources* (blog), 23 April 2013, bookofmormonresources.blogspot.com/2013/04/things-near-and-far.html. Calculated speed per day is an average because the distance traveled each day could vary greatly due to the terrain.

approximately 36 “air kilometers” (22 straight-line miles) per day. Magleby then projected a four-day, straight-line distance, estimating the location of Shazer to be on the western coast of Arabia. Later, under the heading, “Test #6 Relative Distances,” he located Shazer “along the 5 kilometer [3 mile] Saudi coastline between Wadi Maharish on the north and Wadi al Ghal on the south, about 15 air kilometers [9 miles] northwest of modern Duba.”¹² Magleby’s blogs detailed how this area is in the correct direction for travel, as stated in 1 Nephi 16:13 (“nearly a south-southeast direction”), and fits the Book of Mormon description of Shazer as a place where hunting success could be found.

New Textual and Field Exploration

The foundation for this present study began with extensive fieldwork over several years in Israel, Jordan, Yemen, and Oman; all intended to shed new light on the settings of Nephi’s account. This included the possible routes that Lehi’s group could have taken to leave Jerusalem and travel to the Red Sea and into Arabia. Providentially, new political developments in Saudi Arabia began to open access into the country’s northwest area—the Tabuk province—which was previously all but closed to outsiders. This allowed a new study inside Saudi Arabia in 2018, which included an extended 5,720-kilometer (3,554-mile) survey. It ran from the Jordanian border in the north to near the Yemen border in the south, exploring both the interior and the entire coastline of Western Saudi Arabia. This exploratory period, and another in 2019, also focused on candidates proposed for the Valley of Lemuel. Once completed, the first conclusions were published in *BYU Studies Quarterly*, proposing the route that seemed to best match the account of the journey from Jerusalem to the Valley of Lemuel. Further, new exploration had confirmed that Wadi Tayyib al Ism was not only the most plausible candidate for the Valley of Lemuel, it has no viable competing candidates.¹³

12. Kirk Magleby, “Test #6 Relative Distances,” *Book of Mormon Resources* (blog), 18 March 2014, bookofmormonresources.blogspot.com/2014/03/test-6-relative-distances.html

13. For the unique features of the Valley of Lemuel with its implications for Shazer based on new exploration in Israel, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, see Warren P. Aston, “Into Arabia: Lehi and Sariah’s Escape from Jerusalem, Perspectives Suggested by New Fieldwork,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (2019): 99–126, byustudies.byu.edu/article/into-arabia-lehi-and-sariahs-escape-from

The 2018–2019 research began by addressing specific earlier proposals made for the location of Shazer. This involved a full investigation of each location, assessing each of them against Nephi's own descriptions. It concluded that of the four candidates proposed (one in Egypt and three in the Tabuk region of Saudi Arabia), Wadi esh Sharma appeared to be the best fit. The findings from these studies were published in 2020 in the *Interpreter* journal, titled "Nephi's 'Shazer': The Fourth Arabian Pillar of the Book of Mormon." To date, it was the most comprehensive examination related to Shazer.¹⁴

In 2024, independent research was initiated by Wanless Southwick and later included Warren Aston. It was proposed that Shazer was likely located near the mountain, Jebel Shar, and its foothills. This was an area where seasonal water drains toward the Red Sea through streams and several wadis, one of them today named *Wadi Maharish*. The location was identified using Google Earth satellite images. It mapped the route Lehi would likely have been directed to follow from the Valley of Lemuel in Wadi Tayyib al Ism. It ran through mountainous terrain and across coastal plains, traveling in nearly a "south-south-east" direction (1 Nephi 16:13) for a distance of four days' travel. The area of Wadi Maharish showed terrain that appeared to be suitable for camping and hunting and provided fresh water. However, on-site exploration was needed.¹⁵

With these baselines in place, the authors began a collaboration to re-examine Nephi's account of the four-day journey from the Valley of Lemuel to Shazer more closely, utilizing improved satellite-based imagery and maps of the terrain. However, the same developments

-jerusalem-perspectives-suggested-by-new-fieldwork/. In summary, the key elements center around the valley fitting Nephi's description of being "three days" travel from their arrival at the Red Sea (1 Nephi 2:5–6) and being the only perennial water source reaching the Red Sea. The lack of viable alternatives allows us to confidently state that the location of the Valley of Lemuel is known with a high degree of certainty.

14. Warren P. Aston, "Nephi's 'Shazer': The Fourth Arabian Pillar of the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 39 (2020): 53–72, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/nephis-shazer-the-fourth-arabian-pillar-of-the-book-of-mormon. This was later published in Warren P. Aston, Godfrey J. Ellis, and Neal Rappleye, *Into Arabia: Anchoring Nephi's Account in the Real World* (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Tooele, UT: Eborn Books, 2024), 109–27.
15. J. Wanless Southwick, "The Journey to Bountiful Begins," in *Arabia's Mountain of God where Moses, Elijah, and Lehi Met with God* (Rexburg, ID: Southwick Research, 2024), 33–36.

that offered new on-site exploration opportunities in Saudi Arabia in 2025, also introduced new challenges to physically access. This was primarily because of large-scale construction projects across the Tabuk region where all the sites of interest are located. At the time of this writing, the believed location of the Valley of Lemuel, for example, is closed to all visitors, and the general area southeast of it, where Shazer must lie, is being increasingly impacted.

Despite major logistical challenges, new on-site exploration in the region was conducted by Warren Aston in 2025 to focus on sites of potential significance to Lehi's odyssey. The major goal of this new exploration was to ensure that such sites were in accord with the mapping and were more fully documented.

The Physical Setting for the Journey to Shazer

To obtain a basic understanding of the world in which most of the journey of Lehi's family took place, it is necessary to truly appreciate the first eighteen chapters of the Book of Mormon combined with the new information presented below. In the physical sense, that world is dominated by the Arabian Desert, the second largest desert on Earth. It occupies almost the entire Arabian Peninsula and is therefore the backdrop to most of the Old World journey, from their arrival at the Red Sea until reaching Bountiful.

The images and maps presented in this paper give some indications of the physical environment involved, along with its variety (see figure 1). Although Arabia is known for its desert sand dunes, at least two-thirds of the terrain consists of plains, plateaus, mountains, valleys, and volcanic fields. Travelers generally avoid sand dunes because loaded camels require fairly level and firm terrain. Mountain wadis and coastal plains are more suitable for camel travel, which fact helps in following Lehi's trek though western Arabia.

Mountain wadis

Rain is a rare occurrence in the dry desert environment of Arabia, but when it comes, it often arrives in dangerous abundance, filling canyons with flood water. Torrents of water wash mountain debris downhill and leave layers of sand and silt in the bottoms of valleys. Usually dry, these wadis become mountain highways for human travelers. Lehi's travel would almost certainly have followed these wadis for them to arrive at the Valley of Lemuel and to exit from it.



Figure 1. A panoramic overview of the terrain facing Lehi's group as they exited the Valley of Lemuel and traveled to Shazer. The red line suggests the route they may have traveled. The straight white line points to south. (Image from Google Earth.)

"Most fertile" and "more fertile" parts

As today, some parts of the desert in Arabia in Lehi's time were more fertile than others, and Nephi carefully makes this point (1 Nephi 16:14, 16). Suitable fertile places became populated communities. The Book of Mormon records that Lehi traveled "in the most fertile parts of the wilderness" (vv. 14, 16) and "in the more fertile parts of the wilderness," but there is no mention of encountering other people. However, that is implied. A "fertile part of the wilderness" probably meant availability of fresh water, vegetation for livestock grazing, and hunting opportunities for caravan travelers.

Camels and survival

The camel stands as a critical contributor to the survival of the group. Thousands of years ago, the single-hump dromedary, first domesticated in Arabia, became indispensable for desert travel. The species expanded across the region, allowing settlements and towns to emerge and regular overland trade to develop. On level ground, an adult camel can carry loads up to 400 or 500 pounds for a week or longer without drinking or feeding. This was an essential element for nomadic desert people who had to carry all their belongings with them.

For Lehi's group, camels would have provided additional benefits

such as carrying the ill, the elderly, and small children. In addition to carrying the heavy tents, provisions, and the all-important seeds, camels also provided hair fiber for weaving, skins for clothing, and dung for fuel. Lehi's Old World journey simply could not have taken place as it did without camels, the ultimate desert transport.

Overview of Lehi's Trek across Arabia

When the focus narrows specifically to Lehi's journey, further clarity emerges about its setting. Leaving their homeland behind, they arrived at the most northerly point of the Gulf of Aqaba, the long and narrow eastern arm of the Red Sea, traveling near modern-day Aqaba and then turning southward.¹⁶ When they reached the point where the ancient trade routes and modern highways turn eastward, Lehi's group continued south for three days (1 Nephi 2: 5–6). During that time, they traveled along the coast, until they reached the Mazhafa mountains, which extended to the sea and entirely blocked the coastline. Then, following wadis from the coast up into the mountains to find a way to continue southward, they eventually reached the Wadi Tayyib al-Ism oasis, hidden deep inside the mountains.¹⁷ Lehi must have relied on some combination of local knowledge, perhaps previous travel experience, and surely heavenly inspiration to find the wadi oasis.

It should be noted that the Wadi Tayyib al-Ism, which Lehi named the "Valley of Lemuel" (1 Nephi 2:10, 14), is several miles in length. Photographs of the "firm and steadfast, and immovable" gorge area of the wadi, emptying into the Red Sea (v. 9), are readily available to readers.¹⁸ Less known are details of the "River Laman" (v. 8) that Lehi prayed would be an inspiration to his son, Laman (v. 9). Photos of the perennial flow of water in the bottom of the canyon today, and evidence of past huge floodwaters on the canyon walls, can be seen in the book, *Into Arabia*.¹⁹ Infrequent rainstorms in the upland mountain area sends torrents of water down branches of the wadi, which then

16. Comparisons of several possible routes from Jerusalem to Aqaba can be seen in Warren P. Aston, "Lehi and Sariah's Escape."

17. The likely route from Jerusalem and from Aqaba to the Tayyib al-Ism is described in Aston, "Lehi and Sariah's Escape," 15–20.

18. See discussion of the Valley of Lemuel and photos of Wadi Tayyib al-Ism in Scripture Central Staff, "Book of Mormon Evidence: Valley of Lemuel," Evidence 121, 28 November 2020. scripturecentral.org/evidence/book-of-mormon-evidence-valley-of-lemuel.

19. See figures 12 and 13 in Aston, Ellis, and Rappleye, *Into Arabia*, 27–28.

funnel into a narrow canyon gorge at the Red Sea end of Wadi Taayyib al Ism, causing life-endangering flash floods.²⁰ Lehi would likely not have located their base camp in that dangerous gorge. However, about 3 kilometers (2 miles) inland and upstream, the base of the valley becomes wider, palm trees grow, and there Lehi could have "pitched his tent in [the] valley by the side of a river of water" (v. 6). Isolated and secure, with date palms and fresh water, the enclosed oasis could have served as a staging post for them to prepare for the great one-way journey that lay ahead. (Figure 1 shows a proposed camping site for Lehi near the oasis. It also shows the orientation of the Wadi Tayyib al Ism.)

After Lehi was commanded to leave the valley, the Liahona was given to him (1 Nephi 16:10). Thereafter, the group's route was dictated by the pointers in this divine instrument, rather than by merely joining a well-worn trade route with its regular water holes. The Liahona first led them out of the valley, through the surrounding mountains, and around a second barrier of high terrain, to reach flat southern plains. At that point, their path probably followed the natural route taken by today's Highway 5 along the coast of the Red Sea, as they trekked onward to Shazer. This route allowed them to avoid several difficult areas of volcanic rock encountered early in the journey.

Nephi makes it clear that after Shazer, the Liahona's directional guidance continued: "And we did follow the directions of the ball, which led us in the more fertile parts of the wilderness" (1 Nephi 16:16). This is a reminder that the Liahona was the single most significant factor in allowing Lehi's group to locate water and to survive a landscape that was potentially hostile for such city dwellers. This guidance continued for some distance, including the well-known incident wherein Nephi's bow broke and he had to fashion a new bow and arrow out of wood (16:18–32). Here, an additional function of the Liahona is vividly demonstrated. When writing appeared on the ball, the Lord commanded Lehi to read it, which caused him to "fear and tremble exceedingly" (vv. 26–27). Writings on the "pointers . . . in the ball" (vv. 28–29), and

20. There is an interesting video that illustrates how canyon rocks in the area have been worn smooth by flash flooding. See Blue Abaya-Explore Arabia, "Wadi Tayeb Ism in Tabuk province. Rain water is flowing out of the canyon into the Red Sea," *Facebook*, 27 October 2018, [facebook.com/BlueAbayaBlog/videos/wadi-tayeb-ism-in-tabuk-province-rain-water-is-flowing-out-of-the-canyon-into-th/185567152358692/](https://www.facebook.com/BlueAbayaBlog/videos/wadi-tayeb-ism-in-tabuk-province-rain-water-is-flowing-out-of-the-canyon-into-th/185567152358692/).

“directions . . . upon the ball” guided Nephi to find prey to slay for food (vv. 30–32).

In verse 33, the Liahona is not mentioned, but it was likely its guidance that caused a further change in direction when the group resumed their travel. Significantly, Nephi noted that they now traveled “*nearly* the same course as in the beginning.” This small change in direction led them inland from the coast, through one of the gaps in the mountains, and into the interior where “after many days” they arrived at a place where they pitched their tents to “tarry for the space of a time” (v. 33). The next verse records that “Ishmael died, and was buried in the place which was called Nahom” (v. 34). We now know that Nahom was a large tribal area with numerous burial grounds. There is reason to believe that there was a large Jewish population that could have assisted with Ishmael’s burial.²¹

After the burial at Nahom, it was likely that the Liahona signaled the final change to their direction on the Arabian journey, one that Nephi later described as being “nearly eastward from that time forth” (1 Nephi 17:1). The route took them across the most difficult stretch of their Arabian crossing. In that final stage — from Nahom to Bountiful — they navigated a narrow separation between two major dune deserts, being empty places that are avoided even by present-day Bedouins. This precisely mirrors Nephi’s text in verse 1, detailing their hardships. Arriving on the high Yemen plateau, they were directed to enter a particular wadi valley, initially indistinguishable from others, and one of only two possible valleys leading them to a hidden and singular place of abundance, unmatched anywhere else on the Arabian Peninsula. Here were all the resources to sustain a small community and to build a ship — all this in an era when no ocean-going vessels were known to have been built in Arabia.

The Liahona provided the entire directional guidance, even before the first steps from the Valley of Lemuel, while later in the journey it also gave written communication. A glimpse into how this divine instrument

21. This is discussed extensively in Neal Rappleye, “The Nahom Convergence Reexamined: The Eastward Trail, Burial of the Dead, and the Ancient Borders of Nihm,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 60 (2024): 1–86, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/the-nahom-convergence-reexamined-the-eastward-trail-burial-of-the-dead-and-the-ancient-borders-of-nihm. This was later published as chapter 4 in Aston, Ellis, and Rappleye, *Into Arabia*, 129–209.

may have functioned in pointing Lehi to the exit from the Valley of Lemuel and beyond, has recently been offered by new research.²²

Being familiar with other practicalities that are involved in desert survival can assist the reading and visualization of the Book of Mormon text. In addition to the need for water and a means of transportation, there are multiple skills and abilities that aid survival in a harsh environment. It is now generally accepted that Lehi—and possibly also Ishmael and some of their sons—had some level of experience traveling in remote areas in connection with Lehi's likely trade.²³ Whatever skills and abilities came from previous travels in the region would have provided invaluable lessons to pass on to family members, particularly in the early stages of their journey.

Nephi does not specifically mention the use of camels nor of encountering other people, and there are also other things that were likely available to the travelers that can help in understanding the journey narrative. In the background of his primary focus (detailing significant faith-instilling events), Nephi included only the most critical subjects that would help the reader visualize the events. This includes such details as the directions and durations of the various stages of the journey, along with names of places. The rest of the picture is to be inferred.

Lehi's odyssey across Arabia spared his family the destruction at Jerusalem and the resulting exile. Lehi's family was able to establish a new branch of Israel on the Western Continent. In all their journeying, including with their great ocean journey across two-thirds of the planet to the New World, the group's obedience was key to the unerring navigational directions from the Lord, through the Liahona.

22. J. Wanless Southwick and Kyle Kinghorn, "Why was the Liahona a Sphere? A New Perspective on its Form and Function," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 66 (2025): 151–76, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/why-was-the-liahona-a-sphere-a-new-perspective-on-its-form-and-function. The paper includes several illustrations that suggest what Lehi and Sariah's group may have seen while in the campsite on the morning of departure, looking across the oasis and its river to the ridge just beyond. This is the first real-world visualization to be attempted, based on the actual locations, in any proposal for the Liahona.

23. See the summary in Neal Rappleye, "Lehi the Smelter: New Light on Lehi's Profession," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 14 (2015): 223–25, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/lehi-the-smelter-new-light-on-lehis-profession.

Commentary on Nephi's Book of Mormon Account

Six scriptural verses (1 Nephi 16:9–14), which are cited at the beginning of this article and are repeated for convenience at the beginning of the following sections, are all that Nephi recorded in connection with the brief stop they named *Shazer*.

It is unknown how long Lehi and Sariah's group stayed at the Valley of Lemuel, but it was likely at least several months and perhaps up to a year.²⁴ It involved Lehi and Sariah's sons making two trips back to Jerusalem to obtain their written history (the plates of brass) and to invite another branch of their family to join them (Ishmael, his wife, and their children). During their stay in the Valley of Lemuel, they studied the sacred plates and received revelations. It was also a time of significant social celebration when the sons of Lehi, along with Zoram, the servant of Laban, paired with and married the daughters of Ishmael. Because they knew God had promised them "a land which is choice above all other lands" (1 Nephi 2:20), it can reasonably be assumed that most in the party were eager to move on towards their promised land.

On the morrow

And it came to pass that the voice of the Lord spake unto my father by night, and commanded him that on the morrow he should take his journey into the wilderness. (1 Nephi 16:9)

For the modern reader with a Western mindset, this verse appears quite straightforward: the Lord speaks to Lehi during the night and commands him to take his family and leave the Valley of Lemuel in the morning. That visualization is reinforced by the verse that follows, describing how Lehi arose "in the morning" (1 Nephi 16:10) to find the Liahona sitting on the ground outside his tent. Nephi's compressed account may provide more information about of the daily world of a *Judahite*, a member of the southern Kingdom of Judah in Lehi's era.

24. See Godfrey J. Ellis, "Nephi's Eight Years in the 'Wilderness': Reconsidering Definitions and Details," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 57 (2023): especially 317–23, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/nephis-eight-years-in-the-wilderness-reconsidering-definitions-and-details. This was later published as chapter 2 in Aston, Ellis, and Rappleye, *Into Arabia*, 31–108. Ellis's work stands as the most thorough examination of the various travel periods spent in each location, from Jerusalem to Bountiful. He convincingly overturns common assumptions about the length of the Arabian crossing and his analysis deserves careful study.

This was a world largely governed by religion-based traditions and practices.

For Lehi's group, the concept of what constitutes a *day* and a *night* varies from modern Western culture. For them, each day ended at *sunset*, not at midnight. Each new day began at sunset.²⁵ This has a major implication for how this verse is read, because when Lehi was commanded to begin his journey "on the morrow," it may not have meant that the departure happened during the next period of daylight as we might assume. Rather, it may have begun after the next sundown, either in the night hours that followed, or, more likely, after the next sunrise. Appreciating this may help in understanding how the group was able to complete all the preparations listed in verses 11 and 12; to gather all their provisions and other items, to bring a variety of seeds, and finally to "take our tents" as Nephi expressed it. The latter required emptying, collapsing, and packing the heavy tents onto their camels, which were tasks involving hours of arduous work.

The Liahona

And it came to pass that as my father arose in the morning, and went forth to the tent door, to his great astonishment he beheld upon the ground a round ball of curious workmanship; and it was of fine brass. And within the ball were two spindles; and the one pointed the way whither we should go into the wilderness. (1 Nephi 16:10)

Some readers of the First Book of Nephi have theorized that the Liahona somehow gave the travelers compass directions for travel. However, Nephi's text is clear that the Liahona, with its two spindles, functioned very differently from a magnetic compass. Instead of pointing north, the Liahona pointed the direction to travel. This is an important distinction. The first mention of the Liahona in the Book of Mormon says that one of its two spindles pointed "the way whither we should go into the wilderness" (1 Nephi: 16:10), *not* by any directions appearing on the surface of the Liahona or on the spindles. However, later

25. See the general introduction to that era and region in John W. Welch and Robert D. Hunt, "Culturegram: Jerusalem 600 B.C.," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 1–40, scripturecentral.org/archive/books/book-chapter/culturegram-jerusalem-600-bc. Page 8 refers to how days and nights were determined, citing Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Instructions*, trans. John McHugh (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 1:178–94.

descriptions about the functioning of the Liahona makes it apparent that *both* spindles were required to point the direction of travel (Alma 37:40). Several stories in the narrative illustrate that this divine instrument worked not by magnetism but by the faith of Lehi and Sariah's family. Thus, only divine direction could cause the Liahona to point the way they should go.²⁶

Packing up to leave

And it came to pass that we did gather together whatsoever things we should carry into the wilderness, and all the remainder of our provisions which the Lord had given unto us; and we did take seed of every kind that we might carry into the wilderness. (1 Nephi 16:11)

Although Lehi's group may not have known exactly when they would leave the valley where they had lived in tents, potentially for many months, they likely made general preparations to move on. However, when Lehi received directions from the Lord to depart (1 Nephi 16:9), breaking camp would have been a significant task. They had to take down multiple semi-permanent tents and pack up "whatsoever things we should carry . . . the remainder of our provisions [and] seed of every kind" (1 Nephi 16:11). Many hours of work by all members of the group would have been required before the first heavily loaded camel could be led from the campsite.

The matter of the seeds carried on the journey across Arabia has attracted a great deal of commentary over the years, much of it focused on exactly where they had collected or bought the seeds that Nephi said, "we had brought from the land of Jerusalem" (1 Nephi 18:24). In his 2023 article, "Nephi's Eight Years in the 'Wilderness,'" Godfrey Ellis also addresses an equally important aspect: How were the seeds stored to ensure they remained viable for planting in the New World, as Nephi records?²⁷

26. For a comprehensive analysis of the Liahona, see Southwick and Kinghorn, "Why was the Liahona a Sphere?" The suggested function of the Liahona is discussed, with the real-life example of leaving the campsite in the Valley of Lemuel pictured.

27. Ellis, "Nephi's Eight Years." His research includes an important consideration of the issue of seed viability and its implications for the timing of Lehi's land and ocean journey.

Across the river and through the mountains

And it came to pass that we did take our tents and depart into the wilderness, across the river Laman. (1 Nephi 16:12)

The next brief phrase "*we did take our tents*" understates the work involved in preparing the group's many camels for travel, collapsing the extremely heavy tents, packing provisions and other items, and then loading the camels.

The unknown way ahead of them was viewed as wilderness, considered empty and largely uninhabited. In describing the actual departure from their camp, Nephi adds a telling and usually overlooked detail: They first crossed the river Laman. Because their southward direction of travel is stipulated in the next verse, Nephi reveals that the camp had to have lain on the north side of the valley, because its river flowed westward through the wadi down to the Red Sea, only about 3 kilometers (2 miles) away. The fact that the river Laman sometimes floods with extreme life-threatening force, extending its normal width and uprooting adult palm trees, suggests that the timing of the departure was in a period when it ran quietly.²⁸

Almost directly opposite the most plausible location for a campsite, new exploration reveals that there is a short wadi—a valley that offers a route through the *Mazhafa* mountains that surround the Valley of Lemuel. The true nature of this wadi is hidden from easy view. The fact that it branches sharply eastward just a short distance inland, before then turning southward, cannot be seen from its beginning, but only by entering it (see figure 2). It thus remained undetected over years of exploration and other visits by Latter-day Saints. It was first discovered in November 2019 and reported in the 2020 article about Shazer.²⁹

This site is completely consistent with 1 Nephi 16:12, including the

28. See the images of a recent flood event, uprooting adult palm trees, at the Red Sea exit of Wadi Tayyib al Ism in December 2019, in Warren Aston, "What Did the River of Filthy Water and the River of Laman Look Like?" *Scripture Central* (blog), 22 January 2020, scripturecentral.org/blog/what-did-the-river-of-filthy-water-and-the-river-of-laman-look-like.

29. The existence of a previously unknown wadi leading directly from the Valley of Lemuel is displayed in a map published in Aston, "Nephi's Shazer," showing the optimal departure route from the campsite (see image 6 in that article), including photographs taken inside the exit wadi (images 4 and 5). See also Aston, Ellis, and Rappleye, *Into Arabia*. Although not noted in the book, the front cover image and image 2 show the entrance to the wadi leading out of the Valley of Lemuel, lying behind the prominent ridge sitting just behind the oasis and trees.



Figure 2. Oasis of Tayyib al Ism (Valley of Lemuel), approximately 3 kilometers (2 miles) east of the waters of the Red Sea, as viewed from a spot near Lehi's likely tent site, looking toward the only southerly exit from the valley.

features described by Nephi and their positions relative to each other. This includes the likely campground being on the north side of the valley, and the only exit permitting travel in a southerly direction. This exit can only be accessed by crossing the river between them; all these features can still be seen today and result in a strong correlation. Taking the hidden exit route results in a total travel distance of about 6 kilometers (4 miles) from the camp, crossing the river, and then traveling through the first area of mountainous terrain.

The next possible exit from the oasis campsite, allowing travel in a general south-easterly direction, is a little longer, being about 10 kilometers (6 miles), arriving only a short distance from where the "hidden" route arrives. But more problematic than a slightly longer distance, this route contradicts Nephi's text in two main respects. First, it does not require the river to be crossed, at least not initially as Nephi describes. Second, rather than the direction recorded in Nephi's account, it requires initially traveling in an easterly direction, before then making a turn south.

We can conclude that the shorter, hidden, and more direct exit is optimal. It is not only entirely adequate, but is also the only option exactly fitting Nephi's word picture of their departure from the Valley of Lemuel.

In summary, the Liahona unerringly led them across the river Laman in the Valley of Lemuel, into a hidden exit, through the Mazhafa

mountains, and then around another area of high terrain before arriving at flatter countryside in the south. The red line in figure 1 suggests the route they may have traveled.

Travel duration and direction

And it came to pass that we traveled for the space of four days, nearly a south-southeast direction, and we did pitch our tents again; and we did call the name of the place Shazer. (1 Nephi 16:13)

This verse includes three main components: travel duration, direction, and their name for the campsite. The duration of the journey was "four days" from the Valley of Lemuel to Shazer. This can be converted to distance by applying the rate of travel. We know that Lehi's family traveled about 130 kilometers (81 miles) from the northern tip of the Red Sea's Gulf of Aqaba to Wadi Tayyib al Ism in three days (see 1 Nephi 2:5–6). This was approximately 44 kilometers (27 miles) per day, which is consistent with speeds reported for camel caravans from other historical sources.³⁰ Thus, four days of travel could take them about 176 kilometers (108 miles).

The group members must have been energized spiritually with renewed reassurance and optimism after witnessing the gift of the Liahona. The spindles in that compass-like ball pointed the specific way they should travel toward their promised land, strongly suggesting that they were not just slowly meandering through the wilderness. They were probably enthusiastic about arriving in their promised land as soon as possible. Also, the text makes no mention of any contention or discord among members of the group during this period (1 Nephi 16:5). For these reasons, this first leg of travel may have been among the fastest that they would travel during their long trek.

Nephi's text appears to closely match the known realities of desert travel and such travel has two styles that are followed by Bedouins even today. Depending on the season, the terrain, and the load being carried, the group either slept out in the open at night or, very often,

30. Early accounts of Arabian travel are illuminating, such as that by Alois Musil, *The Northern Hegaz, a Topographical Itinerary* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1926), archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.234493/page/n3/mode/1up. Pages 264 and 328, for example, document a great variety of distances covered in a day, depending on multiple factors. The travel speeds and distances recorded by Nephi are reasonable and fit comfortably within the spectrum found in historical sources.

traveled during the cool night hours, sleeping by day wherever they could find or improvise shade. Because of the effort involved, the large tents were erected only when a stop of at least a few days was planned. Unloading the camels and erecting the large and heavy tents was sufficiently noteworthy for Nephi to record each stop of extended time. Nephi gives no hint of searching to find a camping place, possibly suggesting that the Liahona guided them to trail-side locations that provided at least three critical resources:

- Fresh water for camping was a must. The group's water supplies would be low after four days of travel unless they had deviated to local wells during the journey to Shazer. There are several locations where wells were possible after leaving the Valley of Lemuel.³¹
- Vegetation for grazing their animals is also a logical necessity. Once again, this is an apparently abbreviated account that provides limited detail. Again, there is nothing mentioned in 1 Nephi about other people living at Shazer during the Lehites' brief stay in that oasis, so there likely wouldn't have been any competition for the water and vegetation.
- Hunting opportunities is required by the text. Nephi records in 1 Nephi 16:14 their hunting with bows and arrows and returning to the encampment with fresh meat for the group. Game animals require their own vegetation and water sources, which must have been present in or near where they hunted. A less obvious corollary is that wild animals in Arabia such as oryx, gazelle, ibex, and goat are normally only found where the terrain includes hills and mountains.

The introduction to the First Book of Nephi states that the book will describe "the course of their travels," which it does by describing how Lehi's family left Jerusalem, traveled to the Red Sea, and then spent three more days to reach the Valley of Lemuel. After camping there for months, they received the Liahona, which thereafter pointed the way they should go into the wilderness. The Liahona led them further south for four days through the mountains and across the plains adjacent to

31. Ancient wells survive today in *al Bad'a* in Wadi Ifal, the biblical area of *Midian*, in the inland oasis of *Wadi Sharma*, which coastal end Lehi's party had to cross, and wells again mentioned to be at *al Muwayleh*. However, the text does not note deviations to any of these places, and, because only four days travel are involved, it is probably safe to assume that the first water replenishment was obtained at Shazer.

the Red Sea to a place they called *Shazer*. Nephi later recorded that they had been traveling in "nearly a south-southeast" direction (1 Nephi 16:13) from the Valley of Lemuel to Shazer. That appears to have been an explanatory remark to clarify that the direction they had traveled was "south of southeast" or "a little east of direct south," but not a compass bearing. Lehi obviously did not have a magnetic compass with "SSE" stamped on its rim. He had the Liahona, which pointed the way they should travel through the wilderness.

It is important to not minimize the abilities of people in the past to know where they were on the globe and in what general direction they were moving. To enter Nephi's world, one must recognize that anciently people did not perceive directions as we do today; directional terms varied from culture to culture. While they may not have had magnetic compasses or maps, they did have general directional awareness. Spatially, even when in unfamiliar places, they had an orientation provided by the position of the sun, where each morning's sunrise marked "*east*," and at the end of the day, sunset marked "*west*." Knowing *east* and *west* automatically indicated where *north* and *south* were. At night, the cloudless Arabian sky gave a clear view of the North Star (which was named *Kochab* during Lehi's time), thus providing a precise location for the direction *north*.

Although the general course of Lehi's trek through Arabia was indeed nearly in a straight south-southeast direction, it was not because of Nephi's precise navigational skills, but the result of the Liahona guiding them through "the more fertile parts of the [Arabian] wilderness" with no compass bearing required. This suggests that 1 Nephi 16:13 should probably be read with an emphasis on "south" rather than on the compass-like punctuation of "south-southeast," which is the phrase currently used in the Book of Mormon.³²

In scripture, the level of directional accuracy recorded in 1 Nephi

32. For the remainder of this paper, we will use the punctuation of "south, southeast" rather than the current punctuation of "south-southeast" to emphasize the point. Every edition of the Book of Mormon from 1830 to 1920 used the punctuation "south, southeast." See "Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, circa August 1829–circa January 1830," p. 29, Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/printers-manuscript-of-the-book-of-mormon-circa-august-1829-circa-january-1830/33](https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/printers-manuscript-of-the-book-of-mormon-circa-august-1829-circa-january-1830/33); "Book of Mormon, 1830," p. 39, Joseph Smith Papers, [josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-mormon-1830/45](https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/book-of-mormon-1830/45); and page 31 in the 1920 edition of the Book of Mormon, archive.org/details/bookofmormonacco00bookuoft/page/30/mode/2up.

16:13 seems to be unique to Nephi. It occurs again in 1 Nephi 17:1, albeit relating to one of the four cardinal directions (east), when he records the direction from Nahom to Bountiful as “nearly eastward from that time forth.” With the location of Nahom now archaeologically attested,³³ the most recent Old World studies strikingly confirm that Nephi’s directional statements are objectively accurate in linking Shazer, Nahom, and Bountiful to the modern map. “Nearly eastward” from Nahom leads to the only location on the Arabian coast that has the fertility and all other features described by Nephi, something no one in 1830 could have known. Furthermore, this accuracy in determining directions has obvious and major implications for the directions recorded for the New World setting that makes up the bulk of the Book of Mormon.

Nobody knows how often Lehi’s group consulted the Liahona for directions, but unlike a compass that points in just one direction, the Liahona actively led them through “the more fertile parts of the wilderness,” implying deviations from a straight line of travel. They would have checked the Liahona frequently for any changes in its divine guidance toward the next fertile part of the wilderness and whenever they had questions about which way to go. For example, after following the “hidden” wadi for the first 6 kilometers (4 miles) of their four-day trek, they had to make a choice. As they reached the end of this path from the oasis, they arrived at a major new wadi running east-west (visible in figure 1). This consisted of low mountains and broken up hills straight ahead. They were faced with three options to continue southward:

- The first option lay directly in front of them. It would have presented a steep and difficult climb through a wide field of debris at the base of a ravine, quickly narrowing as it ascended to the highest point.
- The second option (which would have been an obvious choice for someone just wandering southward) made a sharp turn to the right to follow the new wadi downhill as it descends in a westerly direction toward the Red Sea, then allowing a turn southward along the coast (see figure 1).
- The third (though less intuitive) alternative was nevertheless

33. Warren P. Aston, “Newly Found Altars from Nahom,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10, no. 2 (2001): 56–61, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1289&context=jbms.

the one we believe would have been given to them by the Liahona: make a sharp turn to the left and travel uphill in an easterly direction for 3 kilometers (2 miles) until they could descend toward a flat pathway crossing through low hills, followed by several options to turn southward onto the plains and continue toward an oasis that they would later call *Shazer* (1 Nephi 16:13).

Although the conclusion is speculative, we believe that the evidence presented above, and illustrated in figure 1, strongly suggests that the Liahona directed them to travel via this third option.

Lehi's group called the place where they stopped *Shazer* (1 Nephi 16:13). The reason for the name choice can be readily deduced by its physical features. To describe those features, consider the following comment from Hugh Nibley about this name:

So we have Shihor, Shaghur, Sajur, Saghir, Segor (even Zoar), Shajar, Sozura, Shisur [or Shisr today], and Shisar, all connected somehow or other and denoting either seepage—a weak but reliable water supply—or a clump of trees. Whichever one prefers, Lehi's people could hardly have picked a better name for their first suitable stopping place than *Shazer*.³⁴

Hunting ground and departure

And it came to pass that we did take our bows and our arrows, and go forth into the wilderness to slay food for our families; and after we had slain food for our families we did return again to our families in the wilderness, to the place of Shazer. And we did go forth again in the wilderness, following the same direction, keeping in the most fertile parts

34. The etymology of the name "Shazer" is briefly discussed in Aston, "Nephi's 'Shazer,'" 54–56. The Nibley commentary is cited in Hugh Nibley, "Appendix: Echoes and Evidences from the Writings of Hugh Nibley," in *Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 461, scripturecentral.org/archive/books/book-chapter/appendix-echoes-and-evidences-writings-hugh-nibley/. For a fuller treatment regarding Shazer, see Robert F. Smith, *Book of Mormon Onomasticon & Theological Word Study, The Ethnological Foundations of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Deep Forest Green Books, 2025), 3:445–47, play.google.com/store/books/details/Robert_F_Smith_Book_of_Mormon_Onomasticon_Theologi?id=CAIxEQAAQBAJ that provides links and commentary on Shazer from several Latter-day Saint and non-Latter-day Saint sources.

of the wilderness, which were in the borders near the Red Sea. (1 Nephi 16:14)

This verse introduces a detail that has not always been appreciated in commentary about Shazer. Shazer was the place of *encampment* but was not the place where the actual *hunting* took place. Nephi's account makes it clear that he and the other young men went forth *from* Shazer "*into* the wilderness to slay food for our families," and afterwards, "*did return* again to our families . . . to the place of Shazer." The two locations are undoubtedly not a great distance apart but must be recognized as separate places and with differing characteristics. This may seem like a small point, but it is a distinction that is vital for any attempt to identify plausible locations.

It might be noted that their diet required animal protein, not just plant foods such as dates. Thus, animal flesh was needed in addition to other categories of sustenance, which were limited for these travelers. Under the Mosaic Law that they strictly followed, the game animals they hunted would likely have included the Arabian oryx, which can weigh up to 460 pounds (209 kg); the Nubian ibex, weighing up to 165 pounds (75 kg); and the mountain gazelle, weighing up to 66 pounds (30 kg).

The final sentence of 1 Nephi 16:14 notes the group's departure from Shazer and, once again, Nephi encapsulates significant detail in concise wording. The reader may notice the repeated term, *wilderness*, used four times in this verse. This word draws attention to the fact that whether they were referring to Shazer's campground, to the hunting area, or to the onward journey, it was all wilderness, likely uninhabited. Inadvertently, or perhaps intentionally, this verse, with its repetition of *wilderness*, offers another subtle reminder that the group was not following a well-traveled trail where food items and replacements for broken hunting implements would have been available.

Nephi notes that they departed "*following the same direction*" (therefore in nearly a "south, southeast" direction). He added the significant amplification that the Liahona's guidance kept them "in the most fertile parts of the wilderness," where they could hunt food, and that these fertile parts were "in the borders near the Red Sea."

Here, if nowhere else, it is clear that Lehi's group traveled along the coastal strip beside the Red Sea, known today as the *Tihama*. Inland, paralleling the coast, lay the "borders," the mountains, with their dry wadis, which became seasonal rivers descending to the Red Sea.

This border area offered fresh water, hunting opportunities, and perhaps salt-water fish at short stopping intervals.

Proposed Locations for the Place Called Shazer

As described earlier, we first conducted further study and exploration into the three original candidate locations. Then, in 2025, we explored the new proposal for Shazer, Maharish, which emerged after closer examination. All four candidates lie along a relatively short section of the Red Sea coast, with the Midian and Shar mountains lying inland. From north to south, they are Sharma, Muwaylih, Maharish, and Al Aznam (see figure 3).



Figure 3. Directions and candidate locations for the Shazer campsite along the western coast of the Arabian Peninsula. Red line is possible route taken by Lehi's group from the Valley of Lemuel to Shazer. (Image from Google Earth.)

A summary of each Shazer candidate

Wadi Esh Sharma

The northernmost candidate, Sharma, offers two inland oases surrounded by nearby rugged terrain and hunting opportunities. However, the directions required to access it seem to conclusively rule it out as *Shazer*. To reach the oases of Sharma, travel from the coastal strip must be in an *easterly* direction. To then depart from these oases, travelers would have to either continue in an easterly direction further inland until the commercial trade route is reached, or backtrack to the coast (in other words, in a westerly direction) and only then resume the journey in the straightforward “south, southeast” direction recorded in Nephi’s account.

Muwaylih

The coastal site of Muwaylih includes a well and a small area of vegetation. Hunting opportunities lie some distance inland where there are several wadis with sporadic small streams crossing the plains. Behind the plains are the Shar mountains, which would offer hunting opportunities. However, the distances involved make this site less likely as a candidate for the Shazer campsite.

Maharish

Maharish is the general area between the candidate sites of Muwaylih and Al Aznam, stretching inland from the coast, eastward across a wide plain to the Shar mountains. Potential locations for the Shazer campsite consist of the mouths or lower stages of the several small wadis containing sporadic rivers descending to the coast from the mountains.

Al Aznam

This, the southernmost candidate, sits near the coast but, aside from freshwater wells, it offers little vegetation. It sits a considerable distance from higher terrain inland where there could be hunting opportunities.

Comparison of candidate sites

With Wadi Tayyib al Ism identified as Lehi’s camp in the Valley of Lemuel and the beginning for the journey to Shazer, the various candidates for the location of Shazer can be evaluated (see table 1). Although all four

candidate locations offer fresh water, grazing, and hunting grounds, they are not equally "fertile."

The most fertile candidate is Sharma. However, reaching it requires several notable deviations in direction (as noted earlier), and it requires only about two days travel, not Nephi's "four days" from the Valley of Lemuel (1 Nephi 16:13). The least fertile is the fourth candidate, al Aznam, which requires five days travel from the Valley of Lemuel. The candidate most closely matching Lehi's four-day, "nearly south, south-east" travel to Shazer and its hunting grounds is the Maharish location.

Table 1. Comparison of the four Shazer candidates by several factors.

Factor	Sharma	Muwaylih	Maharish	Al Aznam
Land distance from campsite in Valley of Lemuel	82 km (51 mi)	128 km (80 mi)	153 km (95 mi)	220 km (137 mi)
Daily travel speed required to arrive in four days	21 km (13 mi)	32 km (20 mi)	39 km (24 mi)	55 km (34 mi)
Days travel at 43 kilometers (27 miles) per day	1.9	3	3.6	5.1
SSE direction of travel?	Yes+East	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fresh water and grazing pasture?	Abundant	Some	Suitable	Scarce
Mountain hunting area?	Surrounds	Nearby	Adjacent	Distant

Maharish and its Hunting Grounds

As with the ancient Shazer encampment, four days travel in the direction recorded by Nephi brings the modern traveler to an area between the present-day coastal towns of Al Muwaylih and Duba. The general Maharish area lies between these settlements and extends from the coast to the interior mountains. We have termed this general area *the Plain of Maharish*, after the wadi of that name (see figure 4). The broad plain begins at the base of a steep mountain range, dominated by Jabal Shar, which is 1,950 meters (6,397 feet) in height. The mountain provides run-off water over most of the area and feeds several intermittent freshwater streams.

The mouth of Wadi Maharish itself is a prime possibility for being the location of the Shazer encampment, but other wadis nearby, such as Wadi al Byda and Wadi al Ghal, also remain possibilities. Unfortunately, recent construction has obscured large swaths of the coastal area, including the mouths of these wadis and areas of inland terrain. An



Figure 4. The Maharish area showing its terrain and the locations mentioned in the text. (Image from Google Earth.)

updated map of the area is available to interested readers.³⁵ A general view of the possibilities can be seen in figure 4.

One can imagine Lehi's caravan traveling southward along the Arabian coast between the waters of the Red Sea on the west (see figure 5) and a long line of coastal hills on the east. Then, on the fourth day of this portion of Lehi's journey, the coastal hills give way to a broad plain where freshwater flows and forage for their animals increases (see figure 6).

The neighboring hills and the more distant mountain look like good hunting grounds (see figure 7). No doubt grateful that God had provided the means whereby they [could] "accomplish the thing which he commandeth them" (1 Nephi 3:7), they found a suitable place and pitched their tents, calling their campsite *Shazer*. The men took their bows and arrows and went into the mountain and its foothills to slay food for their families. After a successful hunt, they returned to their camp with the food they had obtained. Likely encouraged by their success, they broke camp and continued their travel down the Arabian coast in the same direction as before.

35. See mapcarta.com/12566540/Map/.



Figure 5. Views of the Red Sea coast in the vicinity of our proposed Shazer showing palms, vegetation, and freshwater sources. Fishing is also possible here.



Figure 6. Camels demonstrate their ability to survive in a desert environment with minimal vegetation and scarce water, both being features of the Maharish plains.

Summary and Conclusion

The precision of Nephi’s detail in describing the physical surroundings and the directions of a journey to a specific location in Arabia some 2,600 years ago is without parallel. It is simply remarkable. This specificity, only fully appreciable nearly two centuries after the first publication of Nephi’s record in March of 1830, engenders additional appreciation of his ability to record descriptive observations, including “the course of their travel.”³⁶

The exactness of the match between the Maharish area and Nephi’s description of Shazer and its hunting area demonstrates how truly Shazer remains a remarkable, solid, “pillar” of the Book of

36. As noted earlier, the introduction to the First Book of Nephi specifically mentions that his record would include “The course of their travels.” Nephi fulfills this promise through his descriptions of all the major junctures of the Arabian journey—from the Red Sea to the Valley of Lemuel and the river Laman; then to Shazer as discussed herein, including directions and other descriptors allowing us to follow the route to Nahom (which still carries that name), and from there to the great ocean at Bountiful, concisely described with a wealth of precise details. We are fortunate that Nephi was prompted to incorporate this level of geographical information, as it can assist readers in establishing the credibility of his scriptural text.



Figure 7. A general view of Maharish in the dry season, facing eastward and showing the terrain inland of the proposed coastal campsite of Shazer. Temporary pools of water remain for a time after the annual rains, while springs function all year around. The dramatic mountains in the distance (the highest being Jabal Shar) show areas where the hunting of game animals may have taken place.

Mormon's Old World setting. It further enhances confidence that the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient record.



[Authors' Note: *The photography is by Warren P. Aston. There has been no manipulation of photographic images by any means, such as filters, editing software, or AI programs. The mapping was prepared by J. Wanless Southwick. Merging our mutual sense that Nephi's story of Shazer deserved closer scrutiny has been an invigorating experience. We greatly appreciate the guidance of our editors, Godfrey Ellis and Allen Wyatt, and the feedback from anonymous reviewers. Robert F. Smith was a reliable source of linguistic expertise; we thank him for keeping us on track.]*

Warren P. Aston is an independent researcher based in Brisbane, Australia. Since he began exploring in 1984 in Yemen, Warren has now experienced the entire land journey of the Lehite group from Jerusalem to Bountiful. He has explored the entire coast of the Arabian Peninsula, sailed most of its eastern coast, and led several large university teams in fieldwork in Oman. His books include *Into Arabia: Anchoring Nephi's Account in the Real World* (2024) as lead author; *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia* (2015) and other papers, articles, and videos. His findings have featured in the *Ensign*, *Liahona*, and *New Era* magazines, *Church Education System manuals*, *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*, *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, *BYU Studies Quarterly*, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, *Seminar for Arabian Studies (UK)* and *Journal of Arabian Studies*. His work continues in both the Old and New Worlds. Warren is the father of six children and grandfather to eighteen.

J. Wanless Southwick (PhD BYU) retired after careers in the U.S. Army Medical Service Corps, environmental epidemiology, and education, all of which included study and research. He served as president of the *Intermountain Society of Inventors and Designers* in the 70s. Among books he authored are *Arabia's Mountain of God where Moses, Elijah, and Lehi met with God* (2024) and *The Reason for Everything in the Grand Framework of Existence* (2017).

The Opposite of Faith Is not Doubt: The Spiritual Gift of Doubt

Caleb Lemon

Abstract: *Doubt is not the opposite of faith but functions as a constructive spiritual gift that often facilitates faith development, protects against dogmatism, and reframes faith as relational fidelity rather than intellectual certainty. Drawing on scriptural theology and developmental perspectives on meaning-making, doubt commonly—though not universally—serves as a catalyst through which belief matures from inherited assumption to reflective commitment and ultimately toward greater openness, complexity, and compassion. Doubt also performs a vital epistemic role by preventing rigid certainty and fostering intellectual humility within religious life. By reconceptualizing faith as sustained trust and commitment in the presence of uncertainty, doubt distinguishes itself from nihilism. The true erosion of faith occurs not through questioning but through the loss of meaning itself. Ultimately, doubt, when properly understood, does not weaken discipleship but frequently deepens and refines it, enabling believers to engage faith with greater resilience, relational depth, and moral maturity.*

The Lord has prepared many gifts for his children, not only for the next life, but for this one as well. Regarding the gifts that his children receive that relate to faith, the Lord has said that “some [are given the gift of the] Holy Ghost to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that he was crucified for the sins of the world.” Others are “given [the gift to] believe on their words, that they also might have eternal life if they continue faithful” (Doctrine and Covenants 46:13–14). An example of the first, the gift to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of the God, may be the stripling warriors who proclaimed to their mothers,

“we do not doubt” (Alma 56:48). An example of the second, the gift to believe on the words of others, may be Alma’s followers and Alma himself. God praised and blessed Alma “because of [his] exceeding faith in the words alone of [the] servant Abinadi” (Mosiah 26:15). Similarly, God’s praise and blessings extended to those who were baptized in the Waters of Mormon “because of their exceeding faith in the words alone which [Alma] hath spoken unto them” (Mosiah 26:15).

These examples, among many that could be cited, represent the separation of two distinct spiritual gifts that God has allocated for the benefit of those living in mortality. Is one of these two gifts superior to the other? Are those who are endowed with the gift to know better off or more spiritually prepared in the latter days than those with the gift to believe? Not necessarily. In fact, Jesus, foreseeing this potential confusion, suggested exactly the opposite to his newly commissioned disciples in America:

Blessed are ye if ye shall believe in me. . . . And, again, *more blessed* are they who shall believe in your words because that ye shall testify that ye have seen me, and that ye know that I am. Yea, *blessed* are they who shall believe in your words, and come down into the depths of humility and be baptized, for they shall be visited with fire and with the Holy Ghost, and shall receive a remission of their sins. (3 Nephi 12:1–2; see also John 20:29)

Some Latter-day Saints are given the gift of knowledge, but many others are given the gift of belief (often on the words of others). To know is not better than to believe and to believe is not better than to know. Both gifts are truly blessed. But without the certainty of knowing, it can be hard to believe. It can be difficult to believe the words of a prophet, the Book of Mormon, or the existence of a Father in Heaven. Doubt easily creeps in.

The reality of mortality is that many doubt when something appears too good to be true, and that may be a good thing. Doubt often provides safety in environments that could be disadvantageous or even dangerous.¹ When people exercise too little doubt in their lives, they can be too trusting and naïve, thereby becoming vulnerable to manipulation. Doubt, in these ways, inherently serves them. Without it, how

1. Andrew Moon, “The Nature of Doubt and a New Puzzle about Belief, Doubt, and Confidence,” *Synthese* 195 (2018): 1827–48, doi.org/10.1007/s11229-016-1310-y.

would they keep themselves out of financial scams, grow real love, or protect themselves from others?

The gift of knowing and the gift of believing the words of others have been discussed above. There may be a third gift related to faith: the gift of doubt. This third gift will be discussed further below, but, if doubt is truly a gift of God, how is it received? Why, when confronted with doubt in religion, do so many followers withdraw, do nothing, or further bury their heads in their beliefs, often ostracizing others (and themselves) in the process? Latter-day Saints seem stuck choosing among celebrating doubts, discouraging them, or (and often the most chosen route) avoiding the topic altogether. To have doubts about aspects of religion is normal—even, arguably, desirable for many. After all, “one of the purposes of the Church is to nurture and cultivate the seed of faith—even in the sometimes-sandy soil of doubt and uncertainty.”²

Missionaries of the Church routinely encourage investigators to doubt traditional Christian beliefs. Examples include the vagueness of the Trinity and that God’s revealed word stopped at the book of Revelation (which, ironically, was not the last book added to the Bible). An invitation to keep the law of tithing is, in part, an invitation to doubt that God “will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it” (Malachi 3:10). A request to attend Church opens the door to doubting their previous beliefs and prior biases. Missionary work would likely halt completely if missionaries stopped asking others to doubt.

The Prophet Joseph Smith doubted the Presbyterians, the Baptists, and the Methodists for being “equally zealous... endeavoring to establish their own tenets and disprove all others” (Joseph Smith — History 1:9). Even in earnest prayer before the First Vision, Joseph admits his anxieties and his doubts about his attempting to pray vocally. God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ, appeared in a pillar of light shortly after the beginning of that prayer, first resolving the doubts of his prayer, and second, resolving the doubts about those congregations, instructing Joseph to join none of them (Joseph Smith — History 1:19). One could infer that the religion he founded was partially built by doubting others.

Some members and converts, blessed with the gift to know, don’t require a wrestle with doubt to gain a witness of the Restoration, the

2. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Come, Join with Us,” *Ensign*, November 2013, 21, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2013/10/come-join-with-us.

Book of Mormon, or Jesus Christ. But many, blessed with the gift to believe, may. When doubt is viewed as a spiritual gift (like knowledge or belief) it becomes apparent that the opposite of faith is not doubt. Rather, the opposite is *nihilism*—the total loss of ultimate purpose and meaning behind joy and suffering. The purpose of this paper is to help the Saints recognize that doubt is a spiritual gift. When understood as such, this gift (1) becomes a catalyst in faith development, (2) prevents dogmatic thinking, and (3) clarifies faith as being a relationship. Latter-day Saints who begin to understand this view of the gift of doubt recognize that it is not faith’s true opposite, and as such, realize that they have more faith than they had thought.

Doubt as a Common Catalyst in Faith Development

For those blessed with the gift to know, faith may come with unusual clarity and assurance. But for those given the gift to believe, faith often unfolds through tension, reflection, and, at times, doubt. If doubt is not the opposite of faith but is, instead, part of the lived experience of belief, how does faith mature across a lifetime? Developmental theologian James Fowler offered a useful framework for considering that question. His “Stages of Faith” model does not define faith as doctrinal agreement but as the way individuals construct and reconstruct meaning throughout life. In this sense, faith development includes moments of questioning and reinterpretation. Fowler’s framework, therefore, does not serve here as the focus of analysis but as a conceptual lens through which to examine how doubt may be a common, but not universal, catalyst in faith development. The model consists of six stages, summarized in table 1.

Table 1. Fowler’s “Stages of Faith” model.

Stage of Faith	Definition	Example
Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective Faith	Faith shaped by imagination, emotion, and influential figures	Forming beliefs about God through stories and family practices
Stage 2: Mythic-Literal Faith	Religious narratives understood in concrete and literal terms	Viewing scripture as strictly factual and rule-based
Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith	Beliefs shaped by community norms and authority figures	Accepting beliefs primarily because trusted leaders teach them

Stage of Faith	Definition	Example
Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith	Personally examined and critically evaluated beliefs	Reassessing doctrine through reflection and personal conviction
Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith	Acceptance of complexity, paradox, and symbolic meaning	Holding deep commitment while appreciating other traditions
Stage 6: Universalizing Faith	Radical compassion and commitment to justice for all people	A life devoted to service and reconciliation

Stage 1, Intuitive-Projective Faith is shaped primarily by imagination, emotion, and the examples of significant adults. People begin to form early images of God and faith through stories, symbols, and personal experiences rather than through logical reasoning.

The desire to know what is real and what is not can initiate Stage 2, Mythic-Literal Faith. At this stage, sacred narratives are interpreted concretely and literally. While most individuals move beyond this stage in adolescence, many adults continue to engage faith primarily in literal terms. The belief of biblical inerrancy or infallibility can exemplify this stage.

The recognition of contradiction, comparison of beliefs, and ultimately, reflection in general, all open the way to Stage 3, Synthetic-Conventional Faith. Faith becomes closely tied to belonging and social affirmation. As Fowler noted, transition out of this stage often begins when contradictions arise within trusted authority structures or when individuals experience major life transitions that prompt personal responsibility for belief.

As a result, Stage 4, Individuative-Reflective Faith, may emerge. Here, beliefs are critically examined and claimed as one's own rather than merely inherited from community or tradition. Authority shifts from external sources to the self, and questioning becomes a constructive aspect of faith rather than a threat to it. Individuals begin to evaluate doctrine, practice, and meaning through reflection and personal responsibility.

Reflection can launch a person to Stage 5, Conjunctive Faith. Individuals here come to appreciate paradox, ambiguity, and complexity within religious life. Rather than seeking rigid certainty, they recognize the depth and multi-layered nature of spiritual truth.

Rarely, some individuals embody Stage 6, Universalizing Faith,

which is characterized by radical compassion and moral commitment extending beyond religious, cultural, and social boundaries.

Although Fowler associated certain stages with typical developmental periods, he did not claim they are strictly age-bound. As noted above, adults may remain within, return to, or predominantly operate from earlier structures of faith, particularly in communities where belief is strongly reinforced through shared authority, tradition, and belonging.

Each stage has its proper time of ascendancy. For persons in a given stage at the right time *for their lives*, the task is the full realization and integration of the strengths and graces of that stage rather than rushing on to the next stage. Each stage has the potential for wholeness, grace and integrity and for strengths sufficient for either life's blows or blessings.³

It is important to note that Fowler, a Christian himself, believed that a Christian faith “leads out toward [a] Universalizing faith.”⁴ This is because “the further one moves beyond a Synthetic-Conventional structuring of faith, the more likely one is to exhibit increased commitment in faith.”⁵ All of which says the following:

Discipleship to Christ, if radically followed to full maturity, would bring persons to a way of spending and being spent in their lives that would express loyalty to the rule of God and in covenant relations with a commonwealth of being.⁶

Few will reach Stage 6 in this mortal life. However, many may reach Stage 5—a mature faith shaped by sustained reflection and lived complexity. Such faith recognizes both the power and the limitations of conceptual certainty. Terryl and Fiona Givens similarly observe that spiritually robust belief is often marked by openness to truth wherever it may be found and to humility before the vastness of divine reality.

There is solace and kinship to be found in a shared discipleship faithful Latter-day Saints feel with a larger community of those who choose to love and follow God. The injunction to

3. James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1981), 274, archive.org/details/stagesoffaithpsy00fowl/page/274/mode/2up.

4. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 295.

5. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 300–1.

6. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 295.

seek wisdom "out of the best books," along with the Lord's reproof that "because that ye have a Bible [and other scripture] ye need not suppose that it contains all my words," encourage a receptivity to the larger world of beauty and goodness and inspiration that God has cultivated.⁷

This conjunctive posture allows individuals to remain deeply committed to their own religious traditions while recognizing wisdom and meaning in others. Experiences of doubt within this developmental trajectory do not dissolve faith but frequently deepen it, teaching that certainty is not a prerequisite for meaningful discipleship.

Importantly, the movement toward reflective or conjunctive faith does not require the abandonment of belief, nor does it demand universal crisis. Some individuals transition into deeper faith without dramatic episodes of doubt (Stage 4). Yet for many, particularly those given the gift to believe rather than to know, moments of tension, contradiction, or uncertainty become the very catalysts through which faith is internalized and owned. Doubt, in these cases, does not destroy faith; it refines it.

Just how does doubt accomplish this? It appears that doubt of one stage, when it occurs, may function as a common, though not universal, instrument in the movement to a higher stage and, therefore, to the maturation of faith. When understood within a developmental framework, doubt appears less as rebellion and more as reconfiguration. It can be a restructuring of meaning that allows belief to move from inherited assumption to conscious commitment. The words of President Russell M. Nelson summarize well this section of the paper:

If you have questions — and I hope you do — seek answers with the fervent desire to believe. . . . In time, the Lord will answer all our questions. In the meantime, immerse yourself in the rich reservoir of revelation we have at our fingertips. I promise that doing so will strengthen your testimony, even if some of your questions are not yet answered. Your sincere questions, asked in faith, will *always* lead to greater faith and more knowledge.⁸

7. Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The Crucible of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 99–100.

8. Russell M. Nelson, "Choices for Eternity" *YA Weekly*, 15 May 2022, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2022/05/12nelson](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2022/05/12nelson). Emphasis in original.

The Gift of Doubt Prevents Dogma

Doubt also performs a critical epistemic function by safeguarding belief from rigid certainty and intellectual closure. It is in this capacity that doubt operates not as the enemy of faith but as a protection against dogmatism. Dogmatism is “the expression of an opinion or belief as if it were a fact,” or “a viewpoint or system of ideas based on insufficiently examined premises.”⁹

Dogmatism is, as psychologist William James wrote, “the mere outward form of inalterable certainty [that] is so precious to some minds . . . even where the facts most patently pronounce its folly.”¹⁰ In this state, “dogmatic dominion” can occur, manifested by laying down the “law in the form of an absolutely closed-in theoretic system.”¹¹ In Latter-day Saint discourse, dogmatism can appear on topics like the exclusivity of truth to the Church, the discouragement of questioning doctrine, and an overfocus on the notion that doubt is to be overcome only with faith, prayer, and obedience. In Fowler’s Conjunctive Faith, believers develop the capacity to live with paradox, ambiguity, and multiple perspectives. The presence of doubt does not dissolve commitment but instead protects faith from rigid certainty. In this way, doubt serves as a safeguard against dogmatism.

Fowler’s model also helps to explain why religious dogmatism often arises. In the Synthetic–Conventional Faith stage, beliefs are closely tied to community belonging and authority structures. Because identity and faith are intertwined, questioning can feel threatening rather than constructive. Doubt, therefore, may be needed in some contexts for movement beyond this stage. By introducing tension into closed interpretive systems, doubt may allow faith to move toward the reflective and self-aware posture that is characteristic of later developmental stages.

Assuming one has complete intellectual knowledge of things hinders the acquisition of more truth. When doubt leads individuals to question what James calls “closed-in theoretic systems,” intellectual humility and continuous learning and revision can follow. Doubt can expose “misbegotten premises,” “naïve assumptions,” and “outright

9. Merriam-Webster, s.v. “dogmatism,” [merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dogmatism](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dogmatism).

10. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902; repr., New York: Modern Library, 1936), 326, archive.org/details/bwb_Y0-AAE-188/page/326/mode/2up.

11. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 330–31.

false doctrines.”¹² Doubt can also lessen unquestioning acceptance and “careless assumptions,” like the belief that modern prophets and Church leaders are incapable of imperfection. Doubt encourages Church members not to treat “every utterance of any leader as inspired doctrine,”¹³ which Joseph Smith himself recognized and even lamented:

To one of his friends, [Joseph Smith] complained that “he did not enjoy the right vouchsafed to every American citizen — that of free speech.” Smith added that “when he ventured to give his private opinion on any subject of importance, his words were often garbled and their meaning twisted, and then given out as the word of the Lord because they came from him.”¹⁴

The gift of doubt keeps us from believing that “surely God could find more saintly vessels to carry out his work . . . Surely the leaders of the Church should be the most righteous and flawless of humans!”¹⁵

A popular joke has more than a hint of truth to it that Catholics espouse papal infallibility, but no Catholic believes in it. Joseph Smith espoused prophetic fallibility, but no Mormon believes in it. Smith lamented before he was even dead, with his features marbleized and his flaws airbrushed by his followers, the cumbersome myth of his infallibility and ready access to unfiltered truth.¹⁶

Doubt helps Latter-day Saints remember that God “called weak vessels so we wouldn’t place our faith in their strength or power, but in God’s.”¹⁷

Givens explains that, if belief is approached as a choice of agency, a true choice, there must also be “grounds for doubt.” Having a “propensity to doubt” grants the “capacity to freely believe.” If the evidence for God were overwhelming, to the point there were no grounds for doubt, the choice to believe would become as “meaningless as would

12. Terryl Givens, “Letter to a Doubter,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 131, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/letter-to-a-doubter.

13. Givens, “Letter to a Doubter,” 134.

14. Terryl L. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought—Cosmos, God, Humanity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 19.

15. Givens and Givens, *The Crucible of Doubt*, 65.

16. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, 19.

17. Givens and Givens, *The Crucible of Doubt*, 70.

a loaded gun pointed at our heads.”¹⁸ He and his wife add that the moral act to believe requires that doubt remains a powerful and present possibility, validating the choice.

The call to faith, in this light, is not some test of a coy god, waiting to see if we “get it right.” It is only the summons, issued under the only conditions, which can allow us to fully reveal who we are, what we most love, and what we most devoutly desire. Without constraint, without any form of mental compulsion, the act of belief becomes the freest possible projection of what resides in our hearts. . . . The greatest act of self-revelation occurs when we *choose* what we will believe, in that space of freedom that exists between knowing that a thing is, and knowing that a thing is not.¹⁹

The gift of doubt compels the intellectual systems, society’s way of organizing, interpreting, and explaining reality, to maintain openness to new facts. Doubt challenges intellectual closure or finality, for if thinkers try to possess “unchangeable truth” they risk losing subsequent truths.²⁰

Belief and doubt are fluid, not inflexible. According to the Givenses, both believers and doubters “are continually adjusting their paradigms to make better sense of the world as they experience it.”²¹ For them, the ongoing process of “disillusion and readjustment” protects both from settling into a dogmatic state. Dogma demands intellectual certainty. The highest moral value doesn’t come from intellectual knowledge but rather from operating in the “grey area between conviction and incredulity.” It is in the absence of absolute certainty that an individual’s choices become the “purest reflection of who we are and what we love.”

The plea, “Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief” (Mark 9:24) dramatically represents the coexistence, and tension, of faith (belief) and doubt (unbelief). It suggests that the presence of doubt does not necessarily negate belief. Rather, it exists alongside it. In fact, the process of becoming “converted” (which is a change in commitment) is the resolution of this internal divide. Prior to and during the struggle

18. Givens, “Letter to a Doubter,” 144.

19. Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The God who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life* (Provo: Ensign Peak, 2012), 5.

20. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

21. Givens and Givens, *The God who Weeps*, 8.

toward faith (conversion), elements of unbelief (doubt, self-despair, and a sense of sin) exist within the same consciousness as the ideal striving for truth.²²

Faith is often described as a state of assurance, characterized by peace and loss of worry. Having faith is generally intuitive and non-rational, which implies that the intellectual reasons for doubt (even evidence against belief) will persist.²³

Elder Uchtdorf's petition to "doubt your doubts before you doubt your faith" does not discourage the evaluation of doubts.²⁴ The continued coexistence of belief and uncertainty suggests that faith belongs not so much to the realm of proof, as to the realm of commitment. The question, then, is not how faith overcomes doubt but what kind of posture allows faith to persist in its presence.

Faith is Fidelity

The gift of doubt views faith as an alignment of one's heart and one's will. It is a "commitment [to] loyalty and truth."²⁵ In Hindu philosophy, the word *faith* carries a deeper meaning than just simple belief. Faith is expressed in the Sanskrit word, *śraddhā*, which is derived from *śrat* (meaning truth/heart) and *dhā* (meaning to place or hold). *Śraddhā*, literally means *to place one's heart in truth*.

To set one's heart on someone or something requires that one has "seen" or "sees the point of" that to which one is loyal. . . . One commits oneself to that which is . . . acknowledged, and lives loyally, with life and character being shaped by that commitment.²⁶

Faith really is acknowledgment of commitment. Often, believing carries "much the same range of meaning as that associated with 'to set the heart upon.'"²⁷

When the resurrected Jesus appeared to the Apostle Thomas, who had doubted the other disciples' account of a resurrected Savior, he instructed Thomas:

22. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

23. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

24. Uchtdorf, "Come Join with Us."

25. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 11.

26. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 11.

27. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 12.

Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not *faithless, but believing*... because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed. (John 20:27, 29; emphasis added)

Thomas, who had seen Jesus in his glory, certainly met the requirements to know he lives. Jesus didn't counsel Thomas to "be not faithless, but *knowing*," rather, "be not faithless, but *believing*." Thomas then saw the "point of being loyal" to Jesus and committed himself to him. Thomas's declaration, "my Lord and my God[!]" (John 20:28) became a foundation for a stronger, deeper faith, which surely influenced his later missionary work. Doubt is not necessary for the development of strong faith; the apostle John apparently never experienced such doubt. Those who believe in Christ without seeing him are not lesser believers but participants in a different and equally blessed form of faith.

The Lectures on Faith does not define doubt as curiosity or questioning but rather as existential insecurity, the kind that erodes trust and commitment in a divine relationship.

Where doubt and uncertainty are there faith is not, nor can it be. For doubt and faith do not exist in the same person at the same time; so that persons whose minds are under doubts and fears cannot have unshaken confidence; and where unshaken confidence is not there faith is weak.²⁸

This latter position is not at odds with the statements quoted to this point since the quote defines faith here as "unshaken confidence." Unshaken confidence means covenantal loyalty, not intellectual certainty. Faith cannot coexist with a refusal to trust, an inability to commit. In Fowler's Conjunctive Faith stage, individuals accept ambiguity and complexity while remaining deeply committed to their religious tradition. Faith, therefore, becomes less about possessing certainty and more about sustained loyalty to what one has come to recognize as meaningful and true. This developmental step closely parallels the idea of faith as covenantal loyalty. Believers in these later stages no longer rely on rigid certainty but instead choose to remain faithful

28. N. B. Lundwall, comp., *A Compilation Containing the Lectures on Faith, as Delivered at the School of the Prophets at Kirtland, Ohio* (Salt Lake City: N. B. Lundwall, n.d.), 59–60, archive.org/details/compilationconta00lund/page/58/mode/2up.

within the very conditions of uncertainty that doubt introduces. Indeed, “the Book of Mormon repeatedly shows faithful people who struggle, plead, and question while still choosing to trust God.”²⁹ Givens and Givens put it well when they teach:

Even among His modern disciples, there would be — and must be — room for those who live in doubt . . . [and] still live its essence. Many in the Church and world are doing just that. Just as some have entertained “angels unawares,” so might we well be exercising faith unbeknown. Faith is lived, not thought.³⁰

As C. S. Lewis articulately explained many years ago, some followers of Christ have found themselves in situations where they “thought [they] trusted the rope [of faith] until it mattered to [them] whether it would bear [them].”³¹ Certainly, the Book of Mormon teaches that faith is a deliberate choice, to act “as if” something could occur or is true, without perfect knowledge, that is, not merely believing intellectually, waiting passively, or feeling spiritually certain.

When King Lamoni, after offering his repentant prayer, fell “unto the earth, as if he were dead” (Alma 18:42), modern readers know he was not actually gone but only in a death-like state, but the queen does not know that. To everyone present at that time, he appeared completely dead, especially to the queen, his wife. She believed “as if [the king] were dead.” The queen did not see any evidence that her husband was alive. She did not have proof, nor did she receive a spiritual manifestation or have doctrinal certainty. All she had was Ammon’s word. By choosing not to bury her husband, the queen was not trusting an idea. She was trusting a person, Ammon, and through him, Ammon’s God — our God. This was relational trust.

In a similar manner and for some of the same reasons, faith is not simply thinking. It is also not a magical power, an intense cognitive focus, an absence of doubt, or an emotional connection with deity. . . . But it seems that once she has settled on her faithful and active commitment to non-burial, her thoughts and doubts will not matter. . . . The queen must believe enough to act, but forcing herself to pray harder or

29. Paul Bishop, “A Testimony Can Bend Yet Still Stand,” *Meridian Magazine*, 3 February 2026, latterdaysaintmag.com/a-testimony-can-bend-yet-still-stand/.

30. Givens and Givens, *The Crucible of Doubt*, 143.

31. C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 18.

believe stronger will not make what is real somehow more real. Whether she sings hymns all night, recites scripture, or sits beside her husband simply holding his hand, it will not make Lamoni more—or less—alive. . . . As long as she remains committed to her chosen course of action, Lamoni will rise when he rises. The queen's thoughts do not alter that reality—at least they do not until those thoughts become powerful enough to convince her to change how she is behaving.³²

If faith were purely logical, the queen could demand evidence. If faith were purely emotional, then the queen could wait for a feeling. If faith were purely rational calculations, the queen could weigh the probabilities of this outcome. The gift of doubt, however, compelled the queen to choose this relationship with Ammon over any other form of control. Said differently, she accepted the uncertainty of this situation because she trusted the source. In effect, she asked, “do I trust the one who is speaking?” rather than, “Is this true?”

Faith, like an intimate relationship, can be risky. “To trust in a man, or a cause, or a God, is to risk disappointment. To act in faith is to risk failure, betrayal, even humiliation.”³³ What would have happened if King Lamoni had never risen? If Ammon were wrong about the king's death, the queen would have had a delayed burial, she would have had to relive grief, and she might have lost her credibility in her kingdom. Furthermore, she might have been manipulated, her husband's body might have suffered dishonor, and her authority might have collapsed. This constituted a massive amount of trust (and risk) to put in Ammon.

Faith exposes us to potential betrayal, humiliation, and renewed loss. When faith is described in this way, it can be easy to see why there may be too much emphasis in Latter-day Saint dialogue on receiving or promising blessings for acts of faith. We may have grown up “expect[ing] the gospel to make us happy”³⁴ instead of recognizing the vulnerability we must yield to the Lord.

Corrie Ten Boom, Holocaust survivor and rescuer, endured daily starvation, brutality, diseases, and constant fear while imprisoned at the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp during WW II. Yet, she thanked

32. Kylie Turley, “Practical Faith for the Real World: Reading As If, Believing As If,” *BYU Studies* 64, no. 2 (2025): 15, byustudies.byu.edu/article/practical-faith-for-the-real-world-reading-as-if-believing-as-if.

33. Givens and Givens, *Crucible of Doubt*, 139.

34. Givens and Givens, *Crucible of Doubt*, 115.

God for the fleas in the barracks. Why would she do that? It was because the fleas kept the guards away, allowing for forbidden study of a smuggled Bible. She later even forgave a former Nazi guard after the war, despite emotional resistance. Corrie acted in trust when emotion and evidence offered no reason to do so. Likewise, we must often act in trust in similar experience:

From our youth we are taught that God answers prayers, that all blessings can be anticipated as a direct and predictable result of a corresponding commandment, that obedience brings happiness. The empathy shown by Brigham Young is striking: "To profess to be a Saint, and not enjoy the spirit of it, tries every fiber of the heart, and is one of the most painful experiences that man can suffer." He realized that then, as now, thousands of Saints were paying the high price of discipleship and asking, "Where is the joy?"³⁵

Finding the joy in being faithful may be disappointing sometimes because "moments of doubt often arrive during circumstances that seem unfair or overwhelming. Illness, financial strain, loneliness, or unanswered prayers can make God seem distant."³⁶ When blessings don't seem to come, prayers do not seem to have been answered, and life is not going the way one imagined it would. To place one's heart in truth and commitment can be challenging, but it is supposed to be hard. "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:26) because faith takes work. Belief is something one lives, not something one proves. As Givens expresses it, "As our experiences in marriages, families, and friendship teach us, it takes relationships to provide the friction that wears down our rough edges and sanctifies us."³⁷

Faith is not merely intellectuality, but vulnerability. Faith then, is fidelity. It is trust that is sustained over time. This type of relational faith, gained in part through the gift of doubt, is as Ammon labels it, "*exceeding faith*" (Alma 19:10).

Faith's True Opposite

The opposite of faith is not doubt. Fowler believed that if doubt may commonly accompany the developmental movement toward reflective and conjunctive faith, it cannot reasonably be described as faith's

35. Givens and Givens, *Crucible of Doubt*, 115.

36. Bishop, "A Testimony Can Bend Yet Still Stand."

37. Givens, "Letter to a Doubter," 138.

opposite. Rather than destroying belief, questioning can frequently participate in its maturation.

Instead, “the opposite of faith is *nihilism*.” *Nihilism* can be defined as an “inability to [imagine] any transcendent environment and despair about the possibility of even negative meaning.”³⁸ The philosophy of nihilism argues that life has no value or significance. It “does not contend that there is nothing, but it states that everything is meaningless.”³⁹ Jean-Paul Satre believed that there is no God-given purpose, no built-in moral structure, and no cosmic story that gives life meaning. In other words, humans create their own meaning; they self-author their existence. Albert Camus went further, believing that “life is absurd” and that “we are condemned to absurdity by the human condition.”⁴⁰ In his writings, he claims that all mankind seeks meaning, but that the universe remains silent. Despite suffering, death, and randomness, they must rebel by living fully and acting courageously, even in a meaningless universe. While existentialism resists total hopelessness, it, nevertheless, begins with the assumption that meaning itself is absent or only humanly constructed.

In significant and critical contrast, doubt is not a loss of faith. The true opposite of faith is the loss of meaning, which leads to a collapse of faith altogether. The *Lectures on Faith* addresses this directly:

Where faith is weak the persons will not be able to contend against all the opposition, tribulations, and afflictions which they will have to encounter in order to be heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ Jesus; *and they will grow weary in their minds*, and the adversary will have power over them and destroy them.⁴¹

Growing weary in mind combined with a feeling of loss of power (which, alarmingly, means giving power to the adversary) reflects a loss of hope, endurance, and meaning. This is *nihilism*. As Kylie Turley puts it, “Ironically, it is disbelief or lack of faith that has the power to change reality in predictable and yet devastating ways.”⁴² It is not doubt that

38. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 31.

39. Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, trans. Ilse Lasch (1946; repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 152.

40. Jack Maden, “Albert Camus on Rebelling Against Life's Absurdity,” *Philosophy Break*, September 2024, philosophybreak.com/articles/absurdity-with-camus/.

41. Lundwall, *Lectures on Faith*, 60, emphasis added.

42. Turley, “Practical Faith,” 16.

changes reality in devastating ways; it is disbelief — nihilism in disguise. Disbelief is more than merely to be not convinced. It is the withholding of trust, the refusal to commit, and the over-protection from risk. Whereas doubt is uncertainty, questioning, or wrestling, disbelief is a settled rejection or refusal to trust. Disbelief becomes significant, not when one questions something, but when one lives as though it cannot be true.

King Lamoni's wife, the queen, faced two decisions after her husband's death-like state began. The first was to conclude that the king was dead and to bury him because everyone was pressuring for burial. The second was to conclude that the king was alive and that burying him would kill him, pushing back on what society thought to be correct. Burial here was the safest option. It followed the customs, ended the uncertainty, and looked decisive. Even if the king were alive, burial would make him dead. Burying guarantees death. The gift of doubt prevents this. Nihilism feels safe, but it is locked only towards tragedy.

Burying (nihilism) resolves uncertainty by choosing the bleakest interpretation. Instead of "maybe there is life," it chooses "it's over, it's dead." Burying eliminates vulnerability. Faith says, "I might be wrong, but I will risk hope." Nihilism says, "I refuse to risk hope." Burying creates what it assumes. If the queen had buried King Lamoni, she would have guaranteed his death. Similarly, if people assume meaning is not real, then they stop acting "as if" it is. When they stop acting as if meaning is real, their lives begin to feel meaningless.

The deliberate choice to act *as if* allows what is hoped for to become — or to remain — real. It explains why more faith will not make more things happen more quickly, why a fleeting thought of doubt has little impact on faith, and why, contrary to what many assume, disbelief — not faith — can be a self-fulfilling prophecy with a predictable outcome.⁴³

Faith does not guarantee resurrection. But nihilism guarantees no resurrection.

King Lamoni's wife makes the faithful choice not to bury him. But if she had lacked faith in Ammon's words, if she had buried her husband, then how could she ever know with certainty that King Lamoni was dead when he was buried? The

43. Turley, "Practical Faith," 8.

king may have been alive or dead, but [nihilism] hides what is real. The queen's story demonstrates that a lack of faith distorts and hides what is true, even as it changes and ruins what could have been real. It takes fear of the unknown and exchanges it for predictability and tragedy.⁴⁴

The choice of burial (nihilism) is not evil. It is understandable, culturally supported, socially responsible, and emotionally protective. Nihilism can feel intellectually rigorous, emotionally self-protective, and, ultimately, realistic, but nihilism can only protect people from being wrong. Ironically, it also prevents them from being transformed.

Faith fills the need to make sense of the world, it provides meaning. Faith, in a way, is like a movie:

It consists of thousands upon thousands of individual pictures, and each of them makes sense and carries a meaning, yet the meaning of the whole film cannot be seen before its last sequence is shown. We cannot understand the whole film without having first understood each of its components, each of the individual pictures.⁴⁵

By choosing to reembrace faith with depth and nuance, recognizing that faith is like a movie, something that cannot be fully understood without viewing each scene in the present, doubt becomes a spiritual gift.

Corrie Ten Boom observed that Holocaust prisoners who lost hope deteriorated quickly, while those who clung to meaning (be it love, service, prayer, or scripture study) endured far longer. Faith sustained survival.

Similarly, Viktor Frankl, psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, profoundly believed that human beings can survive almost any suffering if they can find meaning in it. If people lose their sense of meaning, they psychologically collapse, even if their physical needs are met. His firsthand experience with prison inmates in concentration camps taught him that those who believed that nothing mattered anymore, those who believed there was no future, and those who believed there was no purpose to survive were the most likely to lose the will to live and to fall into despair. "The prisoner who had lost faith in the future—his future—was doomed."⁴⁶ He further believed that happiness is

44. Turley, "Practical Faith," 16.

45. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 143–44.

46. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 74.

not the goal of life, nor is pleasure or power. It is *meaning*, which can exist even in suffering. Meaning is always present, but, significantly, it must be discovered, not invented. Life is constantly asking something of us, and we respond through love, work, and courage in suffering. Meaning opens life, while nihilism closes it.

When we love, work, and face suffering with courage and fidelity, we find faith. Love draws the heart toward vulnerability and compassion. Work anchors belief through purposeful action. Courageous endurance transforms suffering into a beautiful site of growth. For Latter-day Saints and other Christians, these realities are lived through ministering to others, working through service in the community and our wards, and facing suffering courageously by continually showing up. Uncertainty and questions still arise, but found faith doesn't disappear.

Summary and Conclusions

Doubt can be a spiritual gift, a gift that is blessed, because the opposite of faith isn't doubt. It is the loss of meaning. Uncertainty and difficult questions will not vanish, in fact they often persist, but faith, rooted in meaning and relationship, does not dissolve in their presence. S. Michael Wilcox put it well:

I was blessed with a believing heart. It's a good thing, because I also have a questioning mind. Sometimes the believing heart and the questioning mind have some interesting conversations with each other. So occasionally, my mind has to tell my heart, We need to look at this with reason. And sometimes my heart has to say to my mind, You have to trust me. I have wrestled with just about every issue in the Church. I have learned to live with imperfect scriptures, imperfect people, imperfect prophets, imperfect me, and imperfect organizations. . . So we hold on.⁴⁷

The ultimate realization for Latter-day Saints who are questioning their testimonies is that they may have much more faith than they prematurely thought.

Ecclesiastes 3 reminds the faithful that "to every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven . . . a time to weep . . .

47. S. Michael Wilcox in *Finding Jesus Christ in the Old Testament: Inspiring SoundBites from the podcast "Follow Him,"* comp. Annabelle Sorensen (n.p.: IngramSpark, 2023), 83, followhim.co/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Follow_Him_OldTestament.pdf.

a time to mourn . . . a time to laugh . . . a time to embrace” (Ecclesiastes 3:1–5). There will be times and seasons marked by notably more faith and times and seasons marked by notably more doubt in everyone’s lifespan. Regardless, God promises that all these times and seasons can be *beautiful* for the individual because God makes “everything *beautiful* in his time” (Ecclesiastes 3:11).



[Author’s Note: *Much thanks to my dad, who taught me the importance of believing, and to the BYU-Idaho Psychology Department, which helped cultivate these ideas, specifically Dr. Jon Skalski, who introduced me to the Stages of Faith. Special thanks to Godfrey Ellis and for the reviewers for their patience and feedback, both of which improved this text considerably.]*

Caleb Lemon was born in Provo, Utah, earned a B.S. in Psychology from Brigham Young University–Idaho, and is an incoming PhD student in Developmental Psychology at Brigham Young University. He served a mission in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and likes to ski and to run.

Mi'kmaq, Meldrum, May, and Mark

Jerry D. Grover Jr.

Abstract: *The Annotated Edition of the Book of Mormon, edited by David Hocking and Rod Meldrum, compares Caractors Document glyphs to purported Native American Mi'kmaq glyphs to support the theory that the Book of Mormon took place in the eastern United States. The glyphs used to support the theory are, in fact, taken from the Anthon Transcript document forgery produced by Mark Hofmann.*

One Saturday, I happened to be browsing Book of Mormon themed books in a used bookstore when I ran across the *Annotated Edition of the Book of Mormon*.¹ The book is edited by David Hocking (Managing Editor) and Rod Meldrum (Associate Editor). It also identifies Jonathan Neville, Boyd J. Tuttle, Rian Nelson, Wayne May, and Amberli Nelson as contributors.² As I was familiar with Mr. Meldrum's business promoting the "Heartland" (eastern United States) as the location for Book of Mormon events, I expected that this version of the Book of Mormon would be peppered with various notes promoting the Heartland model. After thumbing through the book my expectations proved correct.

In going through the book, I noted a figure consisting of the familiar Caractors Document (see figure 1), reported to consist of the reformed

1. David R. Hocking and Rod L. Meldrum, eds., *Annotated Edition of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Digital Legend Press, 2018).

2. The contributors to the *Annotated Edition* depend on the publication edition of the book. For instance, there is a free downloadable version of the first one hundred pages of the *Annotated Edition* that is pulled from the third edition. It lists contributors as Jonathan Neville, Boyd J. Tuttle, Rian Nelson, Wayne Maty, and John C. Lefgren.

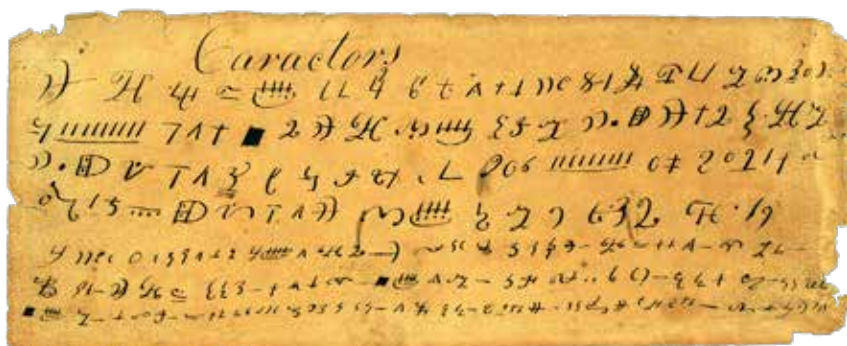


Figure 1. The Caractors Document. (“Appendix 2, Document 1. Characters Copied by John Whitmer, circa 1829–1831,” p. 1, *Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-2-document-1-characters-copied-by-john-whitmer-circa-1829-1831/1.)

Egyptian text mentioned in the Book of Mormon.³ I also noted a chart comparing the document’s characters to Mi’kmaq glyphs.⁴ The commentary accompanying the chart asserts a correspondence between the two scripts, but I recognized that most of the fourteen comparative glyphs were *not* from the Caractors Document at all. I had previously published on the Caractors Document,⁵ so the mismatch was immediately obvious to me.

The Mi’kmaq is an indigenous Algonquin nation with approximately 30,000 members across Atlantic Canada and Northern Maine. The Mi’kmaq script (the script is also referred to as *Mi’kmaq hieroglyphic writing* or *suckerfish script*) is a hieroglyphic type of script used by the tribe from the 1600s into the twentieth century. Comparing characters from the Caractors Document with Mi’kmaq, as the *Annotated Edition* does, is problematic because of the genesis of the Mi’kmaq script.

Father Chrétien Le Clercq was a French Roman Catholic Jesuit missionary on the Gaspé Peninsula in New France amongst the Mi’kmaq between 1675 and 1687. In attempting to teach them to memorize Catholic prayers in French with limited success, Father Le Clercq noticed the Mi’kmaq children writing “marks” on birch bark and then counting them to help in the memorization of the prayers. Recognizing

3. Hocking and Meldrum, *Annotated Edition*, 91.

4. Hocking and Meldrum, *Annotated Edition*, 91.

5. Jerry D. Grover Jr., *Translation of the “Caractors” Document: Revised and Updated* (Provo, UT: Challex Scientific Publications, 2019).

that using unique glyphs might be easier as a memory aid, Le Clercq formed hieroglyphic-like symbols to write prayers and liturgy.

Some scholars have opined that Le Clercq might have derived his Mi'kmaq hieroglyphic script from the original birch-bark marks, but there is no evidence to support this hypothesis. On the contrary, Le Clercq specifically stated that he formed the script characters as a logographic system for pedagogical purposes to teach Catholic prayers, liturgy, and doctrine to the Mi'kmaq. That Mi'kmaq is not an indigenous-derived writing system is further evidenced by the fact that after Le Clercq's return to France in 1687, the script had to be taught to other groups of Mi'kmaq by other missionaries. Clearly it was not a script that the indigenous Mi'kmaq peoples already knew.⁶

Because of this documented history, attempting to support the Heartland model by comparing reformed Egyptian to a script created by Le Clercq in the seventeenth century is not a supportable approach based on linguistics, science, or just common sense. Without an ancient indigenous Mi'kmaq connection, the Heartland model lacks any evidence of an ancient written script, which is a requirement of any proposed Book of Mormon geographical model. Because I have demonstrated that an ancient indigenous connection to Mi'kmaq does not exist, further inquiry regarding the *Annotated Edition's* assertion should be unnecessary.

Even so, it seems appropriate to turn some attention to evaluating the genesis of the *Annotated Edition's* Characters Document chart. The *Annotated Edition* states that the chart "shows that some of the characters copied from the Book of Mormon plates closely resemble selected hieroglyphs of the Mi'kmaq."⁷

The problem with such a claim is that the characters were not copied from the Book of Mormon plates. The references given for the assertion that the glyphs are comparable to ancient American glyphs are from the book *This Land* by Wayne May⁸ and from unnamed

6. David L. Schmidt and Murdena Marshall, eds., *Mi'kmaq Hieroglyphic Prayers: Readings in North America's First Indigenous Script* (Halifax, NS: Nimbus Publishing, 1995), 4–11.

7. Hocking and Meldrum, *Annotated Edition*, 91.

8. Wayne N. May, *This Land*, vol. 3, *They Came from the East* (Colfax, WI: Ancient American Archaeology Foundation, 2005), 45. Early editions of the *Annotated Edition* cite 2004 as the publication year for May's book, however the first edition was published in 2005. This typographical error was corrected in later editions of the *Annotated Edition*.

works by Barry Fell and Stan Johnson.⁹ The only work on this topic from Johnson was *Translating the Anthon Transcript*, coauthored with his wife Polly Johnson.¹⁰ In evaluating the Johnson source, there were only six glyphs relating to “Micmac” glyphs (as the Johnsons prefer to refer to the script) from the Caractors Document, and only one in the fourteen-glyph list found in the *Annotated Edition*. This individual glyph identified by Johnson is the equivalent to the Caractors Document glyph similar to the May 1 glyph (see table 1). Therefore, the glyphs that have no correlation to the Caractors Document are exclusively those provided by Wayne May (hereafter referred to as the May glyphs). Wayne May does not identify or cite any source material for his glyph comparisons. Thus, we are to presume them to be his own original work.

A comparison of any Caractor Document glyphs that have a reasonable similarity to May glyphs (allowing for May reproduction errors) are shown in table 1.¹¹ I have assigned numbers to the Wayne May glyphs for ease of reference.

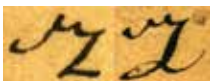
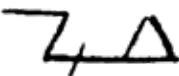
Table 1. Comparison of Wayne May glyphs with Caractors Document glyphs.

Numbers	May Glyphs	Caractors Document Glyphs
May 1		
May 2		
May 3		No Caractors Document Glyph
May 4		No Caractors Document Glyph

9. In early editions of the *Annotated Edition*, Barry Fell is not credited. He is credited in the third edition.

10. Stanley Johnson and Polly Johnson, *Translating the Anthon Transcript* (Parowan, UT: Ivory Books, 1999), 37–39, 41–42, 66.

11. The first fourteen rows of table 1 are from Hocking and Meldrum, *Annotated Edition*, 91, fig. 2, under the heading “Nephite,” with the explanation in the caption that they are “Nephite ‘Caractors’ taken from the plates.” The final three rows of table 1 (May 15–17) are glyphs identified in May, *This Land*, 45, that are not listed in the *Annotated Edition*.

Numbers	May Glyphs	Caractors Document Glyphs
May 5		No Caractors Document Glyph
May 6		
May 7		No Caractors Document Glyph
May 8		
May 9		
May 10		No Caractors Document Glyph
May 11		No Caractors Document Glyph
May 12		No Caractors Document Glyph
May 13		No Caractors Document Glyph
May 14		No Caractors Document Glyph
May 15		No Caractors Document Glyph
May 16		No Caractors Document Glyph
May 17		No Caractors Document Glyph

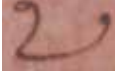
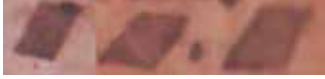
Given that there are some glyphs listed by Wayne May that have similar forms originating from the Caractors Document, why are there so many that are clearly not represented on the Caractors Document and, therefore, could not have been “copied from the Book of Mormon

plates?”¹² The simple answer is that the May glyphs originated from a different source.

As previously mentioned, I have done quite a bit of research on the Caractors Document and related items, so with a few minutes of inquiry it became obvious to me that Wayne May had extracted his characters—the ones reproduced in the *Annotated Edition*—not from the Caractors Document but from the Anthon Transcript document, a forgery created by Mark Hofmann.¹³ In 1980, Hofmann created and sold a forgery of the Anthon Transcript to leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (see figure 2), which was discovered to be fraudulent in 1985 when three Salt Lake City bombings (which Hofmann was convicted for) were investigated.

The supposed Caractors Document glyphs that May used are compared with characters from the Mark Hofmann Anthon Transcript forgery in table 2. The first two columns of table 2 are the same as the first two columns of table 1. The first fourteen May glyphs are, again, reproduced in the *Annotated Edition*.¹⁴

Table 2. Comparison of Wayne May glyphs to Hofmann forgery glyphs.

Numbers	May Glyphs	Hofmann Forgery Glyphs
May 1		
May 2		
May 3		
May 4		
May 5		
May 6		

12. Hocking and Meldrum, *Annotated Edition*, 91.
13. Wikipedia, s.v. “Mark Hofmann,” en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthon_Transcript#/media/File:Ref._Egyptian.jpg.
14. Hocking and Meldrum, *Annotated Edition*, 91, fig. 2.

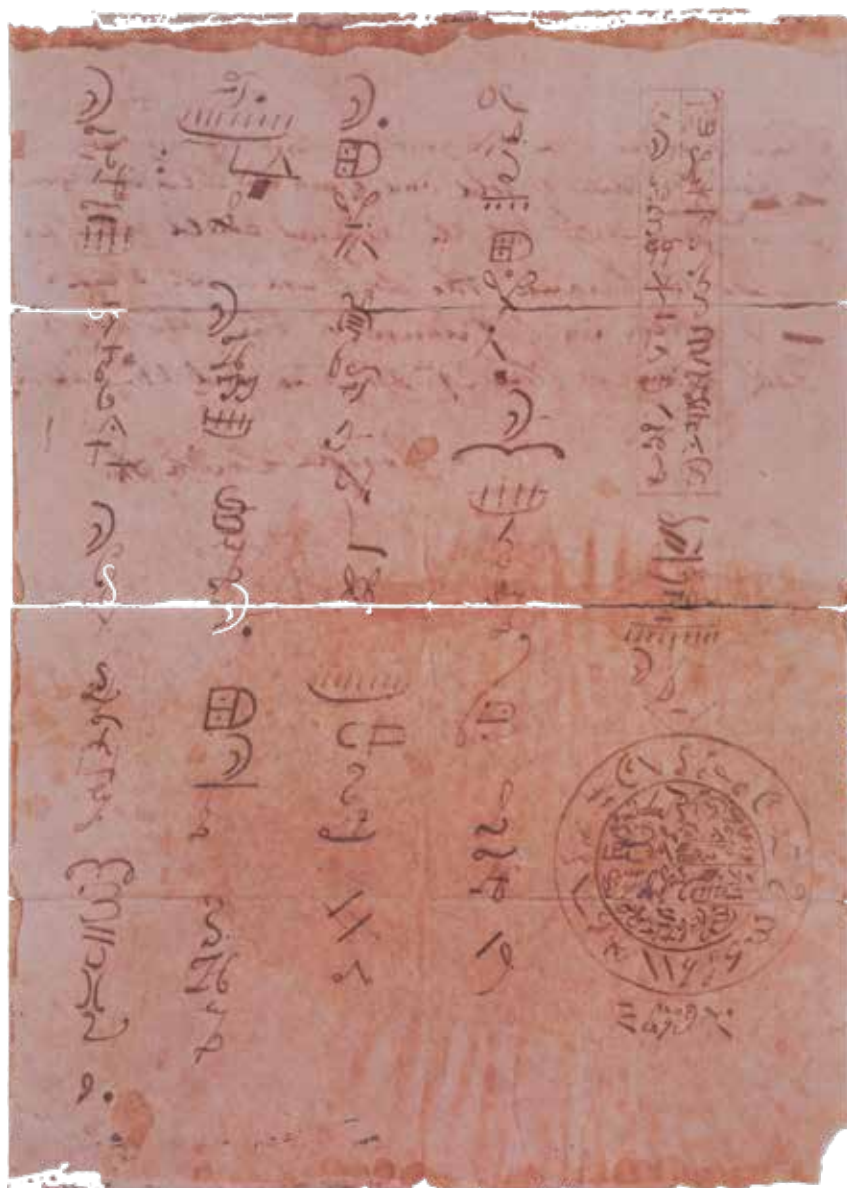
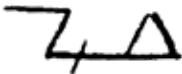


Figure 2. Hofmann forgery of the Anthon Transcript. (Danel W. Bachman, "A Look at the Newly Discovered Joseph Smith Manuscript," *Ensign* (July 1980), inside front cover.)

Numbers	May Glyphs	Hofmann Forgery Glyphs
May 7		
May 8		
May 9		
May 10		
May 11		
May 12		
May 13		
May 14		
May 15		
May 16		
May 17		

It becomes indisputably obvious where the source of the *Annotated Edition* glyphs ultimately came from: a Mark Hofmann forgery. Even for the May glyphs that are similar to both the Hofmann forgery and Caractors Document glyphs, a careful examination shows that the Hofmann forgery glyphs are closer in form to the May glyphs than any of the Caractors Document glyphs. This clearly indicates that Wayne May exclusively used the Hofmann forgery glyphs in his comparison of “Nephite Caractors” to Mi’kmaq glyphs.

It is generally accepted that part of Mark Hofmann’s motivation for

creating his Anthon Transcript forgery, besides money, was to perpetrate fraud onto The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and the Book of Mormon and thus damage the Church.¹⁵ Similarities between some of the Hofmann forgery glyphs and the Caractors Document glyphs were an attempt by Hofmann to add credibility to his forged Anthon Transcript.

It is with some dismay and bewilderment that the editors of the *Annotated Edition*, now in its third edition, continue to perpetrate and promote Mark Hofmann’s fraudulent legacy of deceit to readers. Mi’kmaq glyphs and Hofmann forgeries provide no evidence for the Book of Mormon or a Heartland geography.



Jerry D. Grover Jr. *is a licensed professional structural and civil engineer and a licensed professional geologist. He has an undergraduate degree in Geological Engineering from BYU and a Master’s Degree in Civil Engineering from the University of Utah. He speaks Italian and Chinese and has worked as a freelance translator off and on for the past twenty-five years. He is the author of books related to scientific and linguistic research of the Book of Mormon, including Translation of the “Caractors” Document: Revised and Updated, Calendars and Chronology of the Book of Mormon, The Swords of Shule, Evidence of the Nehor Religion in Mesoamerica, Sumerian Roots of Jaredite-Derived Names and Terminology in the Book of Mormon, Geology of the Book of Mormon, and Ziff, Magic Goggles, and Golden Plates.*

15. Robert Lindsey, *A Gathering of Saints: A True Story of Money, Murder and Deceit* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 379–80.

Entry to the Temple Is through the Principles of the Beatitudes

C. Thomas Black

Abstract: *The significance of the Beatitudes, particularly their relationship to the remainder of the Sermon on the Mount, has long been debated. The Sermon has been shown to possess close similarities to certain instructions delivered in the temples of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Participation in temple ordinances is regulated by a series of sixteen questions regarding beliefs and behavior that are known as the Temple Recommend Interview Questions. Fourteen of these questions are asked of an individual desirous of initial entrance into the temple and participation in specific ordinances therein. The topics of these questions appear to correlate closely with the topics the Lord introduced in the Beatitudes as recorded in the New Testament and particularly in 3 Nephi 12. The two questions omitted in the initial interview, but asked of returning applicants, pertain to the keeping of temple covenants previously entered. Keeping covenants is also discussed in the Sermon but not in the form of a beatitude. Evidence shows that, through the Beatitudes, the Lord gave a preview of the qualifications needed by an individual for initial admission to the temple and participation in temple covenants; those same qualifications exist today. A clear association exists between the Beatitudes and the Sermon that follows.*

Elucidating the meaning of the Beatitudes and their relationship with the Sermon on the Mount has preoccupied theologians for centuries. Georg Strecker posits six possible meanings of the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes.¹ Craig Blomberg reviews “eight of the

1. Georg Strecker, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Exegetical Commentary*, trans.

most significant and influential” correlations, including one of his own.² Harvey McArthur recognizes twelve schools of thought.³ Clarence Bauman reviews the differing opinions of nineteen scholars,⁴ while Craig Keener states that “more than thirty-six discrete views exist.”⁵

A Latter-day Saint scholar, John Welch, found that the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon at the Temple closely parallel the instruction found in the endowment ceremony that takes place in the temples of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.⁶ The repetition of the Sermon and Beatitudes, delivered to the righteous inhabitants of the New World as recorded in the Book of Mormon, confirms that the Beatitudes are unquestionably also linked textually to the Sermon that follows.

In this paper I focus on the requirements to *enter* the temple rather than the association of the Beatitudes/Sermons and the endowment ceremony. I first present evidence that the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon at the Temple contain the qualities required of individuals desirous to enter the temple and participate in temple instruction. Those requirements are standardized in our day into a list of sixteen questions called the *Temple Recommend Interview Questions*.⁷ Fourteen of those questions are asked of a candidate desiring initial

O. C. Dean Jr. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 15–23, archive.org/details/sermononmountexte0000stre/page/15/mode/1up.

2. Craig L. Blomberg, *The New American Commentary: Matthew* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 94n1, archive.org/details/matthew0000blom/page/94/mode/2up.
3. Harvey K. McArthur, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1960), 105–27, archive.org/details/understandingser0000mcar/page/104/mode/2up.
4. Clarence Bauman, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Modern Quest for Its Meaning* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), vdoc.pub/documents/the-sermon-on-the-mountain-the-modern-quest-for-its-meaning-f04shkltld920.
5. Craig S. Keener, “The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7),” in *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 160, archive.org/details/commentaryongosp0000keen/page/160/mode/1up.
6. John W. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount: A Latter-day Saint Approach* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Apologetic Research and Mormon Studies [FARMS], 1990), scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/89; and John W. Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/42.
7. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, s.v. “Temple Recommend Interview Questions” (2026), 26.4.1, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/general-handbook/26-temple-recommends#title_number30.

admission to the temple for the purpose of receiving their endowment. The areas of spirituality covered by each of these fourteen questions are the same as the qualities of righteousness that the Lord discussed in the Beatitudes. The two additional questions inquire about the applicant's faithfulness in keeping the covenants they previously committed to honor. These questions are not applicable to first-time temple attendees and are not discussed in the Beatitudes, but they are reviewed elsewhere in the Sermon, as I will show below.

The opinions I express in this manuscript are not attempts to proclaim or even to influence Church doctrine. I hope, however, that they will encourage a new appreciation for the Beatitudes as well as an appreciation for the consistency, ever since antiquity, of the qualifications the Lord has set forth for one to enter his presence. The associations I propose are not ironclad. They have had to cross obstacles of semantics, translations, traditions, cultures, and even malicious manipulation.

While straight lines of similarity may be drawn between some of the Beatitudes and some of the recommend questions, I readily admit that more circuitous routes are required to appreciate the similarities in other cases. In this, there is no surprise. Some of the Ten Commandments require interpretation between cultures and over millennia. For example, the prohibition against having other gods before the Lord has been expanded in our day to include any of numerous distractions unknown in the ancient world. Those distractions compete with God for our attention and veneration much more today than ever before. Similarly, what it means to kill must now be qualified. What it meant to keep the Sabbath Day holy underwent transformation between the time the commandments were given and the time of Christ and have changed yet again between his day and ours. Even Welch's forty-seven points of association between the Sermon on the Mount and the temple ceremony do not precisely correlate, but they are close enough that the connection in context is clear.⁸ Similarly, I seek only to consolidate principles taught in the Beatitudes with principles discussed in the temple recommend questions. I believe that they are similar enough to invite further scrutiny, using a more

8. John W. Welch, "Christ in the Nephite Temple," in *Teachings of the Book of Mormon, Semester 4: Transcripts of Lectures Presented to an Honors Book of Mormon Class at Brigham Young University, 1988–1990* by Hugh Nibley (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 139, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/73.

wide-angled lens, and to appreciate the commonalities rather than the obvious differences.

Understanding the Beatitudes is greatly aided by referring to the lengthier account recorded in the Book of Mormon in 3 Nephi 12:1–12. Without that account, the observed correlations would be only suggestive and incomplete.

The sacred nature of the Beatitudes will first be established. How Latter-day Saints have viewed the Beatitudes will be followed by a review of the findings of various academics. I will also provide various definitions that I believe are necessary to fully appreciate the sacred importance of the precise wording in both the Beatitudes and the temple recommend questions. I will then offer a brief discussion of each temple recommend question. The correlation between the eleven beatitudes of 3 Nephi and the fourteen questions required for initial entry into the temple will then be described. The verses immediately following the Beatitudes and several verses within the Sermon will be shown to discuss the two additional questions asked of returning attendees.

These correlations suggest that the true meaning of the Beatitudes was to prepare the Twelve Apostles and the Twelve Disciples for their initial entry into sacred ordinances, likely administered during the Lord's forty-day ministry following his resurrection.⁹ Through the Beatitudes and the two Sermons, it appears that Christ conducted a temple preparation class, of sorts.

The Beatitudes

Most Latter-day Saint commentators and non-Latter-day Saint theologians do not recognize a clear connection between the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. Consequently, the significance of these verses has often been trivialized and even reduced to a series of individual platitudes.

The Beatitudes are sacred statements

In its simplest form, a beatitude is a conditional promise, found in the scriptures, that begins with the word *blessed*. The Latin *beātus*,

9. S. Kent Brown and C. Wilfred Griggs, "The 40-Day Ministry," *Ensign*, August 1975, 6–11, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1975/08/the-40-day-ministry](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1975/08/the-40-day-ministry). See also "Book of Mormon Evidence: Parallels with Christ's 40-Day Ministry," *Scripture Central*, 16 October 2024, scripturecentral.org/evidence/book-of-mormon-evidence-parallels-with-christ-s-40-day-ministry.

meaning *happy, prosperous, blessed, or fortunate*, is the basis for the English *beatitude*.¹⁰ The capitalized form, *Beatitude*, refers to one of the series of promises given by Jesus to a group of his disciples immediately preceding his Great Sermon as found in the New Testament in Matthew 5:3–12. The term was first applied to these promises by Augustine of Hippo in AD 393, who devised the word *beatitude* by combining “*beati*” (blessed, a term first used by Jerome in the Vulgate bible) and “*-tude*” (a suffix meaning state, condition, or quality).¹¹

Beatitudes are also found in the Old Testament, including in Psalms (2:12; 32:2; 40:4; 41:1; 65:4; 84:4–5; 106:3; 112:1; 128:1), in Proverbs (8:32), in Isaiah (32:20; 56:2), and in Daniel (12:12). As stated previously, the account of the Savior’s visit to the Americas, recorded in 3 Nephi, contains a more complete version of the Matthean Beatitudes.

The Beatitudes are written in an anaphoric three-part form. The Lord first states the words “blessed are.” He then identifies those individuals he is referencing, either “they” (a third-person beatitude) or “ye” (a second-person beatitude). The third part is a promise beginning “for” (because) that is dependent on the second part.

Because Matthew records eight proclamations by the Savior beginning with the words “Blessed are,” most non-Latter-day Saint commentators maintain that there are eight beatitudes. Spurgeon counted only seven,¹² agreeing with Augustine.¹³ A ninth proclamation states, “Blessed are . . . ye” (Matthew 5:11), which some scholars

10. *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v., “*bēātus*,” ed. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=bēātus&la=la&can=bēātus0&d=Perseus:text:1999.04.0059:alphabetic%20letter=B:entry%20group=7:entry=beatus&i=1.

11. Augustine of Hippo, “De Sermone Domini in Monte,” in *Documenta Catholica Omnia*, book 1, chapter 3, documentacatholicaomnia.eu/02m/0354-0430,_Augustinus,_De_Sermone_Domini_In_Monte_Secundum_Matthaeum,_MLT.pdf. For an English translation see St. Augustin, “Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, According to Matthew,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, trans. William Findlay (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf106/npnf106/Page_6.html. As he coined the term *beatitude*, Augustine wrote, “*Incipit enim beatitudo ab humilitate*” or “For beatitude (blessedness) begins with humility.” Findlay altered the meaning somewhat by rendering the passage, “For the beatitudes begin with humility.”

12. C. H. Spurgeon, “The Beatitudes,” *The Spurgeon Center*, 29 July 1909, 4, spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-beatitudes/#flipbook/.

13. St. Augustine, “The Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,” in *Ancient Christian Writers*, ed. Johannes Quasten and Joseph C. Plumbe, trans. John J. Jepson (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1948), 6, archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.157824/.

claim qualifies it as a ninth beatitude.¹⁴ With the lengthier and complete account of 3 Nephi 12, however, eleven beatitudes may be clearly identified.

The setting of the Beatitudes

Matthew 5 is a continuation of Matthew 4,¹⁵ making it clear that the Sermon was addressed specifically to a select group of disciples¹⁶ on a mountain (Matthew 5:1), which is a well-known metaphor or substitute for a temple (Psalm 24:3, Micah 4:1–2).¹⁷ In the Book of Mormon account, the Lord addressed his Sermon to the righteous Nephite survivors of the cataclysms that followed his crucifixion, who had gathered at the temple (3 Nephi 10:12). Referring to Jesus, the New Testament account states, “And he opened his mouth” (Matthew 5:2). This is “a Hebraism, indicating that the words spoken are not the utterance of chance, but of set will and purpose.”¹⁸

The word *blessed*

As mentioned above, each of the Beatitudes shares the initial word *blessed*. From the Aramaic spoken by Jesus,¹⁹ to the Hebrew and Greek of the early writers, to several versions of English, various words

14. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, v VIII (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1994), 178, archive.org/details/newinterpreters/b0008unse/page/178/mode/1up. Also: Charles H. Talbert, “Grace in the Sermon on the Mount” (Waco, TX, Center for Christian Ethics, 2008), 14, ifl.web.baylor.edu/sites/g/files/ecbvkj771/files/2024-02/SermonArticleTalbert.pdf.

15. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Lesson 3: Matthew 5–7,” *New Testament Teacher Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/new-testament-teacher-manual/the-gospel-according-to-st-matthew/lesson-3-matthew-5-7.

16. The Joseph Smith Translation makes this clearer by additional wording indicating that Christ was specifically addressing the leaders of his Church (JST Matthew 5:3–4).

17. Richard J. Clifford, “The Temple and the Holy Mountain,” in *The Temple in Antiquity: Ancient Records and Modern Perspectives*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University [BYU], 1984), 107–24, rsc.byu.edu/temple-antiquity/temple-holy-mountain.

18. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew vol. 1* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press 1956), 81, archive.org/details/gospelofmatthewv008785mbp/page/n110/mode/1up. Other examples are found in Job 33:1–3, Matthew 13:35, and Acts 10:34.

19. Britannica Editors, s.v. “Aramaic language,” *Britannica*, britannica.com/topic/Aramaic-language.

have been translated as *blessed* in modern English. These multiple translations aside, *blessed* is the word Joseph Smith used when he translated 3 Nephi directly from whatever language was used to record Christ's address to the Nephites. The word *blessed* is the closest English equivalent to the Lord's intent when he gave the address.

The English adjective *blessed*, chosen by the translators of the King James Version of the Bible in the sixteenth century, is derived from the Middle English *blessen*, which comes from the Old English word *bletsian* or *bledsian*. This word, in turn, is based on the Proto-Germanic word *blodison*, a word with the solemn and significant meaning of "hal-low or mark with blood." It had previously referred to a sprinkling of blood on pagan altars.²⁰

If Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount in Aramaic, the common language of Galilee, for *blessed are ye*, he would most likely have used the word "*touvayhoon*, derived from the root *tov*, meaning 'good,' literally it is 'goodness (towards) you.'"²¹

Ancient biblical uses of blessed

The word *blessed* is found numerous times in both the Old and the New Testaments with varying denotations. In the Old Testament, two Hebrew words are translated as *blessed*. One is the adjective *barak* (Hebrew בָּרַךְ),²² a blessing of praise or thanksgiving directed toward God, but this is not the corollary of the New Testament *blessed*. The other Hebrew word commonly translated as *blessed* is *'esher* (רָשָׁא).²³ *'Esher* is derived from the verb *'ashar* meaning either "to go straight," literally, to be on the right path or making progress in the right direction, or "to be blessed" as in a state of blessedness.²⁴ *'Esher* is the word used in the Old Testament beatitudes and is equivalent to the word that begins each New Testament beatitude.²⁵

20. Harper Douglas, s.v. "Etymology of bless," Online Etymology Dictionary, etymonline.com/word/bless.

21. Andrew G. Roth, "Matthew 5," *Aramaic English New Testament* (Sedro Woolley, WA: Netzari Press, 2016), 35n47, dn720004.ca.archive.org/0/items/bible-biblias-peshitta-collection/Aramaic%20English%20New%20Testament%20-%20Andrew%20Gabriel%20Roth.pdf.

22. James Strong, *Strong's Hebrew Dictionary* (Rio, WI: The AGES Digital Library, 1997), s.v. "*barak*," 1288, archive.org/details/19.strongss/26.StrongsHebrewDictionary/.

23. Strong, *Hebrew Dictionary*, 835.

24. Strong, *Hebrew Dictionary*, 833.

25. Skip Moen, "Not Quite," *Hebrew Word Study*, 15 January 2010, skipmoen.com/2010/01/not-quite/.

In the King James Version of the Bible, *’esher* is sometimes translated as *happy*, a word derived from the Old Norse word *hap* meaning *luck* or *chance*, from which come the English words *perhaps* or *happenstance*.²⁶ Happiness is inherently transient and is therefore inappropriately applied in many instances, such as to those who mourn or are persecuted. Regarding this translation, Rabbi Steven Schwarzschild stated:

“Happy” isn’t good enough. . . . The problem is that, if you decide you don’t like “blessed,” there isn’t a single English word which can take its place. You might use a phrase like “on the right track” or “going in the right direction.” Sin means being *off* the track, missing the target. Being “blessed” means you aren’t lost—you’re on the path the Creator intends you to be on. Exchanging “blessed” for “happy” trivializes the biblical word. You might as well sum up the Bible with a slogan like, “Have a nice day.”²⁷

In the New Testament, two words have been translated from the Greek to *bless* or *blessed*. The verb *to bless* in Greek is *eulogeo* (εὐλογέω). Literally, this word means *good speaking* and is understood as *to speak well of* or *to praise*.²⁸ “But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless (εὐλογεῖτε) them that curse you” (Matthew 5:44). *Eulogeo* is often associated with religious ritual or ceremony, as in the blessing of the bread and wine by Christ (the Eucharist). “And as they did eat, Jesus took bread, and blessed (εὐλογήσας), and brake it, and gave to them, and said, ‘Take, eat: this is my body’” (Mark 14:22). It is also the root word of a funeral *eulogy*.

The Greek word for the adjective *blessed* as used in the Beatitudes is *makarios* (μακάριός),²⁹ and a saying in the literary form of a beatitude is accordingly known as a *makarism*. Though *touvay/tovi/tûbay* was likely the actual word that Christ would have spoken as he delivered the Beatitudes in Judea, *makarios* is the Greek equivalent.³⁰

26. Harper Douglas, s.v. “Etymology of hap,” Online Etymology Dictionary, etymonline.com/word/hap.

27. Jim Forest, *The Ladder of the Beatitudes* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 17–18, archive.org/details/ladderofbeatitud0000fore/page/17/mode/1up.

28. James Strong, “εὐλογέω,” *Greek Dictionary of the New Testament* (Rio, WI: The AGES Digital Library, 1997), 2127, archive.org/details/19.strongss/27.StrongsGreekDictionary/page/199/mode/1up.

29. Strong, *Greek Dictionary*, s.v. “μακάριός,” 3107.

30. Peshitta New Testament, dukhrana.com/peshitta/index.php; and Peshitta

The adjective *makarios*, or a related form, is used fifty times in forty-nine verses in the New Testament. In forty-four instances, these words have been translated to the word *blessed*. The other six have been translated to *happy*. As mentioned above, this is a word, like *'esher*, that inadequately and misleadingly fails to convey the magnitude of joy to be expected by achieving the promises listed in the various Beatitudes. "Happy is the man who will see God" or "Happy is the man who will inherit the earth" is a gross understatement.

Biblical verses in which *makarios* is used often carry an eternal or celestial quality. "But blessed (μακάριοι) are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear" (Matthew 13:16), and "Blessed (Μακάριος) art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 16:17).

Ancient nonbiblical uses of blessed

The word *makarios* is derived from the word *makar*, a condition that Homer ascribed predominantly to the gods, meaning "the transcendent happiness of a life beyond care, labor, and death," and thus included immortality.³¹ *Makarios* was first used by Pindar and applied generally to the gods,³² who were content and free from all mortal concerns, including death, and possessed everything they needed for their own blissful existence. The blessed (*olbioi*) heroic dead who inhabited the mythical isles of the blessed (*Nêsoi Makáriôi*) enjoyed the same freedom.³³ The island of Cyprus was once called *hê Makaria* because it was thought that everything needed for its occupants' blissful self-sufficiency could be found there.³⁴

Makarios may have an even earlier Egyptian source, since the Egyptian word *m^or* is similar to and synonymous with *makar*,³⁵ which

New Testament, "Analysis of Peshitta verse Matthew 5:3," dukhrana.com/peshitta/analyze_verse.php?verse=Matthew+5:3.

31. Homer, *Homer's Odessey*, ed. W. W. Merry and James Riddell (Oxford: Clarendon Press), v5:7, archive.org/details/homersodyssedyed01home/page/210/mode/1up.

32. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "μακάριός," ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 362, archive.org/details/theologicaldicti0004unse/page/362/mode/1up.

33. Hesiod, *Works and Days*, trans. Gregory Nagy (n.p., 700 BC), 167–73, chs. harvard.edu/primary-source/hesiod-works-and-days-sb/.

34. Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew vol. 1*, 84.

35. Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 93, archive.org/details/sermononmountcom0000betz/page/93/mode/1up.

refers to the dead and to temples. Definitions of the word *m^cr* refer to “the blessed dead,” to “a successful fate,” and “similar to the gods.” Other definitions of *m^cr* refer specifically to the temple and possibly even to temple-related clothing.³⁶

According to Hans Dieter Betz, “The old sources seem to agree on the basic meaning of the term: it designates a state of being that pertains to the gods and can be awarded to human beings postmortem.”³⁷ Because of the concerns inherent in mortality, Aristotle stated his belief that true happiness could be attained only after death.³⁸

Most translations of more ancient writings carry the connotation of *makarios* as a bestowal of supreme favor from God far surpassing the superficiality of *happy* or *fortunate* (which appear in other versions). Later, the word became a euphemism for the elite or upper class, which somehow merited an abundance of material rewards such as family, wealth, honor, fame, and health.³⁹

Archimandrite Ephrem points out that “the interesting thing about ‘ashrê is that it is never, so far as I know, applied to God.” He adds, “On the other hand, the Greek *makar* starts life as precisely something which the gods are, though the related adjective *makarios* is more commonly applied to humans.”⁴⁰

A fascinating usage of the word *blessed* is found in the Orphic gold leaves, which are small rolls of gold foil recently found in the tombs of deceased initiates of the Greek mystery cult of Demeter. They are usually found near their ears or hands and seem intended to verify their initiation.⁴¹ Upon these leaves are found inscriptions that provide the initiate with instructions on how to navigate the afterlife and with passwords they must know to respond appropriately to questions that will be asked of them by judges they will encounter on their way to the Elysian Fields. As such, these leaves seem to serve as a form of

36. Adolf Erman, Hermann Grapow, eds., *Wörterbuch Der Ägyptischen Sprache* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag 1971), 2:48 *m^cr* I, IIb and c, III, IV, archive.org/details/WorterbuchDerAAgyptischenSpracheV.II/page/n25/.

37. Betz, *Commentary*, 92.

38. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Christopher Rowe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), I.1101a13—I.1101a21, archive.org/details/aristotle-nicomachean-ethics-sarah-broadie-cristopher-rowe/page/n56/mode/1up.

39. Sarah Scott, “Core Vocab: makar,” *Kosmos Society*, 19 Feb 2021, kosmos.society.org/core-vocab-makar/.

40. Forest, *Ladder*, 20.

41. Günther Zuntz, *Persephone: three essays on religion and thought in Magna Graecia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), Bk 3, I, 277–393, archive.org/details/persephonethreee0000zunt/page/277/mode/1up.

totenpässe or passport for the dead. They have been found in graves in South Italy, Crete, Thessaly, and Palestine.⁴² Some inscriptions on these leaves contain quotations or brief sentences that include the adjective *blessed*: "Happy (*olbie*) and blessed (*makaristé*) are you, you will be god instead of human."⁴³ To the early Greeks, *blessed* had a significant association with the blessings of the next life.

Although the more ancient meaning of *makarios* referred to more than earthly happiness, the term was later applied to the quality of life enjoyed by wealthy mortals. In the Beatitudes, Jesus turned this later meaning upside-down and pronounced the poor, the hungry, the meek, and the persecuted as the true elite, while the proud and unrepentant rich and powerful were to be found at the bottom of the order of heaven. This teaching is seen also in the parable of the Bosom of Abraham (Luke 16:19–31).

Latter-day Saint Views of the Beatitudes

There is little unanimity among Latter-day Saint authors regarding the meaning of the Beatitudes, but their viewpoints over many decades may be grouped into several categories. Many of these touch upon concepts related to the temple, such as "a code of ethics," "a constitution for a perfect life," "the pathway to approach God," "requirements for salvation," "the nature of citizenship in the kingdom," "and characteristics of the exalted." In their discussions, however, no commentator makes mention that the Beatitudes might represent qualifications to enter a temple.

The Beatitudes as a pattern of a holy life

Monte S. Nyman writes, "The challenge of the Beatitudes is a celestial challenge, and applying them in our lives leads to eternal life."⁴⁴ Harold B. Lee repeatedly referred to the Beatitudes as "the constitution for

42. Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), VI 2.2., 293, archive.org/details/greekreligion0000burk/page/293/mode/1up. Although the Orphic leaves date from the time of the Mysteries of Demeter, the first was not found until about 1834, and the first translations were not published until the late nineteenth century.

43. Zuntz, *Persephone*, Bk. 3, III, A1, line 8, 300–1.

44. Monte S. Nyman, "I Have a Question: How Are We to Look at the Beatitudes and Make Them Useful in Our Lives?," *Ensign*, December 1974, 28, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1974/12/i-have-a-question/how-are-we-to-look-at-the-beatitudes-and-make-them-useful-in-our-lives.

a perfect life”⁴⁵ Marvin K. Gardner, writing in *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, states, “Jesus revealed the meaning of righteousness — a pattern that he exemplified by his own life.”⁴⁶ Robert E. Wells called the Beatitudes “requirements for salvation.”⁴⁷ James E. Talmage writes, “The Beatitudes are directed to the duties of mortal life as a preparation for a greater existence yet future.”⁴⁸ Alvin R. Dyer states similarly, “Herein is described the moral character required in those who are to constitute his kingdom.”⁴⁹ Harold B. Lee also states that “the Beatitudes . . . have been referred to by Bible commentators as the preparation necessary for entrance into the kingdom of heaven.”⁵⁰ D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner write, “The Beatitudes are both characteristics of and conditions enjoyed by the exalted — those who are or will be recipients of eternal life.”⁵¹

The Beatitudes describe the rewards of an exalted life

The Church teaches that, in the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount, “Jesus is actually describing the qualities of an exalted person.”⁵² Despite the claim by Rabbi Schwarzschild that “there isn’t a single English word which can take its place,”⁵³ in Latter-day Saint vernacular, *blessed* may be appropriately substituted with either *exalted* (in an eschatological sense) or with *worthy of exaltation* (with a view toward this life). Each of thirty-eight uses of the word (including the Beatitudes of Matthew 5) refers to qualities having to do with exaltation. Fourteen of those verses deal specifically with the qualities of

45. Harold B. Lee, *Youth and the Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), 57, archive.org/details/youthchurch0000leeh/page/57/mode/1up.

46. Marvin K. Gardner, “Righteousness,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1236–37, contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/EoM/id/4142.

47. Robert E. Wells, *The Mount and the Master* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), xi.

48. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 231–32, archive.org/details/jesuschriststudy00talmrich/page/231/mode/1up.

49. Alvin R. Dyer, *Conference Report*, October 1970, 150, archive.org/details/conferencereport1970sa/page/150/mode/1up.

50. Lee, *Youth*, 57.

51. D. Kelly Ogden and Andrew C. Skinner, eds., *Verse By Verse, the Four Gospels* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 173.

52. Church Educational System, *The Life and Teachings of Jesus and His Apostles* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1978), 60, archive.org/details/TheLifeAndTeachingsOfJesusAndHisApostlesLDSManual/page/n64/mode/1up.

53. Forest, *Ladder*, 17.

those deserving exaltation, while four deal strictly with the rewards of those who are exalted. Twenty verses (including the Beatitudes of Matthew 5), consider both aspects in an "if . . . then" manner.

As mentioned above, John Welch identified forty-seven points of correlation between the temple and both the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon at the Temple, thereby establishing these Sermons as temple-related texts.⁵⁴ He states that the Beatitudes promise "the ultimate blessings of eternal life, similar to promises made in the temple."⁵⁵ He is, to my knowledge, the only Latter-day Saint author who has associated the Beatitudes with the temple, but even he referred only to the promises and not to the conditions upon which the blessings are predicated. In his discussion of the Beatitudes, Welch included comments by the non-Latter-day Saint scholar, Betz, who concluded that the Beatitudes represent "the entrance requirements for the kingdom of heaven."⁵⁶ Welch suggests that it is "his [Betz's] way of saying 'temple recommend questions' perhaps."⁵⁷ Welch also includes the words of Georg Strecker, who stated that the Beatitudes are "the conditions that must be fulfilled in order to gain entrance into the Holy of Holies."

Academic Interpretations of the Beatitudes

Non-Latter-day-Saint biblical scholars such as Betz and Strecker have recognized, described, and explicitly stated significant associations between the Beatitudes and the qualifications to participate in activities they believe to have been available to the individuals Jesus was addressing. Such statements, particularly when they are correlated with comments by Latter-day Saint authors who imply, without explicitly stating, similar associations, are the impetus for a more detailed analysis.

Betz has written thorough analyses of the Sermon on the Mount.⁵⁸ After reviewing the Egyptian, Greek, and Semitic literary forms of

54. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount*, 47–114.

55. John W. Welch, "The Temple in the Book of Mormon: The Temples at the Cities of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Bountiful," *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1994), 373, archive.org/details/templesofancient0000unse/page/373/mode/1up.

56. Betz, *Commentary*, 60n407.

57. John W. Welch, "The Beatitudes. Christ's Teachings," in *Teachings of the Book of Mormon, Semester 4*, 146.

58. Hans Dieter Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount* (Minneapolis:

beatitudes, Betz supports the following conclusions regarding the Beatitudes that precede the Sermon:

1. The original function of the Beatitudes is ritualistic. “They serve as reminders of things the recipients have heard before” and “presuppose some form of cultic experience, which, however, remains outside the texts.” “The Beatitudes in the [Sermon on the Mount] . . . have primarily didactic functions,” as evidenced by the use of the third-person plural.⁵⁹

A ritual, presented repetitively with didactic features, is reminiscent of the temple experience.

2. They are in the form of a declarative statement. Christ is rehearsing the former shared experience, but the nature of the cultic act he is referencing lies outside the text and is unstated.

The only known cultic act that the recipients may share — baptism — has no apparent connection to either the Beatitudes or the Sermon. The declarative nature of the Beatitudes is in the form of doctrinal statements to be learned and even memorized, linking doctrine and ritual.⁶⁰

3. The Beatitudes are to be understood to pertain equally to this world and to the world to come.⁶¹

As principles of eschatological and divine justice the Beatitudes are ipso facto future-oriented; as principles pronounced in the present they have an impact on the present as well. . . . Strictly speaking, they should be pronounced by the divine judge in the afterlife. . . . Spoken in the present they reveal a message that belongs to the future of persons for whose eternal salvation this message is decisive.⁶²

This point corresponds clearly with the Latter-day Saint viewpoint that temple worthiness in this life prepares for worthiness in the Kingdom

Fortress Press 1984), archive.org/details/essaysonsermonon0000betz/mode/1up; and Betz, *Commentary*, 60.

59. Betz, *Commentary*, 93.

60. Betz, *Commentary*, 95.

61. Betz, *Commentary*, 96.

62. Betz, *Commentary*, 96.

of God in the world to come. The divine judge will certainly pronounce worthiness in the afterlife, but in mortality, access to sacred places and activities must be under the control of authorized, but mortal, representatives of God. "Stake presidency and bishopric members represent the Lord in conducting interviews for worthiness to enter the holy temple."⁶³

4. Regarding the ethical and moral nature of the Beatitudes, they are descriptive rather than prescriptive. As Betz states:

These specific attitudes, actions, and thoughts must also not be confused with "works of the law" in the Pauline sense. They do not "earn" salvation, but they are the "fruits" of insights into God's ways, and as such they "deserve" salvation. Paul would call them "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal 5:22), rather than "works of the law." Taken together the Beatitudes circumscribe the way of life of the faithful disciple of Jesus. As such they constitute the *exordium*, or introduction, of the Sermon on the Mount.⁶⁴

These are attributes that must be actively sought after, not just hoped for. Those who possess these qualities are now ready for the further instruction that will follow in the Sermon.

Contrary to Betz's claim of a "cultic experience," Strecker states, "Jesus, of course, teaches not cultic but eschatological virtues. They refer to entrance not into the earthly temple but into the kingdom of God. It is thus a matter of entrance into the βασιλεία των ουρανών [Greek: 'kingdom of heaven']."⁶⁵ The observations of religious and secular authorities reviewed thus far show the sacred nature of the Beatitudes and how incorporating their precepts into one's life may bring that person into the presence of God.

Latter-day Saint writers and commentators hint at, but do not explicitly state, an association between the Beatitudes and qualifications

63. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Conducting Temple Recommend Interviews," 6 October 2019, 1. The instructions were accompanied by a letter, signed by the First Presidency and entitled "Preparing to Enter the Temple," that provided information about the updated interview questions. See newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/multimedia/file/first-presidency-temple-recommend-letter.pdf.

64. Betz, *Commentary*, 97.

65. Strecker, *Sermon on the Mount*, 33.

for entering into the holy temple. Such an association is more clearly expressed by some scholars, but those scholars do not correlate those qualifications with spiritual aspects, especially those identified by the Church.

The Temple Recommend Questions

The temple recommend interview questions assess the worthiness of an individual to enter the temple. Furthermore, a demonstrated ability to meet the relatively less stringent standards of the recommend questions is necessary before the applicant accepts the more stringent covenants of the temple.

A brief history of the recommend questions

According to Talmage, Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, the primordial temple, because they violated one of the principles of temple worthiness — the Word of Wisdom.⁶⁶ If so, this would be the first example of losing access to the presence of the Lord for violating a principle of temple worthiness.

The first recorded list of requirements to enter the temple is found in Psalm 24:3–4: “Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place [the temple]? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully.”⁶⁷ In this brief statement are covered three qualifications found both in the Beatitudes and in the current temple recommend questions: chastity, meekness, and honesty, respectively.

A definitive history of the standards for entering Latter-day Saint temples has been written by Edward L. Kimball.⁶⁸ At the time the first temple of this dispensation was dedicated in 1836, in Kirtland, Ohio, and for the next several decades, worthiness for participation in temple ordinances was determined by local Church leaders who recommended individuals, based on their personal observation, to

66. James E. Talmage, *Eighty Fourth Semi-Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1913), 118–19, archive.org/details/conferencereport1913sa/page/118/mode/2up. See also Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 29–30.

67. “Line upon Line: Psalm 24:3–4,” *New Era*, November 2007, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/2007/11/line-upon-line-psalm-24-3-4.

68. Edward L. Kimball, “The History of LDS Temple Admission Standards,” *Journal of Mormon History* 24, no.1 (1998):135–76, digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1030&context=mormonhistory.

the President of the Church for his approval.⁶⁹ Since then, the criteria for determining worthiness to enter a temple have undergone gradual evolution. In 1856,⁷⁰ in 1881,⁷¹ and in 1886,⁷² the First Presidency issued suggestions and instructions to bishops regarding specific criteria to be used when recommending an individual to the President of the Church for his consideration in allowing that member to enter the temple. Because of the increasing number of requests, sole responsibility for determining temple worthiness was delegated by the Church president in 1891 to the bishops and stake presidents.⁷³

According to Kimball, in about 1922, the Church published the first recommend book, which contained twelve instructional items and seven criteria to be ascertained. In doing so, the Church began standardizing temple worthiness in this dispensation. The 1934 *General Handbook of Instructions* stated only that applicants

should observe the law of tithing. The applicant should also observe all other principles of the Gospel, should keep the Word of Wisdom, not use profanity, should not join or be a member of any secret oath-bound organization and should sustain without reservation the general and local authorities of the church.⁷⁴

Additional changes to these criteria were made in the handbooks

69. Kimball, "Temple Admission Standards," 139.

70. "Heber C. Kimball to Bishop Evans," 19 May 1856, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/24467901-579b-473c-acf6-65b4429e980b/0/0.

71. Chester Ward, Sanpete Stake, Donation Record 1875–99, quoted in Kimball, "Temple Admission Standards," 140.

72. James R. Clark, ed., *Messages of the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 1833–1964* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 3:63, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/94607ffd-057e-418d-b0f3-e8548af19c28/43570dc9-b3dc-416f-911c-9a4d3f40f046.

73. Kimball, "Temple Admission Standards," 139–41.

74. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Handbook of Instructions: For Stake Presidencies Bishops and Counselors Stake and Ward Clerks* (1934), 10, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/af674b30-18a7-4a74-b549-5a5095c77e67/0/11.

of 1940,⁷⁵ 1944,⁷⁶ 1960,⁷⁷ 1963,⁷⁸ and 1968.⁷⁹ Beginning in 1976, these criteria appeared as a list of questions.⁸⁰ These were further modified in 1978⁸¹ and 1991.⁸² After more than a century of confidentiality, the then-current questions were read by President Russell M. Nelson in the October 2019 General Conference and were made available online.⁸³ Since then, amendments were published once in 2023⁸⁴ and

75. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Handbook of Instructions: For Stake Presidencies Bishops and Counselors Stake and Ward Clerks and Other Church Officers* (1940), 129, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/e7df3c77-4ec7-46db-ae8b-ab9f4766479f/0/0.

76. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Handbook of Instructions: For Stake Presidents and Counselors Bishops and Counselors Stake and Ward Clerks and Other Church Officers* (1944), 77, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/e79e77ad-cc93-474b-8fbc-3dd789ce2042/0/0.

77. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook of Instructions* (1960), 65, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/87737946-45d8-483f-9304-e91abed74e75/0/0.

78. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook of Instructions* (1963), 74, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/e4c35937-0013-4529-a9aa-d1811c331f47/0/78.

79. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook of Instructions* (1968), 91, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/aada07e2-0c2a-45e8-8e61-3b96afb4fb16/0/96.

80. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook of Instructions* (1976), 53, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/5e14b258-ccc4-489e-bc0d-cdf4e7e3cf09/0/64. Supplement 1 followed later that year with additional amendments, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/cfa73bb2-d882-4844-a5be-db71a694ee03/0/2.

81. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook Supplement*, no. 3 (1 March 1978), 4, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/0684f732-d823-4337-bf31-8709f984673d/0/3.

82. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *1991 Supplement to the 1989 General Handbook of Instructions* (1991), 8, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/63e3bd86-2d3d-4d08-8add-f66a35fb9253/0/11.

83. Russell M. Nelson, "Closing Remarks," *Ensign*, November 2019, 121, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2019/11/57nelson.

84. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (August 2023), 224, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/d84420da-303d-40bb-8093-6e2b03e008e4/0/0.

twice in 2024.⁸⁵ The current questions are found in section 26.4.1 of the most recent version of *Handbook of Instructions*.⁸⁶

Matters of belief and matters of conduct

Edward Kimball points out that, until the 1985 *Handbook of Instruction*, matters of belief were far less important in assessing worthiness for admission to the temple than was righteous behavior.⁸⁷ The unqualified acceptance of only several points of doctrine has been mandatory. Kimball suggests further that, based on an analysis of changes in the questions over the past century, “the balance of temple worthiness questions has shifted from conduct toward faith.”⁸⁸

Although sin of any type is unbecoming an individual who wishes to be considered a follower of the Savior, most transgressions, while not condoned, do not jeopardize one’s membership in the Church. On the other hand, certain transgressions can place into jeopardy one’s worthiness to be admitted into the holy temple, or even one’s membership in the Church.

Honest and appropriate answers to the temple recommend questions allow one to enter the house of the Lord and figuratively into his presence. These are the same questions asked of brethren to receive the Melchizedek Priesthood,⁸⁹ and similar questions may be asked of youth in annual and semi-annual interviews at the discretion of the interviewing member of the bishopric. Since the interviewer represents the Lord during temple recommend interviews,⁹⁰ we may assume that these are the same questions the Lord would ask, were he the interviewer.

85. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (May 2024), 226, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/388056ac-f324-4e43-bc69-04329c00454c/0/0; and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (August 2024), 223, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/a7b2308a-9858-4a17-808b-e0525536f749/0/0.

86. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook* (2026), 26.4.1.

87. Kimball, “Temple Admission Standards,” 142.

88. Kimball, “Temple Admission Standards,” 172.

89. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook* (2026), 31.2.6.

90. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Conducting Temple Recommend Interviews,” 1.

The Beatitudes and Corresponding Temple Recommend Questions for the Initiate

Each of the principles suggested by the eleven beatitudes identifiable in 3 Nephi correlates with one or more of the fourteen temple recommend questions for initial entrance into the temple. Three of these beatitudes correspond with two recommend questions. The degree of correlation between beatitude and recommend question varies from principle to principle.

Three of the first four recommend questions correspond with beatitudes in the 3 Nephi account of the Sermon and in the Joseph Smith Translation, but these three beatitudes are absent from the Matthaean account. Each of the missing beatitudes deals with a principle that was lost during the apostasy following the death of Jesus Christ. They include the nature of Deity, the Restoration of the gospel, and the necessity of having authorized, mortal agents of God as “watchm[e]n on the tower” (Ezekiel 33:2).⁹¹ The fourth question, which concerns a belief in the Atonement of Jesus Christ, both unifies and divides Christians, as many aspects of the nature of that Atonement have been altered or lost as well.

The order in which the following principles are presented follows that of the eleven beatitudes of 3 Nephi (labeled as B#), but the order does not correlate with the order of the temple recommend questions (labeled as TR#). Each beatitude and the corresponding temple recommend question or questions will first be stated. A brief history of the question will follow. The discussion then ends with a description of how the beatitude correlates with the recommend question.

Principle #1: A testimony of current Church leaders

This beatitude and its associated temple recommend question both address the question: “Who is authorized to administer the saving ordinances of the Lord’s earthly Church?” This first beatitude is not found in the New Testament account, but it is found in the Book of Mormon (3 Nephi 12:1) and in the Joseph Smith Translation.

Beatitude associated with principle #1

(B1) Blessed are ye if ye shall **give heed unto the words**

91. See Ronald A. Rasband, “Our Watchman on the Tower,” *YA Weekly*, October 2022, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ya-weekly/2022/10/our-watchman-on-the-tower.

of these twelve whom I have chosen from among you to minister unto you, and to be your servants.

Temple recommend question associated with principle #1

(TR4) Do you sustain the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as the prophet, seer, and revelator and as the only person on the earth authorized to exercise all priesthood keys? Do you **sustain members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles** as prophets, seers, and revelators? Do you sustain the other General Authorities and local leaders of the Church?

History

A letter to local Church leaders in Iron and Washington counties (Utah) from the First Presidency, dated March 1856, requested that those to be recommended for temple ordinances "do not speak evil of the authorities of the Church."⁹² The first mention of sustaining Church leaders as a requirement for receiving a temple recommend was in the 1934 *Handbook of Instructions*, which stated that applicants "should sustain without reservation the general and local authorities of the Church."⁹³

In 1976, the portion concerning "general . . . authorities" was more specifically defined to require the applicant to aver that the President of the Church is "a Prophet, Seer, and Revelator" and is the only "person on the earth . . . authorized to exercise all priesthood keys."⁹⁴ Certain splinter groups maintain that temples dedicated early in this dispensation (generally prior to the Manifesto of 1890) were done so by divine authority, but they believe that since that time they, rather than The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, have retained priesthood keys for carrying out temple-associated ordinances. The wording of this question disqualifies members of such groups from gaining access to Latter-day Saint temples. Over the last thirty years, the recommend question has been further expanded to include an

92. "Parowan Historical Record, 13, 16 Mar 1856," quoted in Buerger, *Mysteries of Godliness*, 99–100, dokumen.pub/qdownload/the-mysteries-of-godliness-a-history-of-mormon-temple-worship.html.

93. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Handbook of Instructions* (1934), 10.

94. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook Supplement*, no. 1 (1 July 1976), 2, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/cfa73bb2-d882-4844-a5be-db71a694ee03/0/1.

affirmation of the applicant's belief that the other members of the Quorum of the First Presidency and the members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and no others, are also "prophets, seers and revelators."⁹⁵

Discussion

During his earthly sojourn, Christ established a Church and called and commissioned the Twelve Apostles, who formed a Quorum (Luke 6:13). With the death of Christ, these Apostles became the leadership of the Church and held the keys of authority to administer ordinances. In their first recorded act following the death of Judas Iscariot, the remaining Apostles assembled to reconstitute the Quorum (Acts 1:21–26). That they alone held the keys of the priesthood is evident by this action. Likewise, the Lord called Twelve Disciples from among the Nephites, to administer his ordinances as stated in 3 Nephi 12:1.

The failure of some members to sustain leaders has long plagued the Church. Any individual who does not believe that the President of the Church is a prophet of God and that in him is vested the earthly keys to the holy priesthood cannot believe that the President has the priesthood authority required to authorize the performance of valid temple ordinances. Such individuals have always been proscribed from entering the temple.

Principle #2: A testimony of Deity

The first principle of the temple recommend questions, the first of the thirteen Articles of Faith, the first of the Ten Commandments, and one of the first of Christ's declarations in the preface to the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon at the Temple concerns the reality of Deity. The associated beatitude is not found in any version of the New Testament, but it is found in the Book of Mormon and similarly in the Joseph Smith Translation of Matthew 5.

Beatitude associated with principle #2

(B2) After that ye are baptized with water, behold, I will baptize you with fire and with the Holy Ghost; therefore blessed are ye **if ye shall believe in me** and be baptized, after that ye have seen me and know that I am (3 Nephi 12:1).

95. Nelson, "Closing Remarks," 121.

Temple recommend question associated with principle #2

(TR1) Do you have **faith in and a testimony of God**, the Eternal Father; His Son, Jesus Christ; and the Holy Ghost?

History

According to Kimball, it was not until 1985 that a specific question was included among the recommend questions regarding faith in the members of the Deity. Such a statement was felt to be necessary because of a concern that an applicant, whose outwardly appropriate behavior would otherwise allow him to enter the temple, might do so inappropriately because of peer or family pressure despite lacking a true testimony of Deity. The wording of this question was expanded in 1996 to include both "faith in *and a testimony of*" the members of Deity.⁹⁶

Discussion

Knowledge that God exists and of his true nature is crucial for attaining exaltation. According to the Lord: "And this is life eternal, that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3).

The recommend statement "faith in and a testimony of" God corresponds well with the wording of the beatitude "if ye believe in me . . . and know that **I am.**" *I Am* is one of the sacred names of Jehovah (Exodus 3:14).

Christ gives special emphasis to his statement regarding himself as the Son of God, as it is the second of the Beatitudes that he delivers to the Nephites. The Joseph Smith Translation indicates that Jesus gave a similar statement to his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew-Joseph Smith Translation 5:3), which was apparently deleted from the text.

Principle #3: A testimony of the restoration of the gospel

The essence of this beatitude is to confirm the blessed state of those who have not seen God, but who nonetheless believe in the testimony of those who have. This beatitude is again not found in the New Testament account, but it is present in the Book of Mormon and in the Joseph Smith Translation.

96. Kimball, "Temple Admission Standards," 143.

Beatitude associated with principle #3

(B3) And again, more blessed are they who shall believe in your words because that **ye shall testify that ye have seen me**, and that **ye know that I am**. Yea, blessed are they who shall believe in your words, and come down into the depths of humility and be baptized, for they shall be visited with fire and with the Holy Ghost, and shall receive a remission of their sins (3 Nephi 12:2).

Temple recommend question associated with principle #3

(TR3) Do you have a testimony of the **Restoration** of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

History

The first inclusion of a temple recommend question that included “a firm testimony of the restored gospel” was in 1985. In 1996, the word *firm* was omitted. Edward Kimball points out that acknowledgement of belief in the restoration of the gospel in this dispensation also implies that “the Church was restored as a peculiar instrument in God’s hands to bring salvation to mankind and that Joseph Smith was the instrument of that restoration.”⁹⁷

Discussion

As stated in the scripture, the testimonies of the Nephite Disciples came directly from the Lord, but those who believed on their testimonies would also be blessed.

Beginning with the dispensation of Adam, every dispensation of which we are aware has opened with a face-to-face dialogue between God and the prophet who had been foreordained to stand at the head of that dispensation. Jesus communed frequently with the Father, testified of him, and opened the dispensation of the meridian of time. Nearly 1,800 years passed between the death of the Lord and the visitation by the Father and the Son to Joseph Smith at the First Vision, which ushered in the contemporary dispensation of the fullness of time.

Although others may eventually be worthy to behold God, himself, in this life, it is the testimony of the prophet who opens a dispensation upon which all members of that dispensation must initially rely,

97. Kimball, “Temple Admission Standards,” 144.

as upon Adam in the first dispensation.⁹⁸ Joseph Smith, having also become personally acquainted with God, testified of this knowledge to all people of this dispensation.

Without the testimony of Joseph Smith, knowledge of the true nature of God would have been limited to the ancient and imperfect writings of witnesses from previous dispensations. Even writings from the Savior's dispensation are incomplete, and those extant are prone to human errors of translation and transcription, and even manipulation.

Principle #4: Introspection and personal worthiness

Prior to entering their bishop's office, applicants should, ideally, have reviewed each question they will be asked and determined themselves worthy to come unto the Lord. The Church has recently stated that "the interview questions are made public so members of all ages can better understand the requirements for temple worship and prepare to enter the temple."⁹⁹ N. Eldon Tanner said, "When you sign your recommend, you make a commitment to the Lord that you are worthy of the privileges granted to those who hold such a recommend."¹⁰⁰ An accurate answer cannot be fully provided in the few seconds between being asked this question and responding. It requires introspection prior to arriving at the interview. Depending on whether the candidate humbly did so, as Kimball accurately points out, this question "can be either the easiest or hardest question in the interview."¹⁰¹

Beatitude associated with principle #4

The beatitude that corresponds to this question is found in both the Book of Mormon (3 Nephi 12:3) and the New Testament (Matthew 5:3). The phrase "who come unto me" is absent from the Sermon on the Mount but present in both the Joseph Smith Translation of the New Testament and the Sermon at the Temple in 3 Nephi. This phrase is

98. N. B. Lundwall, comp., *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: N. B. Lundwall, n.d.), 2:56, archive.org/details/compilationconta00lund/page/n3/mode/2up.

99. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Church Updates Temple Recommend Interview Questions," 6 October 2019, newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/october-2019-general-conference-temple-recommend.

100. N. Eldon Tanner, "The Blessing of Church Interviews," *Ensign*, November 1978, 42, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1978/11/the-blessing-of-church-interviews.

101. Kimball, "Temple Admission Standards," 170.

the key to the association between the temple recommend question and the beatitude.

(B4) Yea, blessed are the poor in spirit **who come unto me**,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Temple recommend question associated with principle #4

(TR16) Do you consider yourself to be worthy to enter into
the Lord's House and participate in temple ordinances?

History

The question "Do you consider yourself worthy in every way to go to the temple?" was introduced in 1978.¹⁰² Perhaps because this question often results in a prolonged period of silent introspection on the part of applicants who had not personally resolved the issue prior to seeing the bishop, the phrase "in every way" was eliminated in 1996.

Discussion

Spence and Excell conclude that "[this] Beatitude is the sum and substance of the whole sermon."¹⁰³ This final temple recommend question is perhaps the most important since it summarizes the entire recommend interview. If the comprehensive nature of the recommend question were fully appreciated, it might be the only question required.

Much has been written of the phrase "the poor in spirit," since its meaning in this limited context is vague. O. Leslie Stone states, "What is meant by 'poor in spirit'? Is it not humility, which renders us teachable and eager to learn?"¹⁰⁴ A variety of definitions have been proffered by non-Latter-day Saint authors:

The poor in spirit . . . bring their minds to their . . . low condition. They are humble and lowly in their own eyes. They see their want, bewail their guilt, and thirst after a Redeemer.¹⁰⁵

102. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook Supplement*, no. 3, 5.

103. H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Excell, *The Pulpit Commentary* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1950), 7:147, archive.org/details/pulpitcommentary0015spen/page/n184/mode/1up.

104. O. Leslie Stone, "The Beatitudes," *Conference Report*, October 1974, 40, archive.org/details/conferencereport1974sa/page/40/mode/1up.

105. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), Matthew 5:3–12, 864, archive.org/details/matthewhenryscon00henr/page/864/mode/1up.

Not the poor in purse; but such as are poor in a spiritual sense . . . who are sensible of it, who see their poverty and want, freely acknowledge it, bewail it, and mourn over it; are humbled for it, and are broken under a sense of it.¹⁰⁶

The explanatory words, “in spirit,” fix the sense to “those who in their deepest consciousness realize their entire need.”¹⁰⁷

“The poor” is a translation of the Greek word *ptóchos* (πτωχός) meaning one who cowers, who feels helpless and vulnerable, a beggar who does not know how to meet his needs.¹⁰⁸

The words “who come unto me” demonstrate that these are they who have been alienated but are now prepared to return. By applying the Hebraic device of parallel construction, Noel Reynolds equates the phrase “who come unto me” with “who keep my commandments.”¹⁰⁹ Royden C. Derrick states, “To come unto Christ, one’s first step is to come forth with a broken heart and a contrite spirit that results in overcoming unrighteous pride and becoming submissive to His will.”¹¹⁰ Thus “poor in spirit” means “lacking in one’s own will.” The rejoinder “who come unto me” is critical, however, because to be lacking in will isn’t enough, since even unambitious people lack will.

A full interpretation of this beatitude in Latter-day Saint terminology might be, “Having examined yourself, do you find yourself worthy to approach the Lord and enter into the covenants of exaltation with him?”

Principle #5: A testimony of the Atonement of Jesus Christ

Mourning and the Atonement of Jesus Christ are inextricably connected, since the Atonement overcomes the effects of the Fall of Adam, which introduced mourning. Adam and Eve had reason to

106. John Gill, “Commentary on Matthew 5:3,” *John Gill’s Exposition of the Entire Bible*, web.archive.org/web/20001010153543/http://www.freegrace.net/gill/.

107. David Brown, “Matthew 5:3,” *Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary* (1871), 2086, archive.org/details/english-christian-ebook-commentary-critical-and-explanatory-on-the-whole-bible-1/page/2086/mode/1up.

108. Strong, *Greek Dictionary*, s.v. “πτωχός” 4434, archive.org/details/19.strongss/27.StrongsGreekDictionary/page/414/mode/1up.

109. Noel B. Reynolds, “‘Come unto Me’ as a Technical Gospel Term,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*, 31 (2019): 14, journal.interpreterfoundation.org/come-unto-me-as-a-technical-gospel-term/.

110. Royden C. Derrick, “The Way to Perfection,” *Conference Report*, April 1989, 76, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1989/04/the-way-to-perfection.

mourn as they faced separation from God's presence and the assurance of physical pain, including birthing children and lifelong physical labor. The Lord specifically pronounces "sorrow" upon Eve in Moses 4:22 and upon Adam in Moses 4:23 before they leave the Garden. This emphasis on mourning our lost state, corrected only by the Atonement, ties the beatitude to the temple recommend question. The beatitude is found in the New Testament (Matthew 5:4) and in the Book of Mormon (3 Nephi 12:4); see also the Joseph Smith Translation.

Beatitude associated with principle #5

(B5) And again, blessed are all they that **mourn**, for they shall be comforted.

Temple recommend question associated with principle #5

(TR2) Do you have a **testimony of the Atonement of Christ** and of His role as your Savior and Redeemer?"

History

A question introduced in 1996 asked the applicant to assert their "testimony of the atonement of Christ and of his role as Savior and Redeemer." Perhaps this was prompted in part by demonstrably false sectarian allegations that members of the Church are not true Christians.

Discussion

This beatitude may be understood as, "And again, blessed are all they that **mourn (because of the Fall of Adam)**, for they shall be comforted **(through the Atonement of Jesus Christ)**." All mourning is the result of either the physical or the spiritual effects of the Fall. Physical effects that cause mourning include illness, injury, age-related infirmity, and inevitable physical death, all of which are relieved by the Resurrection.

Whereas all other beatitudes concern relatively small groups of people, this beatitude has reference to every mortal who has lived or ever will live because the Fall and mourning are universal. The physical and spiritual death introduced through the Fall are reversed by the Atonement of Jesus Christ, the healing fruits of which include universal resurrection as well as conditional justification and sanctification for the worthy.

Mourning as a result of spiritual death is always the result of sin and separation from the comfort of the Holy Spirit. Sinners generally feel

the detrimental effects of their own sins, but although we are accountable only for the sins we commit, we often are compelled to mourn because of sins committed by others. Christ also provides, through the Atonement, a mechanism for mortals to be relieved of "pains . . . infirmities . . ." and sorrow resulting from spiritual death by compliance with the conditions stated by the Savior (Alma 7:11–13). Doing so qualifies the individual for blessedness or exaltation. Belief in the Atonement of Jesus Christ provides comfort in mortality and in the eternities.

Principle #6: Dutiful obedience to the responsibilities of Church membership

The meaning of this beatitude is perhaps less obvious. It is based upon the definition of the word *meek*. The recommend question asks about obedience to many of the most important duties of membership, which require subservience of an individual's desires to those of the Lord. The inquiry is not about short-term commitments but about actions that, with time, become so habitual that they are essentially instinctual. The beatitude is found in the New Testament (Matthew 5:7) and in the Book of Mormon (3 Nephi 12:5); see also the Joseph Smith Translation.

Beatitude associated with principle #6

(B6) And blessed are **the meek**, for they shall inherit the earth.

The Greek word in Matthew 5:5, that translates to *the meek* is πραῖς (transliteration: *prais*), the nominative form of the adjective πραῦς (transliteration: *praus*) or *meek*. *Praus* does not mean *meek* in the modern sense of "enduring injury with patience and without resentment," or "deficient in spirit and courage," or "not violent or strong."¹¹¹ *Tame* is perhaps a more accurate translation, but it still lacks clarity. Commenting on Matthew 5:5, Barclay wrote,

The word *praus* . . . is the regular word for an animal which has been domesticated, which has been trained to obey the word of command, which has learned to answer to the reins. It is the word for an animal which has learned to accept control.¹¹²

111. *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*, s.v. "meek," merriam-webster.com/dictionary/meek.

112. William Barclay, "Commentary on Matthew 5," *William Barclay's Daily Study*

The control of a domesticated animal is its willingness to accept the control of another. The strength of the tamed animal is not diminished, but it is channeled to do the will of the master.

In our culture, the term *broken heart* is generally interpreted as “extreme sorrow,” but if one is *broken* as an animal has been broken (has been trained to accept a saddle and bridle), and *heart* means *enthusiasm* or *passion*, as in the phrase “his heart wasn’t in it,” then one with a “broken heart” is one who has become submissive. Bruce Porter taught, “Those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit are willing to do anything and everything that God asks of them without resistance or resentment. We cease doing things our way and learn to do them God’s way instead.”¹¹³ Thus, the statements in the recommend question to “strive to do [one’s] duty in the Church; to attend [important] meetings; and to obey the rules, laws, and commandments of the gospel” are appropriately analogous with being meek.

Meekness, then, is not *passive* refusal to take action, as the modern definition would suggest. Rather, it refers to an *active* endeavor under the direction of God. *The meek* are those who have subjected themselves to the will of the Father and actively serve him.

Two similar current temple recommend questions appear to correspond well with the correct meaning of *meek*.

First temple recommend question associated with principle #6

(TR6) Do you **follow the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ** in your private and public behavior with members of your family and others?

History

No similar question was included prior to 1978. After that, and from the late 1990s to 2019, the wording of this question was, “Is there anything in your conduct relating to members of your family that is not in harmony with the teachings of the Church?” In October 2019, the negative tone was eliminated and the focus shifted to the current, more general question that still emphasizes family relationships. The focus now is more toward obedience.

Bible (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1956–1959), 96–98, emphasis added, studylight.org/commentaries/eng/dsb/matthew-5.html.

113. Bruce D. Porter, “A Broken Heart and a Contrite Spirit,” *Ensign*, November 2007, 32, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2007/11/a-broken-heart-and-a-contrite-spirit.

Discussion

The implication of this question is that the meek applicant has directed his or her life to being a disciple of the Savior at all times, in all places, and with all people. It is a question that requires introspection regarding one's character, since private behavior generally lacks pretense. This question is about integrity and congruence—that the gospel governs who a person *is*, not just what that person *does*. It is about living the spirit of the law even when no one is watching. The meek follow the teachings of the Church because they wish to do so and have trained themselves to do so.

Second temple recommend question associated with principle #6

The second question deals less obviously with meekness but is still strongly correlated:

(TR8) Do you strive to keep the Sabbath day holy, both at home and at church; attend your meetings; prepare for and worthily partake of the sacrament; and **live your life in harmony with the laws and commandments of the gospel?**

History

Edward Kimball writes,

Over the years, very general criteria have appeared either in the bishop's handbook or in the question to applicants: Is the candidate in full faith and fellowship, moral, living by the gospel, living in accordance with the accepted rules and doctrines of the Church, or striving to perform his or her duty? The sweep of these questions, however phrased, is often underappreciated.¹¹⁴

Strict attendance at unspecified meetings was mentioned in 1856 as being necessary to be recommended to attend the temple. Attendance specifically at sacrament, priesthood, and "other meetings" was included as a recommend question in 1963.¹¹⁵ The query about "other meetings" was omitted in 1996. Currently the applicant is asked about several specific ways that demonstrate that he or she is

114. Kimball, "Temple Admission Standards," 165.

115. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook of Instructions* (1963), 74.

striving “to live [his or her] life in harmony with the laws and commandments of the gospel.”

Discussion

This question explores another facet of meekness. Whereas the previous question deals with character, this question is more about visible discipleship and whether one is fulfilling one’s obligations as a Church member. Although an answer to this question may indeed be indicative of the depth of one’s conversion, it is much easier to affect fidelity overtly than covertly. Nevertheless, keeping the Sabbath day holy and worthily partaking of the sacrament require a degree of commitment that cannot be feigned. Such commitment comes from meekness, or relinquishing the control of one’s own desires to the will of the Lord.

Principle #7: Willingness to sacrifice certain physical pleasures for righteousness

Commentators generally interpret the words “hunger and thirst” figuratively to mean “a consuming or powerful desire,”¹¹⁶ as if to say, “Blessed are those who truly long for righteousness.” While this is undoubtedly correct, interpreting “hungering and thirsting” in a more active literal sense harmonizes well with temple recommend questions that deal with the sacrifice of physical pleasures and a willingness to limit desires and passions to within the bounds set by the Lord. This beatitude is found in Matthew 5:6 (Joseph Smith Translation 5:8) and 3 Nephi 12:6.

Beatitude associated with principle #7

(B7) And blessed are all they **who do hunger and thirst** after righteousness, for they shall be filled with the Holy Ghost.

Two current temple recommend questions can be understood as corresponding with “hungering and thirsting for righteousness.” A proper interpretation of the phrase, “hunger and thirst after righteousness” will help with understanding the meaning of this beatitude. *After* may be best interpreted as *in the pursuit of*. True “hungering and thirsting” are done voluntarily, subjugating physical desires to those desires of the spirit. A proper restatement of this beatitude might be, “And

116. Judy Allen, “To Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness,” Open the Bible, 10 May 2017, openthebible.org/article/to-hunger-and-thirst-for-righteousness/.

blessed are all they *who control their physical appetites and desires in the pursuit of righteousness*, for they shall be filled with the Holy Ghost.”

First temple recommend question associated with principle #7

(TR10) Are you a **full-tithe payer**?

Although “hunger and thirst” are most conspicuously associated with a lack of food or drink, that phrase might also appropriately refer to money or other resources one chooses instead to donate as tithes or offerings.

History

As the Nauvoo Temple neared completion, Joseph Smith told the people, “Those whose names are found in the Church books [for contributing property for the temple] shall have the first claim to receive their endowments in the temple.”¹¹⁷ Realizing that tithing is a difficult principle for many people to observe, the necessity to be a full tithe payer has sometimes been relaxed. In 1928, temple recommend applicants were simply “encouraged” to “observe the principle of tithing.”¹¹⁸ By 1934 the wording had stiffened, now requiring the applicant to “observe the law of tithing”¹¹⁹—despite being in the depths of the Great Depression. Six years later, the applicant was required either to be “an honest tithe payer” or to “undertake to become” such.¹²⁰ Since 1963, the requirement has remained to be a full tithe payer.¹²¹ Although the requirement to be a full tithe payer is now more inflexible, the declaration of one’s status is left completely to the discretion of the applicant.

117. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1902) 6:243, archive.org/details/HistoryOfTheChurchOfJesusChristOfLatter-daySaints1902-Volume6/page/n300/mode/1up.

118. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Handbook of Instructions: For Bishops and Counselors Stake and Ward Clerks of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (1928), 11, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/db41ef9c-68e0-46aa-8481-7d6e53994ef0/0/12.

119. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Handbook of Instructions* (1934), 10.

120. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Handbook of Instructions* (1940), 129.

121. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook of Instructions* (1963), 74.

Discussion

One may donate money and other financial resources as tithes or offerings. Additional sacrifices to that end include a monthly twenty-four-hour fast to assist the poor and needy. In addition, men and women voluntarily forgo the usual pleasures that others of their age enjoy when serving as full-time, service, or senior missionaries for the Church. Other faithful fulfillment of Church callings, or performing acts of service to fellowmen, usually results in spending less time on entertainment or other time-consuming activities.

Sacrificing earthly pleasures—in the form of monthly fasts, obeying a proscription on certain foods and more, and the sacrifice of tithing, offerings, and time and energy in callings—in the pursuit of eternal joy is a fitting correspondence to hungering and thirsting after righteousness.

Second temple recommend question associated with principle #7

(TR10) Do you understand and obey the **Word of Wisdom**?

The true disciple will be willing to abstain (hunger and thirst) from proscribed items in the pursuit of eternal joy.

History

Section 89 of the Doctrine and Covenants, received in 1833, and parts of other sections, outline the basic principles of the Word of Wisdom, although details have been supplied through later clarification by Church authorities and by consistent inspired teachings over time. Initially, and for the next nearly ninety years, the principle was considered by some members to be merely a strong suggestion and not a commandment. There is good evidence that Church leaders were committed in principle to the Word of Wisdom long before strict adherence was first required in 1919 to obtain a temple recommend.¹²²

The degree of stringency in observing the Word of Wisdom required of a temple recommend applicant varied over the next several decades. In 1940 and 1944, applicants were required simply to

122. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Instructions to mission presidents, 8 October 1919," in *Messages of the First Presidency*, Vol. 5, ed. James R. Clark (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971), 163, [fairlatterdaysaints.org/answers/Word_of_Wisdom/History_and_implementation#Question:_Did_Heber_J._Grant_include_a_strict_observance_of_the_Word_of_Wisdom_in_the_temple_recommend_interview_because_of_the_repeal_of_prohibition?](https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/answers/Word_of_Wisdom/History_and_implementation#Question:_Did_Heber_J._Grant_include_a_strict_observance_of_the_Word_of_Wisdom_in_the_temple_recommend_interview_because_of_the_repeal_of_prohibition?)

display "willingness to undertake" observation of the principle.¹²³ Numerous prohibitions have been discussed in Church publications, sermons, and manuals relative to the principle, including the use of alcoholic beverages, tobacco in all its forms, coffee, tea, and drugs, both illegal and also legal when taken contrary to their prescribed uses. In 1960, the recommend question became more specific, requiring that the applicant "observe the Word of Wisdom, abstaining from tea, coffee, tobacco, and liquor."¹²⁴ Since 1976, the recommend question has been simply, "Do you keep the Word of Wisdom?"¹²⁵ although in 2019, the wording was amended slightly, but significantly, to "Do you understand and keep . . . ?"¹²⁶

Discussion

The Lord has filled the earth with an immense selection of delicious and wholesome foods and other substances for the benefit and enjoyment of mankind. Beginning in the Garden of Eden, the Lord has proscribed from time to time the ingestion of certain of these items. To those willing to heed such warnings and forego the use of these prohibited items, the Lord has reserved the blessing of worthiness to enter his temple and participate in the ordinances therein.

Many ingestible substances, including those proscribed in Doctrine and Covenants 89:5–9, have a sensual appeal, and some even have associated degrees of addiction (the overcoming of which entails severe hunger) but provide little or nothing toward the sustaining of life.

An applicant must commit to live the law of sacrifice when entering into temple covenants. It is one thing to yearn for something, but it is quite another to be willing to sacrifice physically in its pursuit. Robert E. Wells states, "To hunger and thirst for something involves strife, struggles, work, and sacrifice."¹²⁷ Dallin H. Oaks notes, "Jesus frequently used the familiar examples of food and drink to teach His lessons."¹²⁸

123. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Handbook of Instructions* (1940), 129.

124. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook of Instructions* (1960), 66.

125. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook of Instructions* (1976), 53.

126. Nelson, "Closing Remarks."

127. Robert E. Wells, "The Beatitudes: Pattern for Coming unto Christ," *Ensign*, December 1987, 17, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1987/12/the-beatitudes-pattern-for-coming-unto-christ.

128. Dallin H. Oaks, "Nourishing the Spirit," *Ensign*, December 1987, 13, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1987/12/nourishing-the-spirit.

Bruce R. McConkie emphasized that Christ exemplified his own words while being tempted in the wilderness when he went without food and drink for forty days and was “an hungered” (Matthew 4:2). McConkie writes, “No morsel of food entered his mouth, no drop of water wet his parched lips or dripped down his throat.”¹²⁹ Hungering after food, thirsting after drink, and even denying oneself of certain physical comforts are therefore appropriate metaphors.

Principle #8: Mercy and obtaining forgiveness from sin

All sin separates the sinner from God and is resolved only through repentance, which is possible only because of the Savior’s mercy. The merciful will find favor in the Lord’s sight and will obtain forgiveness.

No unclean thing shall be permitted to come into [the Lord’s] house to pollute it; And when [the Lord’s] people transgress, any of them, they may speedily repent and return unto [the Lord], and find favor in [the Lord’s] sight, and be restored to the blessings which [the Lord] hath ordained to be poured out upon those who shall reverence [the Lord] in [the Lord’s] house. (Doctrine and Covenants 109:20–21)

Beatitude associated with principle #8

This principle is expressed in Matthew 5:7 as well as in 3 Nephi 12:7.

(B8) And blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain **mercy**.

Temple recommend question associated with principle #8

(TR15) Are there serious sins in your life that need to be resolved with priesthood authorities as part of your **repentance**?

History

To cover possible lingering problems, applicants were asked for a time whether they had ever been denied a recommend. In 1976, the question was rephrased to inquire about unresolved “major

jesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1998/12/nourishing-the-spirit.

129. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah: From Bethlehem to Calvary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 411, archive.org/details/mortalmessiahfro01mcco/page/411/mode/1up.

transgressions."¹³⁰ This was changed in 1978 to "anything else amiss" that had not been adequately resolved by priesthood authority.¹³¹ The question was again rephrased in 1985 by changing the vague "anything amiss" to the more direct "sin or misdeed."¹³²

Discussion

This temple recommend question and its associated beatitude discuss two aspects of obtaining mercy, or forgiveness from sin.

This beatitude states that one must show mercy to others to obtain mercy from the Lord. This applies to all sins, but the majority of sins, although unbecoming of a member of the Lord's Church, are not serious enough to jeopardize one's worthiness to enter the temple.

The temple recommend question focuses on grievous sins—emphasizing the need for priesthood authority when temple worthiness is at stake. Forgiveness is ultimately granted only through the Lord's mercy. The priesthood leader, who represents the Lord, is to judge as the Lord would.¹³³

Principle #9: The law of chastity

Throughout the scriptures and associated Latter-day Saint instructions, the phrase "pure in heart" has had numerous connotations. The one most consistently used by Church leaders, however, is associated with moral cleanliness. The beatitude is found in the New Testament (Matthew 5:8) and in the Book of Mormon (3 Nephi 12:8; see also the Joseph Smith Translation of Matthew 5:10).

Beatitude associated with principle #9

(B9) Blessed are the **pure in heart**, for they shall see God.

Temple recommend question associated with principle #9

The associated current temple recommend question is presented in three parts:

130. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook of Instructions* (1976), 21:53.

131. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook Supplement*, no. 3, 5.

132. Kimball, "Temple Admission Standards," 169.

133. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Conducting Temple Recommend Interviews," 1.

(TR5) The Lord has said that all things are to be “done in **cleanliness**” before Him.

Do you strive for **moral cleanliness** in your thoughts and behavior?

Do you live the **law of chastity**?

History

Being free of immoral behavior has been, since the early days of the Church, included as an important tenet of orthodox Latter-day Saint behavior. A statement of doctrinal belief issued in 1856, known as the *Reformation catechism*, was not in itself associated with temple worthiness. However, it did act as a barometer for the concerns of Church leaders. It asked, “Have you committed adultery, by having any connection with a woman that was not your wife or a man that was not your husband?”¹³⁴ An 1856 “letter of instructions to the Bishops of Utah concerning endowments” stated that the applicant should not “interfere with . . . their neighbor’s wives or husbands.”¹³⁵ This statement was included in the 1940 *Handbook of Instructions*.¹³⁶ The 1960 *Handbook* referred to the necessity of refraining from “all kinds of immoral practices.”¹³⁷ Perhaps precipitated by the sexual revolution of the 1960s, the questions in the *Handbook* of 1976 included an inquiry regarding whether the applicant was “morally clean.”¹³⁸ That phrase was amended later in the same year to the more specific query regarding any “transgression relating to the law of chastity.”¹³⁹ A 1978 revision added a scripture to the question: “But if there shall come into it [the temple] any unclean thing, my glory shall not be there; and my presence shall not come into it” (Doctrine and Covenants 94:8–9).

134. Paul H. Peterson, “The Mormon Reformation of 1856–1857: The Rhetoric and the Reality,” *Journal of Mormon History* 15 (1989), 70, digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1015&context=mormonhistory.

135. *Journal History of the Church 1830–2008*, 19 May 1856, LDS Church Archives, 59, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/cfb09404-ec21-47e9-a661-0233ac831191/0/58.

136. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Handbook of Instructions* (1940), 129–34.

137. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook of Instructions* (1960), 65–66.

138. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook of Instructions* (1976), 53.

139. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook of Instructions* (1976), 2.

The same edition of the *Handbook* proscribed "impure, unholy, or unnatural sex acts."¹⁴⁰ That wording often led those interviewed to ask for definitions and resulted in interviewers offering opinions and probing too deeply into intimate marital relations. That may have been the cause for the removal of explicit questioning until 1985 when the question was amended to the simple and straightforward "Do you live the law of chastity?"¹⁴¹ The evolution of the critical question of moral worthiness reflects the sensitive nature of the principle. As such, euphemistic terms have generally been employed.

Discussion

The phrase *pure in heart* has often been similarly used euphemistically by Church leaders regarding sexual matters. A few representative references follow:

God's law of chastity is as binding on men as on women. Each has the same need and responsibility to be *pure in heart*.¹⁴²

[We] warn . . . against all conduct that tends to immorality and unchastity . . . none but the *pure in heart* can see God.¹⁴³

Jesus also declared: "Blessed are the *pure in heart*: for they shall see God." . . . Has God withdrawn the laws relative to chastity?¹⁴⁴

Remember never [speak anything] that is indecent, suggestive, degrading, or of an immoral nature. . . . "Blessed are the *pure in heart*: for they shall see God."¹⁴⁵

Personal chastity is a pre-requisite to the enjoyment of the presence of God; among the beatitudes not one is of greater import than "Blessed are the *pure in heart*."¹⁴⁶

140. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook Supplement*, no. 3, 4.

141. Kimball, "Temple Admission Standards," 149–50.

142. Hugh B. Brown, *The Abundant Life* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 48, pdfcoffee.com/abundant-life-hugh-b-brownhtml-pdf-free.html.

143. Clark, *Messages*, 3:62.

144. Milton R. Hunter, "Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery," *Ensign*, June 1971, 42, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1971/06/thou-shalt-not-commit-adultery.

145. Milton R. Hunter, *General Conference*, April 1963, 15, archive.org/details/conferencereport1963a/page/15/mode/1up.

146. "Personal Chastity—A Latter-day Saint Ideal," *Improvement Era* 12, October 1930, 821, archive.org/details/improvementera3312unse/page/821/mode/1up.

The central theme of the Savior’s teachings on chastity and moral cleanliness . . . [is] the *pure in heart* . . . keep themselves free from immoral fantasies and deeds.¹⁴⁷

President Joseph F. Smith said that sexual impurity . . . would threaten the Church. . . . “Blessed are the *pure in heart*: for they shall see God.”¹⁴⁸

The three-part temple recommend question regarding chastity has understandably been cloaked in euphemism and generalization, as have many other sensitive topics in the scriptures. The phrase “pure in heart” carries a similar feeling of clarity yet uses discretion while emphasizing a delicate subject.

Principle #10: Being peacemakers—Honesty in dealings

The correlation between honesty and being a peacemaker may not be immediately obvious, but many commentators have made the association clearer, as discussed below.

Beatitude associated with principle #10

The beatitude is found in the New Testament (Matthew 5:9) and in the Book of Mormon (3 Nephi 12:9; see also the Joseph Smith Translation of Matthew 5:10).

(B10) Blessed are all the **peacemakers**, for they shall be called the children of God.

Two temple recommend questions are related to maintaining peace.

First temple recommend question associated with principle #10

(TR9) Do you strive to be **honest** in all you do?

History

As early as 1856, honesty was specifically stated by the First Presidency to be a requirement for receiving a temple recommend.¹⁴⁹ Peterson notes, “Of the 1856–57 ‘Mormon Reformation’ catechism’s twenty-seven questions, fourteen dealt with various forms

147. Sheldon F. Child, “Words of Jesus: Chastity,” *Ensign*, January 2003, 44, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2003/01/words-of-jesus-chastity.

148. Gordon B. Hinckley, “In Search of Peace and Freedom,” *Ensign*, August 1989, 2, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1989/08/in-search-of-peace-and-freedom.

149. “Heber C. Kimball to Bishop Evans,” 19 May 1856.

of dishonesty.”¹⁵⁰ This was reiterated in the 1940 *Handbook*, which contained a statement by Brigham Young that temple-goers should be honest.¹⁵¹ A formal recommend question appeared first in the 1976 *Handbook* with the general query “Are you honest in your dealings with your fellowmen?”¹⁵² which was strengthened shortly thereafter by amending “honest” to “totally honest.”¹⁵³ The entire question was removed in the 1985 edition but reappeared in its current form in 1989.¹⁵⁴

Discussion

There are two types of peacemakers. *Peace-preservers* maintain peace and prevent discord. *Peace-restorers* work to repair damaged relationships. Russell M. Nelson spoke often about being a peacemaker, occasionally in the context of being a peace-preserver, but more often as being a peace-restorer. He advised:

Now is the time to lay aside bitterness. Now is the time to cease insisting that it is your way or no way. Now is the time to stop doing things that make others walk on eggshells for fear of upsetting you. Now is the time to bury your weapons of war.¹⁵⁵

President Oaks similarly states, “Our missionaries seek to be peacemakers. They preach repentance from personal corruption, greed, and oppression.”¹⁵⁶

This beatitude focuses on preserving peace rather than restoring it. To that end, honesty in one’s dealings with others is inextricably connected with maintaining peaceful coexistence. Paul associates peace with honesty in 1 Timothy 2:2: “For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.” Richard L. Evans of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

150. Peterson, “Mormon Reformation of 1856–1857,” 70.

151. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Handbook of Instructions* (1940), 130.

152. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook of Instructions* (1976), 53.

153. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook Supplement*, no. 1, 2.

154. Kimball, “Temple Admission Standards,” 169.

155. Russell M. Nelson, “Peacemakers Needed,” *Liahona*, May 2023, 19–20, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2023/05/47nelson.

156. Dallin H. Oaks, “Alive in Christ,” *Liahona*, May 2026, 86, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2026/05/49oaks.

observes, “To find peace — the peace within, the peace that passeth understanding — men must live in honesty.”¹⁵⁷

Much can be learned regarding the interpersonal relationships that lead to peace from the account of one particularly lengthy period of peace found in 4 Nephi 1:2–4, 15–18: “There were no contentions and disputations among them, and every man did deal justly one with another . . . and there still continued to be peace in the land.”

Few interpersonal dealings can cause hostility and destroy peace more rapidly than dishonesty. The first two headings of the lesson on honesty from the *Aaronic Priesthood Manual* state, “Honesty Brings Peace” and “Honesty Is the Basis for All Good Relationships.” It teaches:

Honesty is the basis of all good relationships. Many of the Ten Commandments teach us how to live peacefully with others. Successful relationships depend on people being able to trust each other. Treaties are made between nations on the basis of trust. When there is a lack of trust between nations, diplomatic relations break down and trade and other peaceful activities cease. War may result.¹⁵⁸

Another aspect that is considered less often is peace within oneself. Regarding honesty, the Church teaches, “When we are honest in every way, we are able to enjoy peace of mind” and “The lasting peace that comes from being honest is more valuable than the momentary relief of following the crowd.”¹⁵⁹

Second temple recommend question associated with principle #10

(TR12) Do you have any financial or other obligations to a former spouse or to children? If yes, are you current in meeting those obligations?

History

The focus of the second question related to this principle, honoring financial obligations, began in the 1944 *Handbook of Instructions*. It was a question regarding peacemaking in the situation of divorce. The

157. Richard L. Evans, *Conference Report*, October 1959, 128, archive.org/details/conferencereport1959sa/page/128/mode/1up.

158. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Lesson 47: Honesty,” *Aaronic Priesthood Manual 3*, 189–91, rikers.org/lds/manuals/ap3/56.html.

159. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Honesty,” Topics and Questions (2025), churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/honesty.

purpose was simply to remind the bishop to ascertain that a divorce or sealing had been finalized prior to issuing a recommend for a previously married member to be sealed to another spouse.¹⁶⁰ *The General Handbook* stated in 1960 that all recommends for individuals who had been divorced required First Presidency review.¹⁶¹ That condition was gradually relaxed by the First Presidency over the ensuing decades so that, by 1985, the focus of the question had shifted away from the divorce itself to any financial obligations resulting from a divorce.¹⁶²

If an applicant had been divorced, a follow-up question was asked: “Are you presently fulfilling your obligations for support and maintenance of your family?”¹⁶³ Starting in 1991, requirements for a temple recommend included compliance with all legal obligations that the individual might have incurred as a result of the divorce.¹⁶⁴ In 1996, the wording changed to require the applicant to be “current in meeting financial and other obligations.”¹⁶⁵ The question has remained in its current form since 2019.¹⁶⁶

Discussion

Divorce is no longer directly addressed in temple recommend interviews. There are, however, few common situations that have more potential for acrimony between two or more people than divorce, and one of the most common reasons for such acrimony involves finances. Failure to meet agreed-upon financial responsibilities can extinguish hope for a peaceful coexistence, and often children are caught up in the rancor. Elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord commands those who would come unto him, in the same manner that he would command one who is seeking admission to the temple:

Therefore, if ye shall come unto me, or shall desire to come unto me, and rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee — Go thy way unto thy brother, and first be

160. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Handbook of Instructions* (1944), 17:82.

161. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook of Instructions* (1960), 67–68.

162. Kimball, “Temple Admission Standards,” 154.

163. Kimball, “Temple Admission Standards,” 154.

164. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *1991 Supplement to the 1989 General Handbook of Instructions* (1991), 8.

165. Kimball, “Temple Admission Standards,” 154.

166. Nelson, “Closing Remarks.”

reconciled to thy brother, and then come unto me with full purpose of heart, and I will receive you. (3 Nephi 12:23–34)

All animosity must be resolved and a peaceful existence assured before one seeks a recommend for admission to the temple. In its present form, this temple recommend question has much more to do with integrity and honor in keeping commitments and with maintaining interpersonal peace than it has with divorce itself.

Principle #11: Avoiding apostasy

Both this temple recommend question and the corresponding beatitude refer to apostasy, but they approach the subject from different perspectives.

Beatitude associated with principle #11

The beatitude is found in Matthew 5:10–12 and in 3 Nephi 12:10–12.

(B11) And blessed are all they who are persecuted for my name's sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake; For ye shall have great joy and be exceedingly glad, for great shall be your reward in heaven; for so persecuted they the prophets who were before you.

Temple recommend question associated with principle #11

(TR7) Do you support or promote any teachings, practices, or doctrine contrary to those of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?

History

According to Edward Kimball, since 1940, the primary focus of this particular question has been upon fundamentalist groups who continue to practice polygamy. Members of such groups have been known to attempt to gain entrance into the temples of the Church.¹⁶⁷

Prior to 1985, temple recommend applicants had also been asked whether they had “affiliation with or sympathy for” these fundamentalist groups. Perhaps because many kind-hearted individuals answered affirmatively—that they did indeed have “sympathy for” such people—the query was reworded slightly that year to clarify that the

167. Kimball, “Temple Admission Standards,” 145.

sympathy in question was with *precepts* rather than with *individuals*. The question was again reworded in 1996 to state, “support, affiliate with, or agree with” the precepts of any group whose teachings or practices oppose those of the Church.¹⁶⁸

Discussion

Church members can, and often do, have personal opinions and beliefs about various teachings. This is understandable and perfectly acceptable, and these ideas do not constitute apostasy as long as they are not taught in opposition to—or even as—official Church doctrine.

Although the intent of the original temple recommend question may have been to counter fundamentalist polygamist groups practicing polygamy after the Manifesto, over the past few decades, as unrighteousness has become increasingly more rampant, the focus of this recommend question may have shifted toward non-religious groups that advance causes against which the Church has voiced strict opposition. Vociferous movements have formed both inside and outside of the Church for the purpose of promoting abortion, gender dysphoria, gay marriage, the ordination of women to the priesthood, and other causes.

Participation in, or even sympathy with, an organization that promotes a viewpoint discordant with Church doctrine, as stated in the interview question, is unacceptable for anyone who desires to qualify for a temple recommend. Actively campaigning on behalf of such a viewpoint may even call into question one’s Church membership. Elder Neil A. Maxwell warned two generations ago against apostasy:

The Lord has clearly indicated that His purifying and sifting judgment would begin *first* at the house of God and then proceed outward to the world (See 1 Peter 4:17; Doctrine and Covenants 112:25).¹⁶⁹

Since this initial discord will begin within the Church, both the focus of the recommend question against personal apostasy and the warning against apostates are timely.

While the beatitude is directed toward victims of persecutors, the associated temple recommend question is intended to explore

168. Kimball, “Temple Admission Standards,” 145–46.

169. Neil A. Maxwell, “Be of Good Cheer,” *Ensign*, November 1982, 68, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1982/11/be-of-good-cheer.

a Saint's personal tendency toward apostasy. This is a subtle, but important, distinction in the elaboration of this critical principle. This distinction could be because members who are being asked the temple recommend questions may be more likely to be persuaded by apostate views than would be Apostles and other Church leaders, to whom the Beatitudes were initially delivered.

Keeping Covenants: An Additional Principle for the Previously Endowed Applicant

Two questions are omitted from the interview for unendowed applicants but are asked of the previously endowed. They discuss the importance of keeping previously made covenants. It is understandable that keeping those covenants was not a part of the initial interview introduced by the Beatitudes because the Apostles and Disciples had not yet entered into these covenants. The topic of keeping covenants is, however, discussed several places elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount.

Principle #12: Keeping covenants

True Saints are covenant-makers, but perhaps more importantly, they are covenant-keepers. Three temple recommend questions deal with keeping covenants. Scripturally, the “salt” and “light” verses that follow the Beatitudes, and a portion of the Sermon itself, also discuss keeping covenants. Possibly because they were not part of the training material for initiates into the covenant, none of the verses related to keeping covenants are presented in the form of a beatitude.

Each of the two recommend questions, and corresponding verses from the Sermon, follow.

First temple recommend question associated with principle #12

(TR13) Do you **keep the covenants** that you made in the temple?

History

In 1963, for the first time, applicants for renewal of recommends were asked whether they were keeping the covenants they had previously made within the temple.¹⁷⁰ That question has remained on the list of requirements since.

170. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook of*

Discussion

It may be unnecessary to state that if one applies for readmission to the temple, non-compliance with previously accepted covenants would be reasonable grounds for denial.

Second temple recommend question associated with principle #12

(TR14) Do you honor your sacred privilege to **wear the garment** as instructed in the initiatory ordinances?

Associated scriptures

Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, even so will he clothe you, if ye are not of little faith. (3 Nephi 13:30)

The Lord promises here to provide clothing for the faithful, as he clothed Adam and Eve with symbolic “coats of skins” (Genesis 3:21). In the New Testament account, the Lord sounds accusatory, addressing the hearers as “O ye of little faith.” In the 3 Nephi account, however, his conditional tone is consistent with the loving tone of the Beatitudes. Moreover, the splendor of the raiment is otherworldly. Solomon’s clothing — certainly a metaphor for the finest the world could offer — did not compare to the lilies of the field, which were clothed by the Creator himself. The raiment the Lord offers supersedes even that.

History

Questions regarding wearing of the temple garment began in 1940 when new applicants were asked whether they would be willing to wear the temple garment.¹⁷¹ By 1957, applicants were asked whether they wore “regulation” and later “approved” or “authorized” garments. Beginning in 1976, the applicant was asked whether they wore the garment “both night and day.”¹⁷² The instruction was first given in 1989 that the garment should not be altered.¹⁷³ The 1996 instructions emphasized wearing the garment “in accordance with the covenant you

Instructions (1963), 74. See also Jake Frandsen, “What Are the 5 Covenants Made in the Temple Endowment?,” *LDS Living*, 8 February 2023, ldsiving.com/what-are-the-5-covenants-made-in-the-temple-endowment/s/11289.

171. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Handbook of Instructions* (1940), 129.

172. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook Supplement*, no. 1 (1 July 1976), 2.

173. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook of*

made in the temple.”¹⁷⁴ In 2024, the inquiry about whether the applicant wore the garment as instructed became a separate question.¹⁷⁵

Discussion

When a member applies for initial admission to the temple, this question is understandably omitted because the person has not yet entered into the covenant, received the garment, and committed to wearing it. The temple garment is a constant reminder of the temple experience. Wearing the holy garment is symbolic of a willingness to keep the covenants made in the temple and of having the faith that doing so will be protective both spiritually and even, at times, physically.

Discussing 3 Nephi 13:30, John Welch¹⁷⁶ points out:

[The Lord] then talks about [temple] garments. In Greek the word *enduo*,¹⁷⁷ from which our word *endow* is directly derived, has two meanings. *Enduo* means “to clothe, to put on clothing.” It also means “to take on characteristics, virtues, and intentions.” When a person is endowed, the person is clothed. Jesus told his disciples not to leave Jerusalem (Luke 24:49) until they were “endued with power from on high.” The clothing represents the robes of God’s righteousness. The atonement occurs when one is encircled by the robes of God’s righteousness, but this only occurs as these attributes are taken on — the attributes set forth in the beginning in the Beatitudes. Joseph Smith spoke frequently about the need to be endowed in the House of the Lord. It’s interesting that Jesus expresses this idea by saying to his disciples, I will give you clothing. And the word there is *endumata*.¹⁷⁸

Instructions (1989), 6–3, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/4dc65d2f-56e2-4272-aa3e-e64cc39e5897/0/66.

174. Kimball, “Temple Admission Standards,” 165.

175. Scott Taylor, “First Presidency Updates Temple Recommend Interview Questions, Shares Statement on the Wearing of the Temple Garment,” *Church News*, 14 April 2024, thechurchnews.com/leaders/2024/04/14/first-presidency-letter-garment-of-the-holy-priesthood-temple-recommend-statement/.

176. Welch, *Transcripts*, 143.

177. Strong, *Greek Dictionary*, s.v. “ενδύω,” 1746.

178. Strong, *Greek Dictionary*, s.v. “ενδυματα,” 1742.

First scripture associated with principle #12

The scriptures associated with keeping covenants immediately follow the Beatitudes, but they are not *beatitudes* themselves. They are the so-called "salt verses." Salt is used metaphorically here as a call to action. Once a blessing has been received through covenant keeping, that blessing must be used in the service of others. These verses are found in 3 Nephi 12:13 (Matthew 5:13) and Joseph Smith Translation Matthew 5:15.

Verily, verily, I say unto you, **I give unto you to be** the salt of the earth; but if the salt shall lose its savor wherewith shall the earth be salted? The salt shall be thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out and to be trodden under foot of men. (3 Nephi 12:13)

Discussion

Since salt was used anciently as a preservative, it is commonly stated that Christ compared the Apostles, the New World Disciples, and, by extension, all Saints to *salt* because he was commissioning them to oppose society's moral and spiritual decay. Dictionaries of idioms also define "salt of the earth" as those who enhance society by being "persons of great kindness, reliability or honesty"¹⁷⁹ and "representative of the best or noblest elements of society."¹⁸⁰ Other commentators have suggested the metaphorical usage of salt because it has antiseptic properties, is a catalyst for fire, and creates thirst.¹⁸¹

Salt, however, carries a connotation of much greater temple significance since it is mentioned several times in the Old Testament (*italics added*) with respect to temple sacrifices and a covenant:

And every oblation of thy meat offering shalt thou **season with salt**; neither shalt thou suffer the *salt of the covenant* of thy God to be lacking from thy meat offering; with all thine offerings thou shalt *offer salt*. (Leviticus 2:13)

All the heave offerings of the holy things . . . is **a covenant of**

179. "Salt of the Earth," *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms*, ed. Judith Siefring (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), ngoangu.vimaru.edu.vn/wp-content/uploads/documents/Oxford-Dictionary-of-Idioms-1.pdf.

180. "Salt of the Earth," *Dictionary.com*, dictionary.com/browse/salt-of-the-earth.

181. Kenneth S. Hemphill, "You Are the Salt of the Earth," *SBC Life*, 1 October 2004, baptistpress.com/resource-library/sbc-life-articles/you-are-the-salt-of-the-earth/.

salt for ever before the Lord unto thee and to thy seed with thee. (Numbers 18:19).

The Lord God of Israel gave the kingdom over Israel to David for ever . . . by **a covenant of salt**. (2 Chronicles 13:5)

In Matthew 5:13, the Lord pronounces, “**Ye are** the salt of the earth,” but the account in 3 Nephi differs materially by using instead the words “**I give unto you.**” Cloward states, “[The Joseph Smith Translation of] Matthew and 3 Nephi express the Savior’s words in the form of a commission.” “I give unto you,” then, is a true call to action, promising the Apostles and Disciples what they will become by entering the covenant.¹⁸² Significant additional insight from latter-day revelation is added in the Doctrine and Covenants, which explains that “the salt of the earth” refers to those who have entered into an everlasting covenant with God: “**When men are called unto mine everlasting gospel, and covenant with an everlasting covenant,** they are accounted as the salt of the earth and the savor of men” (Doctrine and Covenants 101:39–40).

The phrase

“When men are called unto mine everlasting gospel, and covenant with an everlasting covenant, they are accounted as . . .”

may be grammatically equated with the phrase

“I give unto you to be . . .”

Syllogistically then, if the New Testament Apostles and the Nephite Disciples were both “the salt of the earth,” and if men who enter into an everlasting covenant are also “the salt of the earth,” then the Apostles and Disciples were entering into an everlasting covenant. Richardson suggests that “rather than telling the disciples what they already are . . . Jesus Christ is actually challenging his disciples to become something new. They are *called* to be the salt of the earth.”¹⁸³ It is the Lord’s intention, then, that they enter into the covenant, but “I give unto you”

182. Robert A. Cloward, “The Sermon on the Mount in the JST and the Book of Mormon,” in *The Joseph Smith Translation: The Restoration of Plain and Precious Truths*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Robert L. Millet (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, BYU, 1985), 163–200, rsc.byu.edu/joseph-smith-translation/sermon-mountain-jst-book-mormon.

183. Matthew O. Richardson, “Salt and Light: Being in the World but Not of the World,” in *The Sermon on the Mount in Latter-day Scripture*, ed. Gaye Strathearn, Thomas A. Wayment, and Daniel L. Belnap (Provo, UT: Religious

implies that they have not yet done so. The Beatitudes, and possibly the entire Sermon that follows, may therefore contain preliminary or preparatory instructions for a future event, which John Welch has suggested is the temple endowment.¹⁸⁴ Since the Apostles did not receive their own endowments until three years later during Christ's forty-day ministry following his death (Luke 24:49), chapters 5–7 of Matthew and 12–14 of 3 Nephi may represent preparatory instructions for a future temple-like experience.¹⁸⁵

Since salt is so closely associated with the covenant, it is perhaps more than coincidental that the largest saltwater lakes in the Eastern and Western Hemispheres, the Dead Sea and the Great Salt Lake, respectively, lie adjacent to the headquarters of God's two covenant peoples.

Second scripture associated with principle #12

These verses are found in 3 Nephi 12:14–16 (Matthew 5:14–16) and Joseph Smith Translation Matthew 5:16–18.

Verily, verily, I say unto you, I give unto you to be the **light of this people**. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Behold, do men light a candle and put it under a bushel? Nay, but on a candlestick, and it giveth light to all that are in the house; Therefore let your light so shine before this people, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

Discussion

As with the "salt verse," the so-called "light verses" are not in the form of a beatitude, but their clear reference to obligations one has assumed in the temple binds them to the preceding verses as being temple related and reinforces the temple context of those verses.

When a candle is lit, it changes from a dark object into one that is autonomously luminous, just as ordinary individuals, empowered by their temple covenants, act autonomously to bring light to the world. Enough faithful members of the Church have become examples of

Studies Center, BYU; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 80–81, rsc.byu.edu/sermon-mount-latter-day-scripture/salt-light.

184. Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount*, 23–34.

185. Brown and Griggs, "The 40-Day Ministry," 6–11; and "Book of Mormon Evidence: Parallels with Christ's 40-Day Ministry."

success by earthly standards that the world is taking notice.¹⁸⁶ The temporal success of Latter-day Saints is, however, secondary to their visible adherence to spiritual, moral, and ethical standards. Gordon B. Hinckley emphasizes this point when he writes, “[I was] asked, ‘what is the symbol of your religion?’ I replied that the lives of our people must become the most meaningful expression of our faith and, in fact, therefore, the symbol of our worship.”¹⁸⁷ In a later book, he identified ten principles in chapter titles that address points of light each covenant Latter-day Saint person should radiate to the world: Love, Honesty, Morality, Civility, Learning, Forgiveness and Mercy, Thrift and Industry, Gratitude, Marriage, and the Family.¹⁸⁸

The salt of the covenant preserves and prevents decay, but the light of the covenant illuminates. *Salt* justifies, or maintains purity, while *light* sanctifies, enhances, illuminates, and glorifies.

Summary and Conclusions

The Sermons on the Mount and at the Temple, including the Beatitudes and several verses that follow them, have been associated with the temple by Latter-day Saint and other scholars. By its etymology and ancient usage, *makarios* or *blessed*, the word that begins each beatitude, describes the happiness enjoyed by the gods but attainable by mortals. Because they describe the characteristics of those who inherit eternal life, the conditional promises associated with the Beatitudes describe an existence that Latter-day Saints might call *exaltation*. The association of the Beatitudes with the divine elevates these sayings from simple prosaicisms to statements with sacred and eternal implications. The conditions for attaining this supreme happiness and holiness are dependent upon the questions asked of Church members who desire to participate in temple ordinances.

As I have noted already, the degree of correlation between beatitude and recommend question varies from principle to principle. I believe, however, that allowing for differences in semantics, translations, and

186. Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld, *The Triple Package: How Three Unlikely Traits Explain the Rise and Fall of Cultural Groups in America* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), 26, archive.org/details/the-triple-package-how-three-unlikely-traits-explain-the-rise-and-fall-of-cultur/page/n25/mode/1up.

187. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Symbol of Our Faith,” *Ensign*, April 2005, 2, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2005/04/the-symbol-of-our-faith.

188. Gordon B. Hinckley, *Standing for Something* (New York: Random House, 2000), archive.org/details/standingforsomet0000hinc_j4r1/mode/2up.

cultural traditions over two millennia, each beatitude of 3 Nephi 12:1–13, may be reasonably paired with one or more corresponding temple recommend questions asked of the initial applicant who is desirous of receiving the ordinances of the temple.

Several non-beatitude verses that follow the Beatitudes focus on the importance of keeping the covenants that one has accepted. Covenant-keeping is the topic discussed by these two temple recommend interview questions, which are reserved for those desiring to reenter the temple.

If these proposed associations are correct, the true meaning of the Beatitudes has been elucidated. Further, the Beatitudes have been shown to correlate more seamlessly with the otherwise rather unrelated verses that follow them than has previously been recognized. The verses that introduce the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon at the Temple, therefore, pronounce the qualifications for participation in the sacred endowment instruction that follows.

Table 1. The Correlation between Topics, Beatitudes, and Temple Recommend Questions.

Principle # and Topic	3 Nephi Beatitude	Matt 5 Beatitude	Recommend Question
Worthiness to Enter the Covenant (Initiates)			
1. Sustain Church leaders	1	---	4
2. A testimony of deity	2	---	1
3. A belief in the Restoration	3	---	3
4. Personal worthiness	4	1	16
5. Mourning / Atonement	5	2	2
6. Meekness / gospel behavior	6	3	6
6. Meekness / do one's duty	6	3	8
7. Sacrifice / tithing	7	4	10
7. Sacrifice / Word of Wisdom	7	4	11
8. Mercy, repentance, forgiveness	8	5	15
9. Chastity, pure in heart	9	6	5
10. Peacemakers / honesty	10	7	9
10. Peacemakers / keep commitments	10	7	12
11. Persecution and apostasy	11	8	7

Principle # and Topic	3 Nephi Beatitude	Matt 5 Beatitude	Recommend Question
Worthiness to Return to the Temple	3 Nephi verses	Matthew 5 verses	Recommend Question
Keep temple covenants	12:13 (salt)	5:13 (salt)	13
Wear the temple garment	13:28–30	6:28–30	14
Bring light to the world	12:14–16 (light)	5:14–16 (light)	---



[Author’s note: *I am indebted to my wife, Ruth, for her patience during my studies. The editorial assistance and encouragement from Godfrey Ellis have also been indispensable and greatly appreciated.]*

C. Thomas Black, MD, earned undergraduate and graduate degrees from Brigham Young University in Microbiology before attending and graduating from Baylor College of Medicine in Houston in 1979. He completed residencies in General Surgery, then Pediatric Surgery, and obtained Board Certification in Adult Surgery, Surgical Critical Care, and Pediatric Surgery. He was Associate Professor of Surgery and Pediatrics at the University of Texas Medical School in Houston before beginning private practice in pediatric surgery in Dallas. He and his wife serve as ordinance workers in the Dallas Texas Temple. They have six sons and fourteen grandchildren.

The Iron Rod Reimagined: Revisiting the Meaning of an Enduring Metaphor

Todd J. Uriona

Abstract: *The iron rod, presented so prominently in Lehi's visionary dream (1 Nephi 8:19–24), has traditionally been conceptualized as a static handrail or balustrade guiding travelers toward the tree of life. While this imagery has provided meaningful theological guidance for many years, the metaphor of the rod of iron can profitably be viewed through another lens: that of the Ancient Near Eastern shepherd-king. From this perspective, the rod functions as a scepter or staff symbolizing Christ's divine authority and active leadership in gathering his flock. Rather than a fixed handrail lining a predetermined route, Christ's staff or rod is an instrument of rescue actively extended to travelers as they traverse the strait and narrow path. This article expands on that premise by demonstrating that the iron rod may encompass a deeper, dualistic functionality that is rooted in the Hebrew terms for the word, rod. The central thesis of this paper posits that the metaphor of the rod of iron functions simultaneously on two levels. First, as the Shepherd's authoritative staff, and second, as an organic branch that is actively extended to the scattered house of Israel to enable their restoration and covenantal grafting. This second horticultural dimension fuses Christ's roles as the divine Shepherd-King with his role as the True Vine. This coupling allows for an intertextual synthesis. It maps the specific vocabulary of adherence ("clinging" vs. "holding fast") in Lehi's dream (1 Nephi 8) onto the established covenantal metaphors found in Zenos's Allegory of the Olive Tree (Jacob 5), which describes the grafting of a branch as either withering or firmly taking hold.*

For generations, the iconic image of the iron rod in Lehi's dream (1 Nephi 8:19–24) has been commonly understood to be a static handrail or balustrade, requiring a simple, physical grip to follow the path toward the tree of life.¹ In a previous article, I offered an initial reevaluation of this symbolism as part of a growing scholarly discussion.² In that earlier paper, I suggest that viewing the rod through the lens of the Ancient Near East (circa 600 BCE) reveals a different interpretation, one in which the rod is a symbol of divine authority, power, and governance. That research establishes the rod as a dynamic instrument — a shepherd's staff or royal scepter extended by an implied agent (Christ) — who actively guides those who take hold of it to the tree of life. As discussed later in this paper, the *rod* functions as a physical manifestation of the “arm of mercy” (Jacob 6:5), which is extended out as a divine invitation to protect and guide those seeking the “tree of Life.”

-
1. While archaeological evidence for a freestanding iron handrail in the sixth-century BCE is absent, scholars have identified functional analogues in later traditions where railings or chains were used to facilitate movement during sacred climbs or ritual ascents. For example, Hugh Nibley said, “There is an account of the iron rod from Jerusalem that led to the temple. That’s grasping the iron rod. We’re told that there used to be.” Unfortunately, he gives no source for this statement. Hugh W. Nibley, “Lecture 16: Mountain of the Lord’s House,” in *Ancient Documents and the Pearl of Great Price*, ed. Robert Smith and Robert Smythe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies [FARMS], 1986), 4. See also Jeffery M. Bradshaw, *In God’s Image and Likeness I: Creation, Fall, and the Story of Adam and Eve* (Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2014), 143, 206–7, 473.
 2. T. J. Uriona, “Rethinking the Rod of Iron,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2022): 141–63. See also Jeff Lindsay, “The Great and Spacious Book of Mormon Arcade Game: More Curious Works from Book of Mormon Critics,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 23 (2017): 161–235, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/the-great-and-spacious-book-of-mormon-arcade-game-more-curious-works-from-book-of-mormon-critics; John A. Tvedtnes, “Rod and Sword as the Word of God,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 32–33; Zachary Nelson, “The Rod of Iron in Lehi’s Dream,” *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 10, no. 3 (2009): 49–58; Matthew L. Bowen, “What Meaneth the Rod of Iron?” *Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship* 25, no. 2 (2005): 2–3; Margaret Barker, “Joseph Smith and Preexilic Israelite Religion,” *BYU Studies* 44, no. 4 (2005): 69–82; David M. Calabro, “Lehi’s Dream and the Garden of Eden,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 26 (2017): 269–96.

A Closer Look at the Wording

Though the text notes that the rod of iron “extended along the bank of the river” (1 Nephi 8:19), its textual presentation allows it to be conceptualized in terms of active bestowal rather than mere static length. This shifts the imagery away from a fixed architectural handrail lining the river. Instead, it introduces the possibility that the rod functions as a dynamic extension of divine mercy, serving as a purposeful rescue instrument offered to help safely navigate those who “caught hold of the end of the rod” (v. 24) forward toward the tree. This reading highlights a potentially important structural nuance found in the text, which states next that “I also beheld a strait and narrow path, which came along by the rod of iron” (v. 20). In this case, the rod led “by,” not denoting proximity like a handrail, but was the very instrumentality used to advance those on the path toward the tree.

This new reading is deeply rooted in the iconography of the Ancient Near East, where the rod, often paired with a ring, is one of the oldest and most powerful symbols of divine authority in Mesopotamian art (see figure 1). The prevailing scholarly view emphasizes that the rod and ring are fundamentally insignia of deity and divine authority. These images are often part of a divine investiture scene, which includes imagery of gardens (or sacred trees) and guides.

These iconographic elements were not incidental, they were essential to the Mesopotamian message of divine kingship, prosperity, and order. In some cases, these images depict a rod held by a god or goddess that is extended to the king, as in the famous Code of Hammurabi Stela and the Investiture Panel at Mari. In describing the Investiture Panel at Mari, Jeffrey Bradshaw and Ronan Head note,

With respect to the royal insignia, there is no question that Ishtar is holding out the well-known Mesopotamian rod and ring that—according to the most recent major study of the subject, by Kathryn Slanski—was “employed for almost 2,000 years, in both Babylonian and Assyrian royal monuments and in non-royal works.”³

Bradshaw and Head go on to relate the Mesopotamian rod to the Old Testament rod that Moses received:

3. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and Ronan James Head, “The Investiture Panel at Mari and Rituals of Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 4 (2012): 35.



Figure 1. The throne dais of the Assyrian king, Shalmaneser III (reigned 859–824 BCE), depicting his handshake with the king of Babylon. Both of them are holding their rods (royal staffs or scepters).

Citing Moses as the prototype of king, priest, and prophet in the Old Testament, Geo Widengren notes his possession of three objects as emblems of these respective offices: the verdant rod or staff (Exodus 4:17), the manna (Exodus 16:33–34), and the tablets of law (Exodus 31:18). The first and third of these can be compared to the cedar staff and the Tablets of Destiny that the Mesopotamian king Enmeduranki received at his enthronement. These tangible “tokens of the covenant,” emblems of Moses’s threefold office that were provided in each case by God himself, seem to have been the very objects that were later transferred to the temple ark (Hebrews 9:4).⁴

This paper builds upon this understanding of a royal endowment, introducing a new dimension of linguistic complexity around the polysemic nature (or multiple meanings) of the ancient source terms for *rod*. This allows the term for *rod* to simultaneously signify not only an extended scepter or staff but also an organic branch or scion, which is the vital, living limb of a tree. This new added dimension develops the idea that the iron rod functions not only as the instrument of the Shepherd-King’s power and an offer of potential kingship, but also as the physical, salvific mechanism through which we are covenantally grafted into the True Vine (Christ). This linguistic and symbolic fusion allows one to map the precise vocabulary of adherence in Lehi’s dream — “clinging” (1 Nephi 8:24) vs. “holding fast” (1 Nephi 8:30) — onto the horticultural requirements found in Zenos’s Allegory of the Olive Tree — “withered” (Jacob 5:40, 43, 45) vs. “taken hold” (Jacob 5:18) — thereby enhancing the language of covenant adherence found in Nephi’s record and anchoring his theology in the cultural imagery of his time.

A Royal Endowment

The interpretation of the rod as an emblem of divine conferral and shepherding authority reveals a profound theological implication: the rod of iron represents an endowment of potential kingship for all who hold fast to it. This suggests that God is willing to endow upon all who will hold fast to his word the opportunity to become kings and queens. Bradshaw and Head, referencing the Mari Investiture Panel, assert that the rod and ring symbols originally depicted the endowment of

4. Bradshaw and Head, “Investiture Panel,” 38–39.

the king with the divine right to rule. They go on to show that in ancient locations such as the desert of Qumran (the home of the Dead Sea Scrolls) and Dura Europos (a Roman military stronghold in modern Syria) similar rites were made available to others. They write:

Findings at Qumran and Dura Europos suggest that in at least some strands of Jewish tradition these rituals of royal priesthood were further democratized, enabling members of the community, and not just their ruler and his priests, to participate. . . . Indeed, a precursor of this tradition is evident in the account of God's promise to Israel that, if they kept his covenant, not just a select few but all of them would have the privilege of becoming part of "a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). Going back to the beginning of the Bible, scholars have concluded that the statement that Adam and Eve were created in the "image of God" (Genesis 1:26–27) is meant to convey the idea that "each person bears the stamp of royalty."⁵

Though Bradshaw and Head do not suggest that the rod in Lehi's dream played a similar function, this ancient, democratized view of endowed kingship finds continuity in later revelations, where the concept of believers becoming "kings and priests" and "queens and priestesses"⁶ to God is reiterated.⁷ Revelation 1:6 says, "And hath made us kings and priests unto God and Father," a sentiment Revelation 5:10 restates: "And has made us unto our God kings and priest: and we shall reign on the earth." Central to this royal imagery in the book of Revelation is the "rod of iron," which serves as the quintessential symbol of kingship and authority.

Modern revelation reiterates this focus, emphasizing an association between receiving with the hand (in other words, "holding fast") and becoming kings and priests and queens and priestesses. Doctrine and Covenants 76:55–56 reads, "They are they into whose hands the Father has given all things—They are they who are priests and kings, who have received of his fulness, and of his glory." This couples with

5. Bradshaw and Head, "Investiture Panel," 39–40.

6. Joseph Fielding Smith, "Relief Society—an Aid to the Priesthood," *Relief Society Magazine*, January 1959, 5–6.

7. From this perspective, Lehi's dream could be seen as an analogue to the modern temple ritual, where the iron rod extending represents an endowment of potential kingship and queenship and holding fast leads to a sealing of the blessing.

Doctrine and Covenants 121:46, which adds, "[A]nd thy scepter and unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth; and they dominion shall be an everlasting dominion . . . forever and ever," explicitly linking the scepter (rod) to everlasting dominion.

This interpretation is reinforced by the Biblical scholar Margaret Barker's reading of the "rod of iron" in Lehi's vision. She explains a potential mistranslation in the King James Version of Psalm 2:9, where the rod of the Messiah is used to "break" the nations. Barker points out that in the ancient Greek translation (the Septuagint), Psalm 2:9 reads, "He will *shepherd* them with a rod of iron." She notes that the two Hebrew verbs for *break* and for *shepherd*, (or *tend*, and *lead*) look very similar and in some forms are identical. Barker further notes that "Lehi's vision has the iron rod guiding people to the great tree—the older and probably the original understanding of the word."⁸ If Barker is correct, the Hebrew behind Nephi's term naturally connects the rod with shepherding and guidance. Significantly, the only reference there is to a *rod of iron* in the Old Testament is in Psalm 2:9, making it the most direct parallels to the *rod of iron* in Nephi's record. Furthermore, it is possible that Psalm 2:9 might have been part of the liturgical literature found in the brass plates. In this light, it is telling that there is only one time where we have a record of Joseph Smith using the phrase *rod of iron*, outside of the Book of Mormon. He recalls:

I dreamed this morning that I was in the Lobby of the Representatives Hall at Springfield, when some of the Members, who did not like my being there, began to mar, and cut, and pound my shins with pieces of Iron, I bore it as long as I could, then jumped over the Rail into the Hall, caught a rod of Iron, and went at them. . . . I thought they would not have the privilege of getting me, so I took a rod of Iron, and mowed my way through their ranks.⁹

In addition to Joseph Smith using the phrase *rod of iron* in this description of his dream, he also uses the same verb here, *caught*, that is used to describe those who "caught hold of the end of the rod of iron" in Lehi's dream (1 Nephi 8:24, 30).¹⁰ Additionally, he uses

8. Barker, "Preexilic Israelite Religion," 77.

9. "History, 1838–1856, volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843]," p. 1456, *Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-d-1-1-august-1842-1-july-1843/99.

10. Lucy recounts a series of seven dreams her husband, Joseph Smith Sr., had between 1811 and 1819. Describing one of those dreams she writes,

it in much the same way it is used in Psalm 2:9 (“Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron”) and the way Nephi first uses the word *rod* in 1 Nephi 3:28 (“[Laman and Lemuel] did smite us even with a rod”). This suggests that this is how Joseph might have conceptualized the rod in Lehi’s dream.¹¹

The Linguistic Nexus of Lehi’s Dream

Though Nephi’s account describing the rod of iron has traditionally been viewed as a handrail, when the rod is viewed as a shepherd’s tool, it suggests that an implied agent, the Lord, is actively extending a rod to shepherd his flock as the Israelite Messiah (see Moses 7:53). Trevan Hatch notes,

I travelled a short distance farther, and came to a narrow path; I entered it, and traveling a short proceeding some distance farther, beheld a beautiful stream of water, which ran from the east to the west. Of this stream, I could see neither the source nor the outlet; but as far as my eyes could extend, I could see a rope running along the bank, about as high as a man could reach; and beyond me was a low but very pleasant valley, in which stood a tree.

Lucy Mack Smith, “Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1845,” p. 53, *Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1845/60. In Lucy’s description of this dream, a “rope” is seen extending instead of a rod, suggesting that the rod in Lehi’s dream might have worked much like the “rope” in Joseph Smith Sr.’s dream. In his biography of Joseph Smith, Richard Bushman addresses the striking parallel between this dream and Lehi’s dream saying,

Since no other member of the family gave an account of the dreams or even referred to them, and Lucy recorded them thirty years later, there is no way of testing the accuracy of her memory. One of Lucy’s accounts echoes passages in the Book of Mormon, suggesting a tendency to make her husband the predecessor of her son.

Richard Lyman Bushman. *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 36. Lucy’s account of Joseph Sr.’s dreams is so close to the Book of Mormon that we must wonder if her memory was colored by what was recorded in the Book of Mormon. In this regard it should be noted that her account of the dream came fifteen years after the Book of Mormon was published, after Joseph Smith’s death, and after he described his own dream where he used a “rod of iron” much like a staff.

11. In an appendix, I have included all the other relative example I could find from early Church records that mention a “rod” or “iron rod” (excluding its use in measurements and the repeated examples of it being used as a weapon). It is apparent that, to the early Church members, the “iron rod” did not have the same conceptual meaning as a handrail that it has for Church members today.

The Israelite king was not only a Messiah but a "son of God." Surrounding Near Eastern cultures — Canaanite, Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Ugaritic — influenced Israelite conceptions of kingship. Ancient Near Eastern kings were thought to be divine — specifically to be sons of god. . . . Like their neighboring nations, early Israelite texts described the king in relation to deity, or even as a deity himself. For example, many Near Eastern gods and kings were associated with shepherd imagery — "Good Shepherd" (Egyptian), "Noble Shepherd" (Sumerian), "Shepherd of mankind" (Hittite), and "Wise Shepherd" (Assyrian). In Israelite literature, just as God was identified as a shepherd of Israel, so too was the king.¹²

Appreciating the complexity of the iron rod imagery as it relates to the Israelite Messiah requires a careful delineation of the primary Hebrew synonyms for *rod* or *staff* (*shebet*¹³ and *mattah*¹⁴). The combined semantic range of these terms illuminates the rod's dual purpose in Lehi's vision. The term *shebet* is derived from a root meaning "to strike" and initially conveyed the idea of a rod used for disciplinary purposes. However, its application consistently migrated toward representing instruments of authority, such as a scepter held by kings, judges, or priests.¹⁵ This is reflected in a prophecy anticipating a Messiah coming through the house of David in Balaam's fourth oracle. In this prophecy, *shebet* is used to refer to "a Scepter [that] shall rise out of Israel" (Numbers 24:15–19).¹⁶ This prophecy confirms the association that *shebet* carries to royal and imperial dominion in the Israelite tradition.¹⁷ *Shebet* can also mean *tribe* as a political entity, underscor-

12. Trevan G. Hatch, "Messianism and Jewish Messiahs in the New Testament Period," in *New Testament History, Culture, and Society: A Background to the Texts of the New Testament*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2019), 72.

13. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1907), 986.

14. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 641.

15. Uriona, "Rethinking."

16. An anonymous reviewer pointed out, "Scepters were not just employed by the king. Agents were often given a rod when they traveled and spoke in the name of the king. For example, Aaron carried Moses' rod because he was the spokesman. Perhaps Laman beat Nephi with the rod given him by Lehi to speak to Laban in Lehi's name. Could it be that Christ is extending his scepter so that we will hold it and act as his agents?"

17. This oracle was delivered by the non-Israelite prophet Balaam, who was

ing the authority figure, such as the Messiah, ruling over a collective. The descriptor *iron* in Lehi's dream aligns powerfully with this aspect, conveying *unbreakable*, *divine*, *royal*, and *authority*, as prophesied of the Messiah (Psalm 2:9).

However, the key to unlocking the rod's extended symbolism in Lehi's dream seems to lie in the verb describing its action. Like *shebet*, there is another Hebrew noun for rod, *mattah*, which is derived from the root *natah*,¹⁸ meaning "to stretch out" or "to bend down" or "extend."¹⁹ The synthesis of these two terms is evident in the Mosaic narrative, where the rod of Moses is the active instrument of deliverance. Moses was repeatedly commanded to *stretch out* the rod, such as, "And Moses stretched out (*natah*) his rod (*mattah*) toward heaven" (Exodus 9:23). This pairing links the action of extension directly with what is described in 1 Nephi 8:19, when the rod of iron is first introduced in Nephi's narrative of his father's dream. Jeff Lindsay points out that

those who gained the benefits of the rod "caught hold of the end of the rod of iron" and then pressed forward by "clinging to the rod" (1 Nephi 8:24), and finally reached the tree of life by "continually holding fast to the rod of iron" (1 Nephi 8:30). The interaction with the rod seems to be one of grabbing and not letting go. This could be advancing along the rod, one grip or handhold at a time, but the language leaves open the possibility that the rod might have been extended toward people on the bank to then *pull* them toward the tree of life if they would but grab the end and hold on.²⁰

Though *mattah* can mean *rod* or *staff*, its extended semantic range also refers to a *tribe* and, most significantly, a *branch*.²¹ This understanding of *mattah* signifies both the shepherd's implement and, as mentioned earlier, an organic component of a tree. Because of that,

compelled by God to bless Israel instead of cursing them. It functions as a profound messianic prophecy, foretelling the rise of a great ruler—a "Star out of Jacob" and a "Scepter out of Israel"—who would exercise ultimate, divine dominion.

18. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 639. *Mattah* and *shebet* are used in much the same way as another Hebrew word, *maqel* (see p. 603).

19. Bowen, "Rod of Iron?," 3n4.

20. Lindsay, "Great and Spacious," 192.

21. *Shebet* can also be referred to as a branch.

mattah can provide an essential linguistic bridge connecting the pastoral dream of Lehi with Zenos's detailed allegory of covenantal horticulture, a connection that will be discussed in more detail later in this paper.

An example of this linguistic duality occurs in Numbers 17, where Aaron's rod functions simultaneously as a staff of governance and a fruit-bearing branch. "And it shall come to pass, that the man's rod, whom I shall choose, shall blossom," (v. 5) and "behold, the rod of Aaron . . . brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds" (v. 8). In this sense the term *rod of iron* in Lehi's vision represents a profound linguistic and theological synthesis such that the *rod/branch* extending describes the Lord offering a branch to which Israel can be attached.²² By extending the iron rod, the Lord provides a mechanism that moves beyond purely symbolic authority.²³ The rod also acts as the essential physical means to affect the spiritual grafting process, ensuring covenant union.

This type of polyvalence (or layered meaning) is characteristic of Nephi's writings and is readily apparent in the way Nephi introduces his father's dream. On that occasion, Nephi prefaces his father's dream by saying, "We had gathered together all manner of seeds of every kind" (1 Nephi 8:1). The main Hebrew word for *seed*, is *zera'*.²⁴ It carries a strong polyvalent meaning such that the literal meaning of a plant's seed also extends to a broader figurative concept of origin and beginning. It is often used to refer to descendants, such as the "seed of Abraham" (for example, Genesis 13:15). Thus, by carefully introducing the literal gathering of *zera'* (seeds) to begin the narrative, Nephi immediately primes the reader to interpret the subsequent vision—which centers on a fruit-bearing tree—as a profound statement about the destiny and gathering of Lehi's *zera'* (descendants) and the

22. To a modern reader, mixing metaphors such as iron with organic elements might seem strange. However, in ancient Hebrew writing, the goal was not logical consistency of the image but rather a robust, layered understanding of the subject. A text might use a variety of metaphors to evoke a multifaceted impression without concern for whether the literal image made sense. See for example Deuteronomy 32:1–18, where God is depicted as a rock, father, mother, and eagle.

23. See for example Esther 5:2, which, though from a later period, depicts the risk of death for an unbidden audience with the king and the life-sparing extension of the scepter. This detail in the text seems to match other extrabiblical descriptions.

24. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 281.

greater house of Israel (see 1 Nephi 15:12–13, 18). This initial focus on *zera'* (*seeds* or *descendants*) serves as a vital rhetorical and thematic primer, teaching the reader to expect and appreciate the very same kind of multi-layered symbolism that follows in the narrative's image of a rod or branch.

The comprehensive meaning of these terms (*mattah* and *zera*) reveals that the imagery of the iron rod in Lehi's vision is not a single symbol. Rather, it can be seen as a powerful convergence of ancient Hebrew polyvalence that unifies the themes of divine authority, covenant restoration, and spiritual nourishment. The seamless rhetorical bridge that Nephi creates between the concrete and the figurative — moving from the literal *zera'* (plant seeds) that sustain physical life to the figurative *zera'* (descendants) that constitute a covenant people — prepares the reader to accept what may be a deeper meaning of the word *rod*. This deep linguistic texture transforms the vision of the iron rod from a guide into an essential mechanism by which the gathered sons and daughters of Christ are grafted into the house of Israel (Mosiah 26:25; Doctrine and Covenants 25:1).

The strength of iron assures the covenant's permanence, while the "branch" quality assures the covenant's organic capacity for restoration and spiritual growth inherent in a branch. The implication is that Christ, the true Shepherd-King, uses his unbreakable power (symbolized by *iron*) to fulfill the covenant by facilitating the gathering and restoration of the tribes (*mattah* as tribe). Jared Marcum points out:

There are two other valuable insights found by interpreting the iron rod as Christ's scepter. First, in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for *scepter*, *šēḇeṭ*, is sometimes figuratively translated as *tribe*. Members of a tribe were under the leadership and authority of their tribal head, the bearer of the scepter.²⁵

He accomplishes this by extending himself as the True Branch (*mattah* as *branch*) and the Word of God to which covenant participants must securely attach themselves. This layered understanding integrates the symbols of shepherd-kingship and organic life found in

25. Jared T. Marcum, "Withstanding Satan's Siege through Christ's Iron Rod: The Vision of the Tree of Life in Context of Ancient Siege Warfare," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 58, no. 4 (2023): 16, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/withstanding-satans-siege-through-christs-iron-rod-the-vision-of-the-tree-of-life-in-context-of-ancient-siege-warfare.

Nephi's rhetorical question: "Will they not receive the strength and nourishment from the true vine? Yea will they not come unto the true fold of God?" (1 Nephi 15:15). In answer to his rhetorical question, Nephi adds, "Yea; they shall be remembered again among the house of Israel; they shall be grafted in, being a natural branch" (1 Nephi 15:16).²⁶ This metaphoric pairing by Nephi helps ensure that the reader sees the rod as simultaneously the divine scepter, the means of gathering, and the mechanism for receiving spiritual nourishment by grafting. Significantly, Nephi asks, "Will they not rejoice and give praise unto their everlasting God, their rock and their salvation?" (1 Nephi 15:15) just before asking these rhetorical questions. This phrase brings to mind an image of Moses striking the rock — with his rod (Exodus 17:5–6) — to bring forth water. The account reads that he was to take "thy rod . . . and thou shalt smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it" (Exodus 17:5–6). This event symbolizes the Lord's support and provision for his people. Interestingly, when Nephi tells this story, he says,

Yea, and ye also know that Moses, *by his word* according to the power of God which was in him, smote the rock, and there came forth water, that the children of Israel might quench their thirst. And notwithstanding they being led, the Lord their God their Redeemer, going before them, leading them (1 Nephi 17:29–30).

Nephi uses the term *word* to describe the action of the rod of Moses that struck the rock. This appears to be the same connection presented to Nephi in his vision, where the iron rod — which is the word of God — similarly "led" to the tree of life. In describing this scene in his vision, Nephi says,

I beheld the Son of God going forth among the children of men; and I saw many fall down at his feet and worship him and it came to pass that I beheld that the rod of iron, which my father had seen, was the word of God, which led to the fountain of living water, or to the tree of life (1 Nephi 11:24–25).

The juxtaposition of these two ideas [the Son of God, going

26. Matthew Scott Stenson, "'This Stone Shall Become the Great, and the Last, and the Only Sure Foundation': A Nephite Poetics of Dramatic Fusion and Transfer in Jacob 5," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 61 (2024): 375–414, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/this-stone-shall-become-the-great-and-the-last-and-the-only-sure-foundation-a-nephite-poetics-of-dramatic-fusion-and-transfer-in-jacob-5.

forth among the children of men (v. 24) and the vision of the rod of iron (v. 25)] is compelling. That they occur in such close proximity strongly suggests a close connection between the elements of the dream. Furthermore, just as those who held fast to the rod of iron in Lehi's dream, those in Nephi's vision fall down at the feet of the Son of God—a covenantal image—after Nephi sees him “going forth among the children of men.”²⁷

Contrasting attachment styles: *Clinging* versus *holding fast*

The distinction drawn in Lehi's vision between different modes of adherence to the iron rod is crucial to understanding the horticultural application of the *mattah* or *rod* imagery. The narrative explicitly contrasts two groups: those who “caught hold of the end of the rod of iron” (1 Nephi 8:24) but were described as “clinging to the rod of iron” (v. 24), and those who were “continually holding fast to the rod of iron” (v. 30). In the context of the rod as a divine branch (*mattah*), this contrast operates as a horticultural test. The initial action of “holding fast” versus “clinging” is posited as analogous to the attempt to determine if a new graft will “wither” or “take hold.” In both cases, a secure connection was made as is evident by the fact that both groups made it safely to the tree. However, a successful graft must achieve a secure, permanent, and even vascular union to receive the necessary “nourishment from the true vine” (1 Nephi 15:15). On the other hand, a graft that does not do this will inevitably fail. It will result in the branch withering and breaking off or falling away, just like those who were “clinging” to the rod in Lehi's dream (1 Nephi 8:24) but soon “fell away into forbidden paths and were lost” (v. 28).

The choice of the English word *clinging* to describe the failed attempt at adherence is perhaps significant. The word *cling* appears nowhere else in the Book of Mormon, nor is it used in the King James translation of the Bible. While *clinging* and *holding fast* share the meaning of being firmly attached, a question arises: why do we have this one instance where *clinging* is used in the text if it is saying the same thing as *holding fast*? The fact that two different words were

27. Falling down is an ancient form of worship, and it contrasts with those who “fell away” (1 Nephi 8:28). See Matthew L. Bowen, “‘They Came Forth and Fell Down and Partook of the Fruit of the Tree’: Proskynesis in 3 Nephi 11:12–19 and 17:9–10 and Its Significance,” in *Third Nephi: An Incomparable Scripture* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2012), 107–30.

used suggests that something more is potentially being said. It is possible that in the use of *clinging*, the text used distinct, older meanings for *clinging* to convey a deeper difference between the two groups. The English term *cling* possesses a dual semantic heritage. Though its primary modern definition is "to adhere closely," the Webster's 1828 Dictionary notes that in the Old English (Saxon) language, *clingan* is rendered *marcesco*, meaning *to shrivel, fade, or wither*. This now archaic meaning persisted into Early Modern English, which some scholars assert is the language of the Book of Mormon.²⁸ The dictionary provides the 1828 definition of *cling* as, "To dry up, or wither," giving, as one example, the phrase, "Till famine cling thee."²⁹

William Shakespeare also uses *cling* in this way in *Macbeth*. In this play, Macbeth reacts with fury at the report from a messenger by issuing the threat, "If thou speak'st false, Upon the next tree shall thou hang alive Till famine cling thee."³⁰ Here, "cling" means to shrivel or shrink. Macbeth is telling the messenger he will hang until he is dehydrated and wasted away from hunger. In an 1830 publication, the same association is made: "Ask Death—Death? without a resurrection! the last agonizing clinging to life, the pallid corpse, the damp of the lone charnel the worm, and corruption, and handful of dust—these give the answer."³¹ By using "clinging," here, the author captures both the emotional desire to live and the grim, physical shriveling of the flesh. This suggests that the dual meaning of *withering* was still in use for *clinging* at the time the Book of Mormon was published.

This understanding of what it means to *cling* sheds new light on Lehi's dream where those who were "clinging" to the rod (1 Nephi 8:24) were, by the very nature of that word's meaning, already beginning to wither or lose vitality. This may help explain their subsequent feeling "ashamed" and then "they fell away" and departed from the tree (vv. 25, 28). *Clinging* describes not just an action of adherence, but an internal

28. Stanford Carmack, "A Look at Some 'Nonstandard' Book of Mormon Grammar," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 11 (2014): 209–62. See also Royal Skousen, "The Language of the Original Text of the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2018): 81–110, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/a-look-at-some-nonstandard-book-of-mormon-grammar.

29. Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: S. Converse, 1828), s.v. "Cling."

30. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, n.d.), folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/macbeth/read/5/5/.

31. "The Resurrection," *Halifax Monthly Magazine* 1, no. 7 (December 1830): 269, canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.8_04924_7/30.

state where one fails to take “strength and nourishment” (1 Nephi 15:15) from the word of God or rod of iron. Using *clinging* serves as an effective dynamic equivalent, prioritizing the nuanced idea of adherence of a withering branch. In the contrasting ideas of a branch that is “holding fast” versus one that is “withering,” the word *clinging* bridges those ideas. This is a clever translation because, while the two words may seem synonymous in current English, it plays off the dual meaning. It suggests that a branch is *withering* but has not yet let go and uses the rich shades of meaning available in older English.

This reading of *clinging* in Lehi’s dream finds a profound parallel in Hebrew terminology. The verb *yabesh*³² means “to wither; to be, or become, dry.” It is specifically used for the drying up of plants and vegetables, but also, metaphorically, for souls.³³ In certain grammatical contexts, *yabesh* becomes indistinguishable from the verb *bōsh*,³⁴ meaning “to be ashamed” or publicly disgraced, even to the point of being “expelled or cast out.”³⁵ The concepts of dryness, weakness, and shame were recognized as kindred in Hebrew. This association seems to be made in Lehi’s dream (vv. 25, 28) and can potentially be seen when Nephi warns his brothers that they will “wither” if they touch him (1 Nephi 17:48).

As another example, the writings of Jeremiah, a contemporary of Lehi, provide an explicit connection between *withering* and being *ashamed*. In Jeremiah 17:5, those who “trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the Lord” are described as a tree “in the desert . . . [who] shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, in a salt land and not inhabited” (v. 6). A few verses later, the consequence of this state is explicitly tied to being ashamed: “O Lord, the hope of Israel, all that forsake thee shall *be ashamed*, and they that depart from me [the Lord]; shall be *written in the earth* because they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living waters” (v. 13, emphasis added). To be “written in the earth” (dust) is a picture of transience — like dust blowing away — which is the ultimate form of withering. This contrasts with those who “trusteth in the Lord” (v. 7), who are described as “a tree planted by the water . . . [whose] leaf shall be green . . . neither shall cease from yielding fruit” (vv. 7–8).

These same associations are made in Lehi’s dream, where those

32. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 386.

33. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 386.

34. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 101.

35. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 101.

who were "clinging" (withered, *yabesh*) left the tree, failing to trust in the Lord and his extended rod, because they were "ashamed" (*bōsh*).³⁶ This failure to trust in the Lord ultimately led to their falling away and being lost (1 Nephi 15:24, 28; see also Alma 16:17). This reinforces and mirrors the horticultural fate of unsuccessful branches in the Allegory of the Olive Tree (Jacob 5:7, 40, 43, 45).

Job's lament: Hope for a tree, despair for man

The failed attachment described in Lehi's dream as "clinging" finds a powerful parallel in the Book of Job, where the prophet laments the fragility of human life and the finality of death in contrast to the regenerative power of the natural world. Job notes the irony that even a mighty man who is strong enough to cut down a tree will eventually fade away, yet the tree retains a hope he lacks. "For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again" (Job 14:7). Job's despair is centered on this contrast between a man and a tree. A cut-down tree, though its stump may appear to have died in the dry soil, holds the potential for new life to emerge from its roots. At the mere "scent of water," it will flourish again, producing sprigs and branches as if newly planted (Job 14:7–9).

Job's sorrowful conclusion is that mankind has no such hope of immediate physical regeneration: "But man dieth, and wasteth away: yea, man giveth up the ghost, and where is he? As the waters fail from the sea, and the flood decayeth and dried up [*yabesh*, withered/ashamed]" (Job 14:10–11). The contrast highlights that failure to secure the spiritual graft to the True Vine leads to the desiccation-driven destruction Job describes for the unredeemed man.

The hope of the graft: The un-withering tree

The despair articulated by Job finds its theological counterpoint in the prophetic literature, where the metaphor of the rooted, non-withering tree is used to describe the fate of the righteous and the coming Messiah. This theological counterpoint directly addresses Job's concern by identifying the source of life springing from apparent ruin. The prophetic answer to the cut-down tree is found in Isaiah 11:1: "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots." This metaphor speaks of the life that will spring forth from the Davidic royal line, reduced to a seemingly dead stump.

36. Similarly, the same associations are made in Isaiah 1 and Psalm 129.

Modern revelation identifies the core elements of this promise: the Stem of Jesse is Christ (Doctrine and Covenants 113:2), and the rod is identified as “a servant in the hands of Christ” (v. 4) who assists in the gathering of Israel in the latter days. The prophetic rod and the perpetual branch thus provide the regenerative hope that Job sorrowfully feared was lost.

The Psalmist confirms the blessed condition of the righteous covenant participant: “He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither;³⁷ and whatever he does shall prosper” (Psalm 1:3). This vision of permanence is echoed by Jeremiah, who speaks of the faithful man:

For he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not see [notice] when heat cometh, but her leaf will be green; and shall not be careful [require special care] in the year of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruit. (Jeremiah 17:8)

This imagery directly counters the spiritual desiccation suggested by the term *clinging*, illustrating that secure adherence to the word/rod leads to perpetual vitality. The horticultural image is united by Isaiah’s messianic prophecy: “In that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the earth shall be excellent and comely for them that are escaped of Israel” (Isaiah 4:2; 2 Nephi 14:2).³⁸ This “branch” is the object of the successful gathering and grafting, which brings the source of the promised fruit (see Alma 26:36).

The righteous branch: The grafting of God’s planting

This prophetic imagery builds on Isaiah’s vision of the restored covenant people, who are destined to become vigorous, strong, and majestic, fruitful trees. Speaking of those who have suffered oppression by calamity and sin, the prophet concludes “that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified” (Isaiah 61:3). A few verses earlier, God speaks similarly of the future inheritance of his people: “Thy people also shall be all righteous: they shall inherit the land for ever, the branch of my planting, the

37. *Navel* not *yabesh* here. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 614.

38. “Escaped” can also mean remnant and is twice used to describe green things that remain. It can be seen in the metaphor that Isaiah uses here (see for example Exodus 10:5 and Job 2:3).

work of my hand, that I may be glorified" (Isaiah 60:21). The linguistic precision inherent in the phrase "the branch of my planting" warrants closer exploration. The Hebrew word translated *planting* is *matta*,³⁹ meaning "an act of planting something." The underlying root word is *nata'*,⁴⁰ which clarifies the action. While *nata'* can mean "to establish" or "to found," its more fundamental meaning is "to strike in, fix, and be fastened." Given that Isaiah 60:21 specifically describes God planting a *branch*, this fundamental definition of striking in and fastening the branch confirms that the divine "planting" (*matta'*) of the covenant people is the horticultural act that is identified as *grafting* (see Exodus 15:17, Doctrine and Covenants 124:61). The core idea of *nata'* as permanently striking in the branch or securing a graft confirms the covenantal relationship exemplified by those who hold fast to the rod of iron. The bond between Christ and those who take hold of his word demands an unyielding union to prevent the desiccation associated with mere "clinging."⁴¹

This establishes God's people as a *branch* that he plants, the work of his own "hands." This concept finds specific fulfillment in the Nephite covenant. The Lord declared that he had led the people forth from Jerusalem "by the power of mine arm, that I might raise up unto me a righteous branch from the fruit of the loins of Joseph" (Jacob 2:25). Jacob later further develops this imagery when he records the Allegory of the Olive Tree. Following this allegory, Jacob returns to the image of the Lord's arm, when he pleads with the people to "cleave unto God as he cleaveth unto you. And while his arm of mercy is extended towards you, harden not your hearts" (Jacob 6:5). Here, the *arm of mercy* is extended much like the rod of iron in Lehi's vision, and in both cases, individuals must *cleave* to what is being extended. Jacob further develops the association of the rod as a branch when he says, "For behold, after ye have been nourished by the *good word of God* all the day long, will ye bring forth evil fruit, that ye must be hewn down and cast into the fire" (Jacob 6:7), effectively bringing together the concept

39. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 101, 642.

40. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 101, 642.

41. The promise to Abraham—that he would be the instrument through which all families of the earth would be grafted in—is realized through the rod of iron, the binding Word and Covenant of God. Nephi speaks of this promise, saying that "the earth cannot be blessed unless [Lord] shall make bare his arm" (1 Nephi 22:10). The Lord's extended arm, accompanied by the rod of iron, provided the necessary guidance to restore the scattered generations Lehi saw, bringing them back to the tree of life.

of the *word* (or rod) to the branch's survival as found in the Allegory of the Olive Tree.

As can be seen in the example above, in both the Book of Mormon as well as in the Bible, the word *extend* seems to be reserved for the active reach of an agent. In both books, things do not *extend* on their own; they are extended by a personified force—most notably in the extension of the Lord's arm or the extending of his mercy to those in need.⁴² Lexical consistency suggests that when *extend* is paired with the rod in Lehi's vision, it also involves an active agent (like the arm of God) rather than a static existence, as in the handrail interpretation. When Nephi is asked by his brothers, "What meaneth the rod of iron which our father saw?" (1 Nephi 15:23), Nephi replies with just such a personification. He says,

It was the word of God; and whoso would hearken unto the word of God, and would hold fast unto it, they would never perish; neither could the temptations and the *fiery darts of the adversary* overpower them unto blindness, to lead them away to destruction. (1 Nephi 15:24)

It is telling that the only time *extend* is used in the Doctrine and Covenants, it once again involves a personified force: the extended arm of God, which provides protection from the "fiery darts of the adversary" (Doctrine and Covenants 3:8). After the loss of the 116 pages of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith was told, "You should have been faithful; and he would have extended his arm and supported you against the fiery darts of the adversary" (Doctrine and Covenants 3:8). Significantly, this scripture equates the protection of the extended arm of God with the very same protection that Nephi attributed to the extended rod of iron: "the fiery darts of the adversary." By viewing the rod not as a preexisting fixture but as something actively extended by a personified shepherd-king, the vision is transformed from a journey along a railing into an encounter with the divine. In this light, the rod is not a railing people merely happen to find; it is the very arm of God's mercy extended into the mists to lead and nourish those who take hold of it on their way to the tree of life.⁴³

42. See 1 Nephi 8:19; Jacob 6:5; Mosiah 1:14; 16:12; 29:20; Alma 5:33; 9:16, 24; 17:15; 19:36; 29:10; Helaman 15:12; 3 Nephi 9:14; Ezra 7:28; 9:9; Psalm 109:12; Isaiah 66:12; Doctrine and Covenants 3:10.

43. In Egyptian, the verb *m3c* means both to extend and to lead, guide, or direct. See David M. Calabro, "Lehi's Dream and the Garden of Eden," *Interpreter: A*

Intertextual Unification: Universal Efficacy of the Tree Metaphor

This extended imagery of the iron rod provides a unified theological framework for the Book of Mormon narrative. It demonstrates that the gathering of Israel and adherence to the word are inextricably linked to the covenantal process of grafting. The initial wandering that Lehi described in his vision, before he found the tree, parallels the scattering of the house of Israel. Lehi was clearly aware of the allegory of Zenos, as he spoke to his family of the captivity and gathering of Israel immediately after recounting his vision (1 Nephi 10:12–14; 15:7). John Tvedtnes notes that Lehi's subsequent teachings provide "direct evidence that Lehi's vision of the tree of life is related to the parable of Zenos."⁴⁴ Nephi confirms this understanding, stating that his father taught that,

After the house of Israel should be scattered they should be gathered together again; or, in fine, after the Gentiles had received the fulness of the Gospel, the natural branches of the olive tree, or the remnants of the house of Israel, should be grafted in, or come to the knowledge of the true Messiah, their Lord and their Redeemer. (1 Nephi 10:14)

Lehi interpreted this process to mean that the grafting of the natural branches back into the olive tree would be understood as regaining knowledge of Christ. This established a direct covenantal context for interpreting the events of the dream in relation to Zenos's allegory.

This dual understanding of *mattah* (rod/branch) is leveraged when Nephi seeks to explain the meaning of the rod of iron to his skeptical brothers. As discussed earlier, Nephi plays on the dual meaning of the iron rod as both a staff/rod used for gathering and a branch used in grafting. This is evident when he asks his brothers, "Yea, at that day, will they not receive the strength and nourishment from the true vine? Yea, will they not come unto the true fold of God?" (1 Nephi 15:16). He immediately supplies the answer, "They shall be grafted in, being a natural branch of the olive tree, into the true olive tree" (v. 16). This rhetorical bridge demonstrates that, for Nephi, the concepts of gathering

Journal of Mormon Scripture 26 (2017): 269–96, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/lehis-dream-and-the-garden-of-edem.

44. John A. Tvedtnes, "Borrowings from the Parable of Zenos," in *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, The Bible, and Jacob 5*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1994), 375.

and grafting were inseparable and that the instrument of gathering — the rod, defined by Nephi as the word of God (vv. 23–24) — is the very mechanism facilitating the grafting process into Christ, the True Vine.

The metaphor of the tree is one of the most powerful and enduring images in the Hebrew tradition. This is a fact that Kirsten Nielsen, in her study of its use in Isaiah, attributed to its “evident accuracy” and connection to shared human experience: “Everyone knows from his own experience that this is the way things are with trees.” She further notes,

The tree as a metaphor is among the elementary metaphors whose suitability and capacity to survive are evidenced by their continual reuse. But in regard to the Old Testament’s tree images there is the additional fact that they came into being in a culture in which the tree’s holiness was a natural assumption.⁴⁵

Beyond its traditional power, the tree image is also ideally suited for communicating an evolving message, as its “many different aspects . . . have made it possible to produce new text here, where new aspects of the image are utilized.”⁴⁶ The Book of Mormon’s use of the Allegory of the Olive Tree in relation to the rod of iron, though unique in its detail, seems to be directly tied to the Israelite prophetic tradition. This inherent adaptability is present across diverse prophetic traditions, and its sophisticated use by the Book of Mormon prophets speaks to its authenticity. See Romans 11:16–24 for a New Testament example.

The thematic consolidation of the rod, the word of God, and grafting is echoed throughout the subsequent Nephite record. Alma explicitly links adherence to the “word of God” (the rod or staff) with successful horticultural union, speaking of those who receive the word with joy: “And as a branch be grafted into the true vine” (Alma 16:17). This action is necessary to prevent destruction, paralleling Nephi’s declaration that holding fast to the rod prevents the traveler from perishing to destruction (1 Nephi 15:23–25). The linking of the word of God and the grafting into the house of Israel thus reinforces the functional identity of the rod of iron, despite the fact that Alma never used that precise language.⁴⁷

45. Kirsten Nielsen, *There Is Hope for a Tree: The Tree as Metaphor in Isaiah* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1989), 140.

46. Nielsen, *Hope for a Tree*, 234.

47. Alma 32 also seems to parallel Lehi’s dream and Nephi’s visions with the

Jacob's extensive copy of Zenos's allegory likewise employs language highly reminiscent of the rod imagery as it is presented in Lehi's dream and speaks to its importance. Jacob notes that the branches of the wild tree have "have *taken hold* of the moisture of the root thereof" (Jacob 5:18). This terminology directly parallels the concept of the covenant seeker "holding fast" or "taking hold" of the rod of iron. The rod leads to the "fountain of living water or the tree of life" (1 Nephi 11:25.) Zenos describes the successful grafting as securing the "moisture of the root" (Jacob 5:18), confirming that the act of grasping the word/rod secures the spiritual, life-giving nourishment necessary for survival. Jacob summarizes the Lord's constant, merciful labor, noting,

And how merciful is our God unto us, for he remembereth the house of Israel, both roots and branches; and he stretches forth his hands unto them all the day long. . . . Wherefore, my beloved brethren, I beseech of you in words of soberness that ye would repent, and come with full purpose of heart, and cleave unto God as he cleaveth unto you. And while his arm of mercy is extended towards you. . . . For behold, after ye have been nourished by the good word of God all the day long, will ye bring forth evil fruit, that ye must be hewn down and cast into the fire? (Jacob 6:4–7).

Jacob's words mirror both the imperative in Lehi's dream to hold fast to the rod when it is extended and the destructive judgment described in Ezekiel that "the east wind dried up her fruit: her strong rods were broken and withered; the fire consumed them" (Ezekiel 19:12).

Table 1. Book of Mormon grafting terminology coupled with the rod of iron.

Narrative Source	Grafting Terminology	Iron Rod Terminology
Lehi's Dream (1 Nephi 8:24, 30)	<i>"Clinging" (fall away/wither/shrivel)</i>	<i>"To the rod of iron"</i>
Lehi's Dream (1 Nephi 8:30)	<i>"Continually holding fast"</i>	<i>"To the rod of iron"</i>
Lehi's Teaching (1 Nephi 10:14)	"The natural branches of the olive tree . . . should be grafted in"	"Or come to the knowledge of the true Messiah"

tower and the great and spacious building as well as those who have nice clothing mocking those who came to hear the word of God. Further, the planted seed that is not nourished is said to "wither" (Alma 32:38).

Narrative Source	Grafting Terminology	Iron Rod Terminology
Nephi's Teaching (1 Nephi 15:16)	"They shall be grafted in, being a natural branch"	Restoration of Israel (the natural branch) "come into the fold of God"
Nephi's Teaching (1 Nephi 15:23–24)	"Hold fast unto [the rod of iron], would never perish"	"What meaneth the rod of iron?"
Jacob's Zeno's Allegory (Jacob 5:18)	Branches "have taken hold of the moisture of the root thereof"	"Continually holding fast"
Jacob's Teaching (Jacob 6:5, 7)	"Nourished by the good word of God all the day long, will ye bring forth evil fruit"	"Cleave unto God as he cleaveth unto you. And while his arm of Mercy is extended towards you"
Alma's Teaching (Alma 16:17)	"As a branch be grafted into the true vine" (via the word)	The salvific act of union with Christ to "receive the word with joy"

Conclusion: The Gathering and Restoration of Israel

The iron rod presented in Lehi's vision of the tree of life seems to be a symbol of far greater complexity and theological depth than the metaphor of a handrail, though this enduring imagery has inspired millions of readers. Through linguistic and intertextual analysis, it is possible to see the rod of iron as a sophisticated, layered metaphor for royal authority. By means of divine extension, the rod can facilitate the covenantal *gathering* and *grafting* needed to restore the scattered house of Israel. Viewed in this way, the function of the rod is defined by the polysemy of *mattah*. Christ, the Shepherd-King, actively stretches out the word of God and as the True Branch, offers a permanent connection to the source of eternal life. The gathering of Israel is therefore intrinsically linked to the process of grafting. The rod or word of God ensures that the separated branches (*mattah* as *tribe*) are restored by being securely affixed to the True Vine (Christ), allowing them to receive spiritual strength and nourishment (1 Nephi 15:15, Omni 1:13, Moroni 6:4).

This framework clarifies the essential difference between temporary commitment and salvific adherence. The distinction between "clinging" (a term carrying the semantic range of "wither" or "shrivel") and "holding fast" (a secured, immovable union) illustrates that covenant participation requires a permanent, sustained spiritual connection. This mirrors the requirements of a successful horticultural graft.

Holding fast in effect seals the family of Adam and Eve to the tree of life through the blessings promised to Abraham. Those who are susceptible to becoming ashamed of the word of God can wither and fall away, while those who hold fast ensure that they remain "trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord" (Isaiah 61:3). The linguistic depth and intertextual precision embedded within the Book of Mormon narrative — particularly the reliance on the dualistic meaning of the rod — demonstrate the profound sophistication of Lehi's vision. This enhanced understanding confirms the richness of the imagery in the text. That imagery provides a deeper appreciation for Jesus Christ's active and comprehensive role as the Shepherd who uses his unbreakable word (the iron rod) to perpetually gather and graft Israel into the tree of life. He thereby makes all who hold fast to his rod, heirs to his kingdom. Holding fast to the rod of iron reinforces the necessity to "hear" and "follow" Jesus Christ, the Shepherd-King and the True Vine.⁴⁸

Appendix: Early Historical Examples of the Usage of Rod or Rod of Iron

The following includes all the examples that I could find from early Church records that mention a "rod" or "iron rod." This includes Joseph Smith's dream (mentioned earlier). This appendix excludes the mention of a rod as used in measurements and the repeated examples of it being used as a weapon. To the early Church, it did not seem to have the same conceptual meaning of a handrail, which is almost an automatic reading today.

Joseph Smith History

"I dreamed this morning that I was in the Lobby of the Representatives Hall at Springfield, when some of the Members, who did not like my being there, began to mar, and cut, and pound my shins with pieces of Iron, I bore it as long as I could, then jumped over the Rail into the Hall, caught a rod of Iron, and went at them, cursing and swearing at them in the most awful manner, and drove them all out of the house. I went to the door and told them to send me a Clerk and I would make some laws that would do good. There was quite a collection around the State House trying to raise an army to take me — and there were

48. This is a message that Russell M. Nelson repeatedly admonished the Saints to do.

many horses tied round the square[.] I thought they would not have the privilege of getting me, so I took a rod of Iron, and mowed my way through their ranks, looking after their best race horse thinking they might catch me, where they could find me, when I awoke.”⁴⁹

Revelation, April 1829

“In preparing the text of Revelation Book 1 for publication [now Doctrine and Covenants 8], Sidney Rigdon replaced ‘sprout’ with ‘rod.’ Green, flexible shoots or rods cut from hazel, peach, or cherry trees were sometimes used as divining rods.”⁵⁰

Mason Brayman letter

On 29 July 1843, Mason Brayman, a lawyer from Springfield, Illinois, wrote to Joseph Smith to convey Governor Thomas Ford’s position regarding the recent attempt to extradite Smith to Missouri.⁵¹

His decision in your case, will be precisely the same whether he makes it before the election, or whether you vote for one or the other of the political parties. Do give heed to the insinuation, made only to answer bad purposes, that a rod is held over you. This rod, is turned to ashes and can do no harm.⁵²

Sidney Rigdon blessing

“Blessed of the Lord is brother Sidney [Rigdon]: notwithstanding he shall be high and lifted up, yet he will humble himself like an ass that coucheth beneath his burden, that learneth his master’s will by the stroke of the rod, thus saith the Lord.”⁵³

49. “History, 1838–1856, volume D-1 [1 August 1842–1 July 1843],” p. 1456, *Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-d-1-1-august-1842-1-july-1843/99.

50. “Revelation, April 1829-B [D&C 8],” p. 13n5, *Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-april-1829-b-dc-8/2?foot-notes.

51. For more historical context, see “Letter from Mason Brayman, 29 July 1843,” Historical Introduction, *Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-from-mason-brayman-29-july-1843/1#historical-intro.

52. “Letter from Mason Brayman, 29 July 1843,” p. 6–7, *Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-from-mason-brayman-29-july-1843/6.

53. “Appendix 5, Document 8. Blessing to Sidney Rigdon, 2 October 1835,” p. 13, *Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/appendix-5-document-8-blessing-to-sidney-rigdon-2-october-1835/1.

History draft

"Come all ye lovers of Liberty, break the oppressors rod, loose the iron grasp of Mobocracy, & bring to consign punishment all those who trample under foot the principles of our glorious Constitution."⁵⁴

Joseph Smith letter

On 15 April 1844, Joseph Smith wrote a letter to Francis P. Blair, editor of the Washington, DC, *Daily Globe*. Commenting on the actions of men in governmental positions, Smith quoted from the poet Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*:

A Wit's a feather and a chief's a rod,
But an honest man's the noblest work of God.⁵⁵

Times and Seasons

"We have been chastened by the hand of God heretofore for not obeying his commands, although we never violated any human law, or transgressed any human precept: yet we have treated lightly his commands, and departed from his ordinances, and the Lord has chastened us sore, and we have felt his arm, and kissed the rod: let us we [be] wise in time to come, and ever remember that 'to obey is better than sacrifice; and to hearken than the fat of rams.'"⁵⁶

"The following account of preparing and managing books, is taken from Dr. Jahn's Biblical Archaeology. Tablets, tables, and plates, are all of the same import, and the mode of fastening *leaves*, plates or tablets together at the back with *rings*, is the same way the Book of Mormon was connected. We may, at some future day, pursue this subject far enough to convince honest people, that the stone tables of the Bible, and gold plates of the Book of Mormon, were constructed and carried alike. . . . Those books, which were inscribed on tablets of wood, lead, brass, or ivory, were connected together by rings at the back, through which a rod was passed to carry them by."⁵⁷

54. "History Draft [1 January–21 June 1844]," p. 65a, *Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-draft-1-january-21-june-1844/88.

55. "Letter to Editor, 15 April 1844," p. 3, *Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-editor-15-april-1844/3.

56. "Times and Seasons, 15 July 1842," p. 857, *Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/times-and-seasons-15-july-1842/11.

57. "Times and Seasons, 1 September 1842," p. 908–9, *Joseph Smith Papers*,

Heber Kimball address

“Will those who hold the Priesthood govern with a rod of tyranny? No; but it will be done by the power of the Priesthood of the Almighty, which is compared to an iron rod. The nations will eventually have to come and bow down before this Priesthood and to this people.”⁵⁸

John Taylor address

“If we have drank of that water which the Savior spoke of to the woman of Samaria; if we have laid hold of the rod of iron, and continue to cling to it; if we adhere to the principles of righteousness, and pray unto God and keep his commandments continually, we shall have His Spirit at all times to discern between good and evil, and we shall always know the voice of the good shepherd, and cleave to the principles of righteousness.”⁵⁹

Thomas Marsh address

“I do not know that I can make all this vast congregation hear and understand me. My voice never was very strong, but it has been very much weakened of late years by the afflicting rod of Jehovah. He loved me too much to let me go without whipping. I have seen the hand of the Lord in the chastisement which I have received. I have seen and known that it has proved he loved me; for if he had not cared anything about me, he would not have taken me by the arm and given me such a shaking.”⁶⁰

Erastus Snow address

“But shall all people be thus converted unto the Lord? Shall the king

josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/times-and-seasons-1-september-1842/15.

58. Heber C. Kimball, “Cultivation of the Spirit of Truth—Trials of the Church & c.,” 14 April 1861, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 9 (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1862), 54, archive.org/details/per_utah-and-the-mormons_journal-of-discourses-_brigham-young-_1862_9/page/54/mode/2up.

59. John Taylor, “Confidence of the Saints in the Ultimate Triumph of the Kingdom of God—The Condition of the Nations,” 10 October 1863, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 10 (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1865), 261, archive.org/details/per_utah-and-the-mormons_journal-of-discourses-_brigham-young-_1863_10/page/260/mode/2up.

60. Thomas B. Marsh, “Remarks by Thomas B. Marsh,” 6 September 1857, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 5 (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1858), 206, archive.org/details/per_utah-and-the-mormons_journal-of-discourses-_brigham-young-_1858_5/page/206/mode/2up.

upon the throne, the judges who have judged for reward, the Prophets who have divined for money, the priests who have taught for hire, the murderer, the idolater, the abominable, those who have oppressed and ruled mankind with a rod of iron, who have said to the souls of men, 'Bow down, that we may walk over you?' Shall all these be converted unto the Lord of hosts and receive of these blessings? Would to God that it were possible!"⁶¹

John Taylor address

"We started in with the intention of carrying out the views of President Young, and we purpose to do it; but should we, by and by see a better way, one that suits us better, that would be more pleasant all around, we will then adopt it. In the meantime, we will stick to the rod of iron, and humble ourselves before God, seeking to do His will in all things; and by and by, when we shall have done our work on earth, will obtain an inheritance in the celestial kingdom of our Father. Amen."⁶²

Brigham Young address

"When I say rule, I do not mean with an iron hand, but merely to take the lead—to lead them in the path I wish them to walk in. They may be determined not to answer my will, but they are doing it all the time without knowing it. Kindness, love, and affection are the best rod to use upon the refractory. Solomon is said to have been the wisest man that ever lived, and he is said to have recommended another kind of rod. I have tried both kinds on children. I can pick out scores of men in this congregation who have driven their children from them by using the wooden rod."⁶³

61. Erastus Snow, "Discourse by Elder Erastus Snow," 14 September 1873, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 16 (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1874), 205, archive.org/details/per_utah-and-the-mormons_journal-of-discourses-_brigham-young-_1874_16/page/204/mode/2up.

62. John Taylor, "Discourse by President John Taylor," 21 October 1877, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 19 (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1878), 249, archive.org/details/per_utah-and-the-mormons_journal-of-discourses-_brigham-young-_1878_19/page/248/mode/2up.

63. Brigham Young, "Robbing the Dead—Dancing, Not a Part of the Saints' Religion—Kindness in Government—More Telegraphic Wires," 9 February 1862, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 9 (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1862), 195–96, archive.org/details/per_utah-and-the-mormons_journal-of-discourses-_brigham-young-_1862_9/page/194/mode/2up.

Erastus Snow address

“Dark clouds may gather around us from time to time; then is the time not to fear, but to watch and pray and patiently await the Lord of Hosts to dispel them and cause the sun to shine again upon us; remembering the vision of Nephi, in which he saw the rod of iron which led to the tree of life, along the turbulent stream of muddy water, and through mists and clouds which at intervals beset his pathway; and that those who clung to it were led safely through and reached the tree and partook of the fruit thereof, while those who ceased their hold to the rod of iron wandered off and were lost.”⁶⁴

Orson Pratt address

“I recollect that Lehi had a very great and important dream communicated to him, and his son Nephi had the same renewed to him. While Lehi was on his way to this country he dreamed that he wandered many hours in darkness; that there was a certain rod of iron, notwithstanding this darkness that seemed to gather around him, on which the old man leaned steadfastly. So great was the darkness that he was fearful he should lose his way if he let go the rod of iron; but he clung to it, and continued to wander on until, by and by, he was brought out into a large and spacious field, and he also was brought out to a place where it was lighter, and he saw a certain tree which bore very precious fruit. And he went forth and partook of the fruit of this tree, which was the most precious and desirable of any fruit that he had ever tasted; and it seemed to enlighten him and fill him with joy and happiness . . . But notwithstanding this gift of prophecy, and the gifts of the Spirit which he enjoyed, the Lord showed him by this dream that there would be seasons of darkness through which he would have to pass, and that even then there was a guide. If he did not all the time have the Spirit of God upon him to any great extent, there was the word of God, represented by an iron rod, to guide him; and if he would hold fast to that in his hours of darkness and trial, when everything seemed to go against him, and not sever himself therefrom, it would finally bring him

64. Erastus Snow, “Discourse by Elder Erastus Snow,” 8 October 1879, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 20 (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1880), 374, archive.org/details/per_utah-and-the-mormons_journal-of-discourses/_brigham-young-1880_20/page/n381/mode/2up.

where he could partake of the fruit of the precious tree — the Tree of Life."⁶⁵



[Author's Note: *I would like to thank my wife for her constant support, anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback, and Godfrey Ellis for his attentive editorial work.*]

Todd J. Uriona received a PhD from the University of Utah in comparative physiology and evolutionary biology. He works at a microbiology lab in Spanish Fork, Utah. Married with four children, Todd and his family have a little ground that they farm together. He loves studying the scriptures.

65. Orson Pratt, "Discourse by Elder Orson Pratt," 24 November 1872, *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 15 (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1873), 233–34, archive.org/details/per_utah-and-the-mormons_journal-of-discourses-_brigham-young-_1873_15/page/232/mode/2up.

The Literary Structure of Alma 16

Derek J. Squire

Abstract: *Alma 16 is an easily overlooked chapter in the Book of Mormon. It could be dismissed as a simple summary and “tidying up” of the narrative. It comes after two of the most dramatic scenes in the Book of Mormon, wherein women and children are burned to death in Ammonihah and Alma and Amulek are miraculously delivered from prison. It also directly precedes the account of the sons of Mosiah journeying to Lamanite lands to preach the gospel. However—as is the case with other chapters in the book of Alma that serve to summarize and conclude large sections of the text—Alma 16 is carefully developed, highly structured, and beautifully written. In this article, I will analyze the literary structure of Alma 16, which is composed of two major literary units. Both units are structured as chiasms in which the matching units share many strong links and parallels. These two chiasms also work together to engage the reader with striking parallels and dramatic contrasts. Alma 16, being the concluding chapter of Alma’s missionary efforts among the Nephites, reveals a particular splendor and distinction. The two main chiastic structures help with the exegesis of these verses by highlighting significant yet potentially underappreciated features.*

Alma 16 can be a somewhat inconspicuous chapter in the book of Alma. It stands on its own as an original chapter of the Book of Mormon (In the 1830 edition it was formatted as Alma 11), despite consisting of only twenty-one verses.¹ It comes after a vivid, heartbreaking,

1. When I use *original* in this article to describe chapters of the Book of Mormon, I refer to the chapters or sections as broken out and clearly delineated on the original and printer manuscripts of the Book of Mormon. For referencing in this article, I will use the Book of Mormon’s current chapters and verses. See

and emotional retelling of Alma and Amulek preaching in Ammonihah, the resultant casting-out and stoning of men who were believers, and the martyrdom by fire of women and children who believed (see Alma 14:8). Alma 16 also follows the dramatic healing and baptism of Zeezrom (see Alma 15), and directly precedes the beginning of the next major section in the book of Alma, composed of the preaching of the sons of Mosiah among the Lamanites (Alma 17–29).

Mormon, as the editor, tends to carefully structure “summary chapters” in the book of Alma. For example, the structure of Alma 28 consists almost entirely of different types of parallelism. Also, two large chiasms provide the overarching structure of Alma 29.² Additionally (albeit outside of Alma’s own account but still within the book of Alma), Alma 63 also consists of a carefully crafted chiasm.

Alma 16 consists of two major literary units, both appearing to be structured chiastically.³ The first proposed chiasm spans verses 1–12 and highlights an important episode in which Alma inquires of the Lord and receives revelation resulting in the rescue of numerous Nephites who had been taken captive by the Lamanites. The second proposed chiasm is in verses 13–21, focusing on the theme of preaching the word of God. It has a somewhat unexpected center (v. 18), highlighting twelve sins against which the Nephite missionaries were preaching. A striking parallel can be drawn from this second chiasm and its center, being comparable to verses in chapter 7 of the Gospel of Mark which exhibit a similar theme, chiastic structure, and center.

These two chiasms in Alma 16 work together to underscore a stark contrast: on the one hand, the violent destruction of the wicked by physical conquest, the captivity of the Nephites, and their eventual deliverance from their enemies through reliance on and obedience to the prayers and revelation of the prophet; while on the other hand, a story of peace, spiritual growth, and construction (rather than

Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). I will use this source for all wording and grammar in the text, unless otherwise specified.

2. Donald W. Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon: The Complete Text Reformatted* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2007): 298–99.

3. Donald Parry identifies a chiasm in Alma 16:1. Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms*, 266. Sterling D. Allan and Ryan Chapman also propose multiple chiasms in Alma 16. See Allan & Chapman, “Alma 16 Chiasms,” *greaterthings.com*, last revised 24 May 1995, <https://web.archive.org/web/20111123080531/http://greaterthings.com/Parallels/BofM/Alma16-CHI.pdf>.

destruction) of the Church, with a focus on equality (versus servitude), and a list of principles which, if followed, would bring the power and protection of Christ into the people's lives and grant them victory over their true enemy—the devil.

In this article, I will:

- Provide a summary of the account narrated in Alma 16.
- Present the two proposed overarching chiasms—the first covering Alma 16:1–12, the second in Alma 16:13–21.
- Analyze the matching elements from each chiasm, assess their strengths and potential weaknesses, and explain why these structures may have been deliberately designed by Mormon.
- Summarize key findings and insights derived from the structural analysis of this chapter.
- Include an appendix detailing the literary analysis used to delimit the major units of this chapter.

Summary of Alma 16

First, Alma 16 serves as a literary bridge in Mormon's narrative. It is the concluding entry, relating Alma's missionary efforts among the Nephites (see Alma 4:15–20; chapters 5–15), before moving on to the sons of Mosiah's missionary efforts among the Lamanites (chapters 17–29).

Second, Alma 16:1–3, 9–11 records the fulfillment of the prophecies of Ammonihah's destruction (foretold in Alma 9:4, 12, 18, 24; 10:22–23). Alma 16 begins with the Lamanites coming to war against the people in the city of Ammonihah. They destroy the city and its inhabitants in the 11th year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi. This puts a capstone on the episode of Alma and Amulek's preaching to the people of Ammonihah. As they had prophesied earlier, the people would be visited with utter destruction if they did not repent. This prophecy is quickly fulfilled.

There is a related episode wherein the Lamanites also slay Nephites around the borders of Noah and take others captive into the wilderness. The Nephites want to rescue their brethren. A man named Zoram is the Nephite captain at the time, and he and his two sons, Lehi and Aha, go to Alma because they know he has the spirit of prophecy. They hope to be instructed where to go in search of their brethren in the wilderness. Alma inquires of the Lord and learns where the Lamanites are headed, and where Zoram and his sons can

meet the Lamanites. Alma also declares that the Lord will deliver the captives unto Zoram and his armies. All goes according to plan, and miraculously “there was not one soul of them which had been lost that were taken captive” (Alma 16:8).

Third, Alma 16 sets the stage for the missionary journeys of the sons of Mosiah among the Lamanites (which will begin in chapter 17); with specific mention of their teaching and preaching in Alma 16:13–21.

The Nephites then enjoy three years of continual peace. Alma and Amulek preach repentance to the people, and the establishment of the church becomes general throughout the land. The Lord pours out his Spirit and his blessings upon all the face of the land, in preparation for his coming. The closing statement in this chapter includes the triumphant assertion that the people “got the victory over the devil” (Alma 16:21).

Proposed Twenty-three Element Chiasm in Alma 16:1–12

The first twelve verses of Alma 16 form a twenty-three element chiasm which highlights Alma’s inquiring of the Lord on behalf of the Nephite armies, in order to rescue their brethren who had been taken captive by the Lamanites (with correspondences between matching elements depicted in italics here and in all chiastic structures in this paper):

- A “*much peace in the land . . . for a certain number of years*” (v. 1)
- B “*until the fifth day . . . a cry of war heard*” (v. 1)
- C “the armies of *the Lamanites had come in*” (v. 2)
- D “*slay the people*” (v. 2)
- E “*destroy the city*” (v. 2)
- F “*destroyed the people . . . in the city of Ammonihah*” (v. 3)
- G “*taken others captive into the wilderness*” (v. 3)
- H “*desirous to obtain those . . . carried away captive into the wilderness*” (v. 4)
- I chief captain over *the armies of the Nephites* (v. 5)
- J “*Zoram and his two sons . . . went unto [Alma]*” (v. 5)
- K “*whither the Lord would that they should go into the wilderness in search of their brethren, who had been taken captive by the Lamanites*” (v. 5)
- L “Alma inquired of the Lord” (v. 6)

- K'** "the Lamanites will cross the river
Sidon *in the south wilderness*
... *there* shall ye meet them ...
and *there the Lord* will deliver
unto thee *thy brethren which*
have been taken captive by the
Lamanites" (v. 6)
- J'** "Zoram and his sons crossed over
the river Sidon" (v. 7)
- I'** "*with their armies*" (v. 7)
- H'** "*into the wilderness ... they took their*
brethren which had been taken captive by
the Lamanites" (v. 8)
- G'** "not one soul of them had been lost that were
taken captive" (v. 8)
- F'** "*the people of Ammonihah were destroyed;*
yea, every living soul of the Ammonihahites was
destroyed" (v. 9)
- E'** "and also their *great city*, which they said God could
not *destroy* ... it was left desolate" (vv. 9–10)
- D'** "they were of *the profession of Nehor*, who were *slain*"
(v. 11)
- C'** "*the Lamanites did not come again*" (v. 12)
- B'** "*to war against the Nephites until the fourteenth year*" (v. 12)
- A'** "*thus for three years ... continual peace in all the land*" (v. 12)

Correlation Between Matching Elements

Correlations between the matching elements of the above chiasm are primarily direct verbal parallels. A certain elegance is manifest in this chiasm, in that there are multiple matching elements that appear in inverted order in the second occurrence, as well as a few instances of amplification/intensification in the second matching element:

- Element A mentions "peace in the land" and then "years."⁴ Element A' mentions these two parts in inverted order. An actual number of "years" is noted, and then element A's "much peace" is amplified to become "continual peace" in A'. Further amplification is demonstrated by the peace extended from "in the land of Zarahemla" in A to "in all the land" in A'.

4. To keep to a minimum the distractions caused by numerous citations, verse numbers will not be shown here. Verse numbers for this section can be found at the end of each element in the chiasm itself.

- Element B notes the “cry of war” heard in Nephite lands, whereas B’ notes that there was no more “war” at that time. Both elements include a timeframe along with the word *until*. The keyword *war* and a phrase beginning with the word *until* are in inverted order.
- Elements C and C’ both mention “the Lamanites.” In C, the Lamanites “had come in” upon the people in the city of Ammonihah. In contrast, in C’ the Lamanites “did not come again.”
- Element D refers to Lamanites slaying the people of Ammonihah, whereas D’ mentions these same people being slain, but by a different and more specific association: “for they were of the profession of Nehor, who were slain.” The two parts to these elements of a group of people and the word *slay/slain* are in inverted order in D’.
- The two parts of element E, “destroy” and “the city,” also appear in inverted order in E’. In E, the Lamanites “destroy the city.” In E’, this intensification illustrates the irony of reversal by adding “their great city, which they said God could not destroy.” Intensification is also present in E’ as “the city” is now “their great city,” and not only is the city destroyed, but it is also “left desolate” in just one day.
- The pattern of inversion recurs in elements F and F’. The two parts to each element, namely, “destroyed” and “the people of Ammonihah,” are in inverted order in element F’. In F, the Lamanites “destroyed the people . . . of Ammonihah.” In F’, “the people of Ammonihah were destroyed.” Additional intensification is exhibited by a second, emphatic phrase in F’: “Yea, every living soul of the Ammonihahites was destroyed.” A subtle yet significant shift is evident as the narrative moves from the use of the active voice in F to the use of the passive voice in F’. In F, the Lamanites act as agents in a military event in which “they had destroyed” the people in the city of Ammonihah. In F’, the passive voice is used: “The people of Ammonihah were destroyed; yea, every living soul of the Ammonihahites was destroyed.” The focus shifts from the Lamanites as the destroyers to the culpability of the people in Ammonihah for their own destruction. This grammatical shift aligns with verses 9–11, reinterpreting the event not as a random raid, but as the fulfillment of prophecy

and divine judgment (see Alma 9:14). This is another form of amplification in a sense. The first instance (F) is the raw fact of the invasion. The mirrored instance (F') is the prophetic, theological interpretation of that fact. The destruction is no longer just something the Lamanites *did*; it is something that *happened* to Ammonihah and its people as a direct consequence of their wickedness.

- Elements G and G' both mention the people that were "taken captive,"⁵ but in G' the reader learns from this unequivocal statement that "not one soul of them had been lost that were taken captive."
- Another inversion arises involving two parts in elements H and H', namely, the word *captive* and the phrase *into the wilderness*. In H, "the Nephites were desirous to obtain those . . . carried away captive into the wilderness." In H', the Nephites drove the Lamanites "into the wilderness; and they took their brethren which had been taken captive." The desire of the Nephites to rescue those who had been taken captive in element H is realized in element H'. Synonymous verbs are used to state this desire and realization, namely, "obtain" in H and "took" in H'.
- The "armies" of the Nephites are mentioned in elements I and I'.
- Elements J and J' share the phrase *Zoram and his sons* and describe their movements. In J, Zoram and his two sons "went unto [Alma]," into the central social/political location of the Nephites. In J', they "crossed over the river Sidon," out into the military frontier.
- Element K provides the reason Zoram asks Alma to inquire of the Lord—"to know whither the Lord would that they should go . . . in search of their brethren who had been taken captive by the Lamanites." In K', Alma receives an answer from the Lord which he then shares with Zoram and his sons about where they should go. The word *there* is used twice in Alma's answer to first tell them where they will meet up with

5. In *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, verse 3 states, "they had destroyed the people . . . and also some around the borders of Noah, and taking others captive into the wilderness." To keep the verb forms consistent in this sentence, I have used the word *taken* instead of the word *taking* to match "had destroyed."

the Lamanites, and second, to let them know the Lord would deliver their brethren unto them in that same place. These elements share the phrase “*brethren who had/have been taken captive by the Lamanites.*” The only two uses of “the Lord” (outside of its appearance in the central element, L) are found in these two elements.

- Element L, the central element of this chiasm, is striking in its simplicity, but very fitting to serve as the central focus and turning point of the chiasm. It succinctly states, “Alma inquired of the Lord concerning the matter.” The act of inquiring of the Lord is of such profound importance to the narrative that no further elaboration is necessary. The fate of the captive Nephites hinges on this faithful act by Alma and the subsequent revelation he receives from the Lord.

Analyzing the Strength of the Proposed Chiasm

Multiple points of evidence indicate a higher likelihood that this chiasm was deliberately designed by Mormon. First, having such an abundance of matching elements within the chiasm strengthens the validity of the structure as intentional. The eleven matching elements also appear precisely in inverted order in their second occurrences. Second, there are multiple key words and phrases that are found in paired elements and nowhere else within the chiasm. Such examples include the key word *peace*, found only in elements A and A', and the phrase *Zoram and his sons* in elements I and I'. Third, many inversions of key words and phrases have also been identified within the paired elements themselves. Such inversions occur in elements A and A', D and D', E and E', F and F', and H and H'. Fourth, the literary technique of amplification (or intensification) is used effectively between multiple paired elements in this structure. Amplification is employed in elements A and A', E and E', F and F', and G and G'. Finally, the chiasm's central element, L, functions as an effective turning point, or hinge point, in the narrative.

Verses 9–11 deserve further explanation. Parts of verses 10 and 11 are not included in the above chiastic structure. Some of the people's words to Alma in Alma 9:4 are realized in Alma 16:9–10. The people of Ammonihah initially proclaim, “We will not believe thy words if thou shouldst prophesy that this great city should be destroyed in one day” (Alma 9:4). Two main interpretive possibilities can be deduced from this verse, with the second one coming with some added nuance:

First, Alma initially shares this prophecy with the people of Ammonihah who then repeat it back to him. Second, the people unwittingly utter this "prophecy" themselves somewhat akin to Caiaphas' prophecy he unintentionally gives in John 11:49–52. This could be labeled a prophecy or be treated simply as a declaration or statement. Part of this prophecy's (or statement's) fulfillment, "But behold, in one day it was left desolate . . ." (16:10), is included in the above chiasm in element E' because it stresses the devastation experienced in Ammonihah. However, the rest of verse 10 and most of verse 11, detailing the dead bodies and the scent upon the land, could also be included in this element, performing this same function of intensifying the account of the destruction.

Analysis of Alma 16:13–21

The second literary unit in Alma 16 consists of verses 13–21. The proposed five-element chiasm for these verses is presented below. A supplemental structure is also shared, drawing out some of the key words and phrases from these verses, which are repeated in inverted order. This second structure provides the framework for the overall structure. To be clear, this second structure does not compete with the principal five-element chiasm, but rather complements it and highlights some of its strengths. It also strengthens the argument for deliberate design of the five-element chiasm. Additional parallels and correspondences rich with meaning are only found in the five-element chiasm, as discussed below.

Proposed Five-Element Chiasm in Alma 16:13–21

The final nine verses of Alma 16 (vv. 13–21) consist of five sub-units which are delimited in the appendix. These sub-units form a five-element chiasm highlighting the establishment of the church throughout all Nephite lands:

- A** Alma and Amulek *preach the word throughout all the land; establishment of the church becomes general throughout the land* (vv. 13–15)
- B** The Lord pours out his Spirit on all the land to prepare hearts and minds to receive the word to be *taught* at the time of *Christ's coming*; they are to receive the word with *joy* (vv. 16–17)
- C** Priests preach against twelve specific sins (v. 18)
- B'** Holding forth *the coming of the Son of God*; the people inquire

concerning the place he would come and are *taught* that He would appear unto them after his resurrection; *great joy and gladness* (vv. 19–20)

A' *The church is established throughout all the land; the word of God is preached in all the land; the Lord pours out his blessings upon the people* (v. 21)

Correlation Between Matching Elements of the Five-Element Chiasm

Correlations between the matching elements of the five-element chiasm consist largely of direct verbal parallels.

- The chiasm is framed in elements A and A' by two key phrases. Element A includes the phrases *preach the word* and *the establishment of the church became general throughout the land* (v. 15). Element A' has these two phrases in inverted order—the phrase *the church had been established throughout all the land* is followed by the phrase *the word of God being preached* (v. 21). Not only are these two key phrases in inverted order in element A', but also both phrases can be further broken down to exhibit additional inversion. In element A, the ordering of the first phrase is “preach . . . word,” whereas in A' the ordering is “word . . . preached.” In element A, the ordering of the second phrase is “establishment . . . church,” whereas in A' the ordering is “church . . . established.” In element A', the description of the establishment of the church is elevated by the addition of the word *all* in the phrase *throughout all the land* (v. 21) compared with the phrase *throughout the land* (v. 15) in A.
- Elements B and B' both mention Christ's coming (vv. 16, 19, 20) and the people being “taught” (vv. 16, 20). The Lord pours out his Spirit on all the face of the land in verse 16. This coming of the Spirit also parallels the coming of the Son of God in verses 19 and 20. The idea of receiving the word with joy appears in verses 17 and 20. In B, the Lord's Spirit works to prepare the people's hearts to “receive the word with joy” (v. 17). In B', the people receive teachings about the Son of God (the Word) “with great joy and gladness” (v. 20). This second reaction is another example of intensification as “joy” in B is set in parallel with “great joy and gladness” in B'. Alma, in Alma 33:22–23, defines the word as follows: “Begin

to believe in the Son of God, that he will come to redeem his people and that he shall suffer and die to atone for their sins and that he shall rise again from the dead, which shall bring to pass the resurrection. . . . And now my brethren . . . plant *this word* in your hearts" (emphasis added). Significant parts of Alma's definition of the word are found in Alma 16:19 in element B', including the following (each with its corresponding phrase from Alma 33): "the coming of the Son of God" / "the Son of God, that he will come;" "his sufferings and death" / "he shall suffer and die;" and "and also the resurrection of the dead" / "he shall rise again from the dead, which shall bring to pass the resurrection." The prominence of "the word," referenced three times in element B, thus does not disappear in B' but rather is given enhanced definition and greater emphasis.

- The central element C includes a list of twelve sins or sins against which the priests preach. This is a fairly surprising center. The coming of the Son of God, his sufferings, and death in verse 19 would typically be a more likely candidate to serve as the central element of a chiasm. Instead, the coming of the Son of God and receiving the word (referenced in verses 16, 17, and 19) function as a distinct frame for the list of sins in verse 18. For the people to be spiritually prepared for the coming of the Son of God, they must guard against certain sins. This focus on the actions the people could undertake to prepare for the coming of the Son of God is thus central to this unit. As people refrain from such sins and look forward to the coming of the Son of God, the church is established throughout all the land and victory over the devil is declared. This is a direct result of preaching, a theme prevalent throughout this unit. This list also complements the theme of completeness and totality that permeates the entire literary unit. The priests "did preach against *all* lyings . . . and *all* manner of lasciviousness" (v. 18, emphasis added). (This theme is explored further in the appendix.)

The word *preach*, or any of its derivatives, is found in the first, central, and last elements in the chiasm, and nowhere else within it. This complies with Nils Lund's third "law" of chiastic structures, which states: "Identical ideas are often distributed in such a fashion that they

occur in the extremes and at the center of their respective system, and nowhere else in the system.”⁶

Supplemental Twelve-Element Chiastic Structure in Alma 16:13–21

This supplemental chiastic structure is provided here for reference purposes, but will not be examined in detail until the section titled “Analyzing the Strength of the Proposed Chiasm” below. Keywords and phrases from these verses are arranged chiastically, complementing the five-element chiasm introduced above. This chiastic structure is provided below:

- A “*preach the word throughout all the land*” (v. 15)
- B “*the establishment of the church became general throughout the land*” (v. 15)
- C “*the word . . . taught among them*” (v. 16)
- D “*at the time of his coming*” (v. 16)
- E “*preach against*” (v. 18)
 - F “*lyings, deceivings, envyings, strifes, malice, and revilings*” (v. 18)
 - F’ “*stealing, robbing, plundering, murdering, committing adultery, and all manner of lasciviousness*” (v. 18)
- E’ “*crying that these things ought not so to be*” (v. 18)
- D’ “*the coming of the Son of God*” (v. 19)
- C’ “*they were taught*” (v. 20)
- B’ “*the church had been established throughout all the land*” (v. 21)
- A’ “*The word of God being preached . . . in all the land*” (v. 21)

Parallels Between Alma 16:18 and Mark 7:20–23

An intriguing correlation exists between Alma 16:18 and a passage in Mark 7:20–23. However, before diving into this further, to be clear, no proposition is being made as to whether the passage in Mark was used in translating this verse in the Book of Mormon; there may even be an unknown common source that predates both passages. However, the comparison of Alma 16:18 with Mark 7:20–23 provides additional insights that may factor into the structure of the chiasm in Alma 16.

Mark 7:20–23 also includes a list of twelve sins which are a part

6. Nils Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942): 40–41.

of a larger chiasmic structure. Having the same total number of sins listed appears to be a significant correlation with Alma 16, as does the structure in which they are organized. Most sins in Alma 16 have strong correspondences with those listed in Mark 7. In the King James Version of Mark, four of them—adulteries, murders, deceit, and lasciviousness—correspond precisely to sins from the list in Alma 16. The triad of stealing, robbing, and plundering in Alma 16 aligns conceptually with “thefts” in Mark 7:22. The word translated *wickedness* in Mark 7:22 is translated as “malice” in the New International Version (NIV), matching the use of the word *malice* in Alma 16. Alma 16 lists both “lyings and deceivings” which correspond with Mark’s “deceit.” Alma’s “revilings” ties well with Mark’s “blasphemy,” and Alma’s “envyings” parallels Mark’s “covetousness” in the KJV or “envy” in the NIV and New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

It is a valuable pursuit to consult multiple translations of these verses from Mark, to be able to explicate further structural meaning within Alma 16:18. Again, the King James Version of Mark 7:20–23 appears to show a list of thirteen sins, whereas the NIV and the NRSV both catalog twelve sins. The KJV of Mark 7:21 begins, “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications . . .” This translation makes “evil thoughts” a thirteenth sin, instead of separating it from the twelve sins that follow. The NIV translation of Mark 7:21–22 states: “For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly.”⁷ It treats the twelve sins as all proceeding from “evil thoughts.” The use of an em dash (—) makes this separation even more clear. The NRSV follows the same treatment as the NIV. Mark 7:21 of the NRSV begins thus: “For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.”⁸ This is followed by the twelve sins. The NRSV utilizes a colon in the same manner as the NIV uses an em dash to separate “evil intentions” from the twelve sins to come.

Why does this matter? John Dart, in his book *Decoding Mark*, identifies a chiasmic structure for Mark 7:20–23 with the twelve sins as the central elements as shown below:⁹

7. *New International Version, Bible Gateway*, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark%207&version=NIV>.

8. *New Revised Standard Version, Bible Gateway*, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark%207&version=NRSVUE>.

9. John Dart, *Decoding Mark* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2003): 125.

- A** What comes out of a man is what defiles a man.
- B** For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts:
 - C** fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness,
 - C'** deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.
- B'** All these evil things come from within,
- A'** and they defile a man.

The English translation of the Book of Mormon may hide a potential correspondence between these twelve sins in Mark and those listed in Alma, which could affect the structure of the chiasm in Alma 16:13–21. In Greek, the first six sins in Mark 7:21–22 are plural nouns; the next six are singular nouns. In Alma 16:18, the first six sins listed are also all plural nouns except for the word *malice*, and then the next six sins are in the singular. The word *malice* is typically not pluralized in English. In Greek, however, the word translated as “wickedness” in the KJV of Mark 7:22 comes from the Greek word *poneriai* (πονηρίαί) which is a plural noun meaning acts of wickedness or malicious deeds.¹⁰ It is translated as “malice” in the NIV of Mark 7:22. As the word *malice* is surrounded by plural nouns in Alma 16:18, it is reasonable to assume that this use of the word could also be treated in a plural form.

Another reason for grouping the twelve sins in Alma 16 into two groups of six sins each can be derived from the use of the word *and* within this verse. Verse 18 begins, “Now those priests . . . did preach against all lyings and deceivings and envyings and strifes and malice and revilings and stealing, robbing, plundering, murdering, committing adultery, and all manner of lasciviousness.” The word *and* is used after each sin, up until the word *stealing*. Then it appears that the word *stealing* is grouped with the next five sins since the word *and* is not used again, until it comes before the last sin in the list, in which the word *and* would typically be used with any list.

Based on these factors, the chiasm for Alma 16:13–21 could then have two parallel central elements. The first central element includes the list of six plural nouns, preceded by the phrase *preach against*. The second central element includes the list of six singular nouns, succeeded by the phrase *crying that these things ought not so to be*, which corresponds well with the phrase *preach against* in the first central element. This second set of six also includes much weightier sins than those in the first set.

This correspondence between Alma 16 and Mark 7 could easily be

10. United Bible Societies, “Translation Commentary on Mark 7:21–Mark 7:22,” <https://tips.translation.bible/story/translation-commentary-on-mark-721-722>.

coincidental, yet it is an intriguing possibility that the authors intentionally organized this list of sins by breaking them down into six plural nouns followed by six singular nouns, with the graver sins appearing last. With the additional evidence of a deliberate and thoughtful design for the contents of this chapter, it appears that this catalog of sins was also organized intentionally, further highlighting the chiasmic structure.

Analyzing the Strength of the Proposed Five-Element Chiasm

This chiasm exhibits pronounced framing by the means of two key phrases—*preach the word* and *establishment of the church*—located in the first and last elements of the chiasm. As discussed in the correspondences above, these two key phrases appear in inverted order in their second occurrence. Other keywords and phrases from these verses are also repeated in inverted order in their second occurrence, as is evident from reviewing the supplemental chiasmic structure.

At first glance, this supplemental structure appears to be more elegant and organized than the five-element chiasm based on the five sub-units. The six paired elements in this structure have obvious verbal parallels, based on keywords and phrases from the text. Key phrases in elements A, B, and D can be further divided into keywords which appear in inverted order in elements A', B', and D', respectively. However, the structure leaves too many gaps from the text to be a comprehensive structure for the entire unit. Parallels rich with meaning, such as "receiving the word with joy" in element B of the five-element chiasm—with its parallel in B' of hearing or receiving the word with great joy and gladness—are not included in the supplemental view above, but are included in the five-element chiasm. The link between the word in B and the Son of God's coming, sufferings, death, and resurrection in B' would also be missed.

Other factors provide evidence of authorial intent behind this five-element chiasmic structure. First, there are numerous correspondences between paired units. The more correspondences there are, the stronger the likelihood that the structure was consciously constructed by the author. Second, there are clear instances of amplification among parallel phrases from paired elements. For example, "the establishment of the church became general throughout the land" in element A is amplified to "the church [is] established throughout all the land" in A'. "Joy" in element B becomes "great joy and gladness" in element B'. Finally, the theme of preaching is highlighted in the central

element, as well as in the first and last elements in the structure. The list of twelve sins in the center also appears to have been deliberately divided into two groups of six sins each, with the second set more serious in nature, the first six as plural nouns and the last six as singular nouns.

Key Insights and Findings

Once literary structures have been identified and analyzed for their validity and intentionality, the critical step of interpretation can occur. For example, what (if any) additional meaning can be derived from how the text is organized? Also, in addition to the literary beauty and elegance exhibited by chiasmic structures such as these, we may ask what interpretive function do they serve in this instance?

These two chiasms in Alma 16 work together to highlight some illuminating similarities and contrasts.¹¹ Four such points will be examined.

First, the theme of destruction in the first chiasm contrasts with the establishment or construction of the church, and the work which is done to keep people from going on to destruction in the second chiasm. In the first chiasm, elements E, F, F', and E' focus on the destruction of the city of Ammonihah and of its inhabitants. The words *destroy* or *destroyed* appear five times in verses 2, 3, and 9. In contrast, in element B in the second chiasm, the Spirit is poured out upon the land to prepare people to receive the word "that they might not . . . go on to destruction" (v. 17). The establishment of the church is a prominent theme in the second chiasm, emphasized in its first and last elements (A and A'). This building up of the church contrasts with the great destruction which occurs in Ammonihah. There is also mention of the temples, sanctuaries, and synagogues which were "built" (v. 13).

Second, both units incorporate the theme of inquiry. "Alma inquired of the Lord" (v. 6) in the first chiasm's central element concerning whither the Nephites should go in search of their brethren who had been taken captive. In the second unit, "the people did inquire concerning the place where the Son of God should come" (v. 20). The words *inquire* and *inquired* only occur in these two instances in this chapter. Both inquiries regard the question of location. Interestingly, it appears that Alma is told where the Nephite armies should go in the first unit, but the people in the second unit are given an answer

11. Special thanks to Rebecca Lambert for identifying many of the findings shared in this section.

regarding when the Son of God would appear unto them, instead of receiving a direct answer to their initial inquiry of where he would come.

Third, "physical deliverance" in the first unit parallels "spiritual deliverance" in the second unit. In the first unit, the Nephite captives are eventually delivered from their enemies, the Lamanites, due to their reliance on and obedience to the prayers and revelation of the prophet, Alma. In the second unit, the people are given a list of commandments and principles which, if followed, would bring the power and protection of Christ into their lives and grant them victory over their true enemy—the devil. In the first unit, Alma promises that "the Lord will deliver unto thee thy brethren who have been taken captive by the Lamanites" (v. 6). Fulfillment of this promise comes two verses later as "they took their brethren which had been taken captive by the Lamanites; and there was not one soul of them which had been lost that were taken captive" (v. 8). An even bolder statement of deliverance is provided in the conclusion to the second unit. In verse 21, after the Church had been established throughout all the land, we are told that the people "got the victory over the devil." A complete spiritual deliverance was thus obtained. This also contrasts with the complete lack of physical deliverance experienced by the people of Ammonihah in the first unit; instead of physical deliverance, the wicked suffer divine judgment.

Fourth, the temporal is again compared with the spiritual, regarding peace. The first chiasm is framed in elements A and A' with descriptions of temporal peace. In the second unit, a type of spiritual peace is promised to those who "receive the word with joy," as well as being blessed to "enter into the rest of the Lord their God" (v. 17). Peace is achieved in the first unit by removing an external threat (the Lamanite army) and an internal source of corruption (the city of Ammonihah). In the second unit, peace is solidified by removing internal, spiritual threats from the lives of believers (the twelve sins) and establishing an external institution (the Church) throughout all the land.

In addition to these four insights, the incredible skill and literary sophistication on display in the Book of Mormon must be acknowledged, even in what some may consider to be a more temporal chapter. Inspired thought and considerable effort have gone into the choice of words and the organization of the material; for both aesthetic and interpretive purposes. The Book of Mormon is truly a marvelous work and a wonder!

Appendix: Identifying Individual Units in Alma 16

Alma 16 consists of two major literary units delimited by coherent themes, verbal parallels, and chronological markers. The analysis of delimiting these two units is detailed below, in addition to the sub-units of the second unit.

Unit A (Alma 16:1–12)

The first major unit in Alma 16 encompasses the first twelve verses. It is well framed by the matching outer elements in the chiasm. “Much peace” in verse 1 pairs with “continual peace” in verse 12. Verses 1 and 12 both include a date reference marking the passage of time: “for a certain number of years” in verse 1; “for three years” in verse 12. The correspondences continue with mention of war in verses 1 and 12, references to the Lamanites in verses 2 and 12, and so on, according to the paired elements in the chiasm. The strength inherent in this framing overrides what would otherwise appear to be a natural frame for verses 1–9; the recording of the eleventh year being noted twice in verse 1 and then again in verse 9. However, the twenty-three element chiasm discussed above shows that these twelve verses comprise a distinct literary unit. The paired elements in the chiasm share many striking verbal parallels, either appearing in many cases in an inverted order in their second occurrence, or showing amplification or intensification, providing further evidence of possible authorial intent behind the chiasm.

The theme of war is consistent throughout this unit, from the first mention in verse 1 to the last mention in verse 12. In between, the Lamanites attack and destroy the city of Ammonihah and carry away Nephites captive into the wilderness. The Nephite armies rescue these captives, aided by a revelation given to Alma, after he inquired of the Lord to know their location.

Unit B (Alma 16:13–21)

The theme of the universal spread of the preaching of the word and the general establishment of the church throughout all the land gives this unit its cohesiveness. The word *all* occurs eight times in this rather short unit, and other descriptions are given in different terms, also emphasizing the theme of totality. The unit begins with a list of three locations in which Alma and Amulek preach, highlighting the extensiveness of their efforts to share the word of God. They preach in the temples, sanctuaries, and synagogues. They also preached

the word "without any respect of persons" (16:14). Thus, every person who desired to listen to their words was afforded the opportunity. Not only did Alma and Amulek preach the word to whomever would listen, but emphasis is also given to the frequency and scope of their teaching. As to the frequency of their preaching, they imparted the word of God "continually" (16:14); and in verse 15, many more were chosen "to preach the word throughout all the land. And the establishment of the church became general throughout the land, in all the region round about, among all the people of the Nephites." This verse — in several ways — highlights the scope of their preaching. Key phrases include *throughout all the land*, *general throughout the land*, *in all the region round about*, and *among all the people of the Nephites*. This theme continues in the remainder of this unit. In verse 16, "the Lord did pour out his Spirit on *all* the face of the land" (emphasis added). In verse 18, the extent of preaching is described as full or complete in a different manner: the priests "did preach against *all* lyings and deceivings . . . and *all* manner of lasciviousness" (emphasis added). In the last verse of this unit, verse 21, this theme comes to a fitting climax and conclusion: "And now after the church had been established *throughout all the land*, . . . and the word of God being preached in its purity *in all the land*" (emphasis added).

The Five Sub-units of Alma 16:13–21

This unit consists of five distinct sub-units. The first includes verses 13–15; the theme being referenced in each of the three verses is preaching or imparting the word of God. Many people, in addition to Alma and Amulek, are chosen to preach the word. This leads to the establishment of the church throughout the land.

The shift to a new theme in verse 16 signals the beginning of the second sub-unit, consisting of verses 16 and 17. The Book of Mormon printer's manuscript adds the word *for* in verse 16, so the verse begins in the following way: "And there was no inequality¹² among them, for the Lord did pour out his Spirit on all the face of the land." Grant Hardy, commenting on this verse, observes: "The reading of [the printer's manuscript] makes it clear that the lack of inequality was a consequence rather than a cause of the Lord pouring out his Spirit."¹³ The

12. The printer's manuscript of the Book of Mormon says "unequality," but I use "inequality" for clarity.

13. *The Annotated Book of Mormon*, ed. Grant Hardy (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2023), 358.

theme of this sub-unit is *receiving the word*. In these two verses, the phrase *receive the word* occurs twice, along with the phrase *not be hardened against the word* in verse 17.

Verse 18 comprises the third and central sub-unit. It is tightly framed by the phrases *preach against* and *crying that these things ought not so to be*, along with the list of twelve sins in between. This list divides into two groups of six each. The first six sins are in the plural form, whereas the last six sins are in the singular. As noted in the above section, “Supplemental Twelve-element Chiastic Structure for Alma 16:13–21,” the components of this verse are organized chiastically.

The fourth sub-unit consists of verses 19 and 20. One could conclude that verse 19 belongs with verse 18, because “holding forth” at the beginning of verse 19 is a present participle, as is “crying” at the end of verse 18. However, verse 19 shares more in common with verse 20, including the themes of the coming of the Son of God, along with His resurrection. Also, the chiastic structure of verse 18 — with its distinct outer frames — makes this verse its own sub-unit. The title *Son of God* appears in verses 19 and 20, and nowhere else in the unit. The word *resurrection* also appears once in each of these two verses and nowhere else in the unit. Thus, the theme of the coming of the resurrected Son of God dominates these two verses. Verse 19 cites his coming twice: “Holding forth things which must shortly come” and “holding forth the coming of the Son of God.” Verse 20 also references his coming twice, in consideration of where and when he would come: “Many of the people did inquire concerning the place where the Son of God should come,” and “they were taught that he would appear unto them after his resurrection.”

The fifth and final sub-unit within this unit consists solely of verse 21. A shift in themes is evident, from the preceding sub-unit’s theme of the coming of the Son of God, then back to prominent themes from the first sub-unit — including the establishment of the church throughout all the land and the word of God being preached in all the land. This verse brings the unit and chapter to its conclusion by noting the end of the fourteenth year of the reign of the judges; which forms an inclusion, with the end of verse 12 in which the fourteenth year of the reign of the judges is first mentioned, leaving verses 13–21 as a distinct literary unit. The end of this unit and sub-unit is clearly delineated by the heading which introduces the next major account in the book of

Alma — the account of the sons of Mosiah preaching the word of God to the Lamanites.



Derek J. Squire was born and raised in Orem, Utah. President Ezra Taft Benson's call to make the study of the Book of Mormon a lifetime pursuit changed his life when Derek was a teenager. Derek graduated from BYU with a master's degree in accounting and has been a CPA, nursing home administrator, and business owner of a home health and hospice company with his brother. He is currently a real estate investor. He and his brother, Ryan, are the authors of the book *A Christlike Heart: A Study of the Heart in the Book of Mormon* (CFI, 2019). Derek served a mission in the Russia Rostov-na-Donu Mission. He and his wife, Elizabeth, are the parents of three girls and a boy. They currently reside in Bountiful, Utah.

Theology as Pretext

John Gee

Review of Ben Witherington III, *Rethinking Biblical & Systematic Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2026), 232 pages, \$39.00 hardback; and Ben Witherington III, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology: Testing the Exegetical Foundations of Calvinism, Dispensationalism and Wesleyanism* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005), 332 pages, \$52.24 hardback.

Abstract: *Ben Witherington outlines a method for interpreting the Bible that emphasizes studying the Bible in the original languages and in the original contexts without imposing foreign philosophies or frameworks and focuses on the ethical teachings of the Bible. He wishes to use this method to build a biblical and systematic theology. His method, however, undermines his project. In this, there are lessons for Latter-day Saints.*

Ben Witherington III has made a name for himself as a biblical scholar and has been making a name for himself as a theologian with a distinct methodology. In this review I look at Witherington's method by examining two of his books published twenty years apart: *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*¹ and *Rethinking Biblical and Systematic Theology*.² Witherington's methodology has not changed in the intervening years. Although Witherington is no friend of Latter-day

1. Ben Witherington III, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology: Testing the Exegetical Foundations of Calvinism, Dispensationalism and Wesleyanism* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005).

2. Ben Witherington III, *Rethinking Biblical & Systematic Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2026).

Saints, he provides substantial food for thought for Latter-day Saints who have much to learn from his approach.

Readers may be vaguely aware that *theology* is used in positive and negative senses in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and so should know that the term *theology* is used three different ways in the Church. The first is the way that Witherington uses it in his works: as a discipline and field of study, which will be discussed later. The second and most common use in the Church is as a synonym for *teaching* or *belief*. Because this is not the way the term is usually used outside the Church, this usage can create confusion. One can find references to the term *theology* used in both of these senses in General Conference, for example, and used in both positive and negative ways. The third way the term has been used in the Church — a recent development of the current century — is to describe the clothing of postmodern philosophy in scriptural language. In this review I discuss it in the sense that Witherington uses it, which is the most common (outside the Church).

The Method

The two books under discussion in this review have much overlap in theme and content. Latter-day Saints will possibly find the earlier book more interesting even though it is the longer of the two. Witherington spends the bulk of both books discussing problems of Evangelical theology within an Evangelical framework. Such internecine squabbles will probably not interest Latter-day Saints, but Witherington's method and some of his conclusions should.

Witherington's latest volume is comparatively slender. He was "*not* [trying] to present the reader with a biblical or systematic theology" but to discuss how such a work ought to be produced.³ Many times in his latest book Witherington notes the tendency for theologians to produce very fat volumes. This brings to mind one of the theological controversies leading up to the Council of Nicea. The historian Sozomen relates that before the Council, one of the debates was: which was the greater miracle, to make a stone speak or a theologian stop.⁴

As an Evangelical, Witherington begins his latest effort with an obligatory off-handed disparagement of the Book of Mormon⁵ and

3. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 185–86.

4. Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.18.

5. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 4n1.

continues to deride the Church later in the book.⁶ There are doubtless minor denominational quibbles which we might have, and there are many places where I would question Witherington's assumptions, interpretations, and understanding of the ancient world, but not his basic method. One of Witherington's points in his books is that,

it is time to recognize that denominations are a result of Protestant differing and bickering. They are children of the Protestant Reformation. They are also the result of profoundly weak ecclesiology on our part, and they reflect and are based upon the biblically weakest aspects of our theology — our distinctives.⁷

That being the case, I will not argue here over denominational differences. I will concentrate on agreements and things that I think he got right and limit my criticism to one problem where his method was correct, but his application was inconsistent with his method.

Witherington's real target, however, is not Latter-day Saints but Protestants who read their theology into the Bible. For most Protestant theologians, theology is an excuse for eisegesis: reading into the text what the theologian wants rather than what is actually there. In both books, Witherington lays down rules with examples both positive and negative of how to implement those rules. The first two rules provided by Witherington are the most important and are explicitly laid out:

1. You need to be able to read the text in its original language, since every translation is already an interpretation.
2. You need to have studied the text in its original contexts (literary, historical, archaeological, theological, rhetorical).⁸

These two, along with two others, are discussed in the following sections.

Reading the Text in the Original Language

Latter-day Saints "believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly" (Article of Faith 8). Normally, this means that one must be able to read the Bible in the original languages to determine if it has been translated correctly. This provides an impetus for Latter-day Saints to study the original languages. It is typical scholarly

6. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 142n14.

7. Witherington, *Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 247.

8. Witherington, *Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 246.

practice—and certainly my practice—to refer to the original languages in doing research. Consistent with scholarly practice, I provide my own translations of the original texts throughout this review—both scriptures and other ancient writers—unless otherwise noted. For Latter-day Saints, this practice has scriptural authorization (see also Doctrine and Covenants 128:18).

Not being a Latter-day Saint, Witherington provides additional reasons to read the text in the original languages. Witherington notes one reason to master the original languages:

The Bible . . . is not a theological dictionary with a bunch of topics alphabetically listed. Nor do the many terms in the Bible have only one meaning throughout the canon. Indeed, many of these words have a considerable spectrum of meaning, with the particular meaning determined by *the context*.⁹

Witherington has taken the time to learn the languages, especially Greek, though a couple of typos in Semitic languages did slip through.¹⁰

Witherington faults Thomas Aquinas, considered by some to be the greatest Christian theologian, for never learning Greek.¹¹ He also notes Aquinas's "detailed interaction with Greek philosophy."¹² Beyond these two issues raised by Witherington, there is a greater reason for rejecting Aquinas, and it comes from Aquinas himself. Aquinas's early fourteenth-century biographer, Guillelmo de Tocco, records the following of an event that happened on 6 December 1273, shortly before Aquinas died:

Of this doctor it is also said that when he was in Saint Severinus, the castle of his sister, with his aforementioned associate and other brothers of his order, for a long period of time he was in an ecstasy so that he seemed completely removed from his senses. When his sister was particularly troubled about this, she asked his associate what this might be that had suddenly befallen her brother. He told her: the master is often carried away in the Spirit when he is pondering something, but never for as long as now have I seen him

9. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 38.

10. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 108 (*marana tha* for *maran atha*) and p. 122 (*tov m'ov* for *tov m'od*).

11. Witherington, *Rethinking*, x–xi n. 4.

12. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 107.

so absent from his senses. Then, after some time, the associate went to the master, and pulling him forcefully by the cloak as if he finally aroused him from his sleep of contemplation, who sighing said: Raynalde, my son, I will reveal to you in secret forbidding that you should never dare to reveal it to anyone during my lifetime: My writing has come to an end, because such things have been revealed to me, that those things that I have written and taught seem to me insignificant, and because of this I hope in God that my doctrine and my life will soon come to an end.¹³

Theologians grasping at straws have often mistranslated and misconstrued this episode to try to make it seem as if Aquinas was not repudiating his theological enterprise. Because they value Aquinas's work more than he did, they would like to depict this event as other than Aquinas's rejection of his life's theology. In Aquinas's view, next to the revelation that he received, his theology was insignificant and he hoped that it would not survive him. He deserves a modicum of credit for his insight. If, at the end of his life, Aquinas did not think his theology had any value why should we dispute that?

Reading the Text in the Original Context

Witherington insists on reading a text in context. As he often repeats, "a text without a context is just a pretext for whatever you want it to mean."¹⁴ He insists:

We need to get beyond both ancient and modern ways of

13. *"De hoc etiam Doctore dicitur, quod existens in S. Severino, castro sororis suae cum praedicto socio suo, et aliis fratribus sui ordinis, per magnum spatium temporis fuit passus extasim, ita ut a sensibus totaliter videretur abstractus. De quo cum soror sua praecipue turbaretur, quaesivit ab eius socio, quid hoc esset, quod suo Fratri subito accideisset. Qui dixit ei: Frequenter Magister in spiritu rapitur, cum aliqua contemplatur: sed nunquam tanto tempore, sicut nunc, vidi ipsum sic a sensibus alienum. Unde post aliquam horam ivit socius ad Magistrum, et trahens ipsum per cappam fortiter, quasi a somno contemplationis ipsum ultimo excitavit. Quis suspirans dixit: Raynalde fili, tibi in secreto revelo prohibens, ne in vita mea alicui audeas revelare. Venit finis scripturae meae, quia talia sunt mihi revelata, quod ea quae scripsi et docui, modica mihi videntur, et ex hoc spero in Deo, quod sicut doctrinae meae sic cito finis erit et vitae."* Guillelmo de Tocco, *Ystoria sancti Thome de Aquino*, 47, in, D. Prümmer, *Fontes Vitae S. Thomae Aquinatis* (Tolosae: Bibliopolam, 1912), 120. I have provided the Latin original because the translations are often inaccurate.

14. For example, Witherington, *Rethinking*, ix.

handling the text that strip away the story, leaving a mass of quivering ideas and concepts that we then are free to rearrange in any order that pleases us. That may be an intellectually satisfying exercise for some, but in fact it turns out to be a way of neutralizing the story, and not allowing it to have its effect on us. It is in fact a power trip, an attempt to take control over these stories before they fully take hold of us. If that is what thinking theologically and doing theology amounts to, we need a moratorium on thinking and doing theology.¹⁵

He notes the discord among theologians:

When one assesses the few recent attempts in the twenty-first century at undertaking such a task [constructing a systematic theology] . . . one is left feeling one is in the period of the Judges, where “each did what was right in their own eyes.” There is not only content diversity in such volumes; there is in addition no agreement about methodology either.¹⁶

This is because they read the text out of context.

One important reason to read scriptures in context is because “nothing can be theologically true and redemptive that is historically false.”¹⁷ It is therefore imperative that scriptures be historically true. Latter-day Saints and Witherington agree on this point.

Eschewing Outside Frameworks

Another point that Witherington repeatedly makes is that it is a mistake to read the scriptures through the lens of philosophy. He faults “ideas about God that come from Greek philosophy and do not appear to comport with what the Bible says about God” such as “the notion of God’s impassability and immutability.”¹⁸

Though the Reformers were not all equally indebted to Augustine, it seems clear that the indebtedness of Luther and Calvin was considerable, especially when it came to the understanding of issues like predestination, election, salvation, perseverance of the saints, and the nature of the

15. Witherington, *Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 239.

16. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 4.

17. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 12.

18. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 109.

limited atonement of Christ on the cross. Behind all of this was a particular conception of God's sovereignty, a conception which in the case of Augustine owed something to Manicheanism, and fatalism.¹⁹

Ancient Greek philosophies are not the only philosophies that create problems in reading the scriptures. "It is of course also true that there are many problems with applying various forms of modern philosophy to the analysis of Biblical Theology. For example, the unhelpful attempt to read Biblical Theology through a Kantian epistemological lens."²⁰ "All later forms of theologizing, including contemporary theologies such as post-colonial theology, philosophical theology, or historical theology and much more, *must be tested against and normed by the Bible, not least because these later constructs were not inspired directly by God.*"²¹ Witherington is particularly critical of postmodernism and work on intertextuality that depends on postmodernism.²² "The Biblical text is not an ink blot into which one can read whatever comes to one's mind, or one prefers. . . . Modern theories of semiotics and theories of meaning being in the eye of the beholder (or in the reading of the text and its interaction with the beholder) are not assumed to be true or helpful in the interpretation of the Biblical text. . . . The text means what the author meant."²³ Witherington, thus, has major problems with "a reader-centered theology of scripture"²⁴ that "treats scripture less as an established deposit of truth certified by 'author'-ity and more as a field of potential ready for communities of readers to unlock its meaning and power."²⁵ Asserting that "the half-century of literary theory that has unfolded since the late 1960s has made forcefully clear" that "a book is no more than the set of interpretations it proves capable of prompting,"²⁶ is a notion that he would reject. (Seriously, if an author really believed that "a book is no more than the set of interpretations it proves capable of prompting," why would he or she bother writing a book?) Theology, in Witherington's

19. Witherington, *Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 87.

20. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 112 n. 15.

21. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 11, emphasis added.

22. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 165–69.

23. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 166.

24. Rosalynde Frandsen Welch, *Ether: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020), 72.

25. Welch, *Ether*, 77.

26. Joseph M. Spencer, *A Word in Season* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2023), xi.

view, becomes a travesty when the Bible is read through intellectual frameworks brought in from outside the Bible.

Foregrounding the Ethics of Theology

Witherington decries the abandonment of the study of ethics among theologians.²⁷ He notes that,

Early Judaism, like the ancient Israelite religion, was more about orthopraxy than orthodoxy, and by orthopraxy I mean both ethical behavior and what came to be called religious practices such as sacrifices, food laws, Sabbath observance, issues of clean and unclean. These things were not at the periphery of Jewish religion; they were at the heart of it.²⁸

He laments that “the world is laughing at us because our witness is so divided and we speak with forked tongues.”²⁹ Witherington is not exaggerating. About the same time that Witherington wrote that sentence, Ronald Sider noted that evangelicals were just as likely if not slightly more likely to divorce than the general population.³⁰ Over time, evangelicals had given less and less a percentage of their wealth to charity even as they have become richer.³¹ The majority of evangelicals engaged in premarital sex, their rates of cohabitation were only slightly lower than the general population, and a significant number did not believe that extramarital sex is wrong.³² “The number of evangelicals that blatantly reject biblical sexual norms is astonishing.”³³ Sider cited studies that show that “theologically conservative Christians, according to these studies, commit domestic abuse at least as often as the general public.”³⁴ In the intervening time, not much seems to have changed. Eleven years later, the cohabitation rate among Christians had more than doubled.³⁵ Twenty years later, the Barna Group was still

27. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 113–26.

28. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 114.

29. Witherington, *Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 247.

30. Ronald J. Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2005), 18–20.

31. Sider, *Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, 20–22.

32. Sider, *Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, 22–24.

33. Sider, *Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, 24.

34. Sider, *Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, 26–27.

35. David Kinnaman and Roxy Lee Stone, “Majority of Americans Now

reporting that "Christians experience divorce as often as the general population."³⁶

I, too, worry about the neglect of ethics among theologians, though I suspect for different reasons than Witherington. There have been high-profile cases of theologians who were unethical, like Paul Tillich, Ronald Thiemann, Richard Pervo, and Ravi Zacharias.³⁷ The impact of theology on unethical behavior and unethical behavior among theologians affects more than just high-profile names. While I know this from personal observation and reported anecdotes, consider the following story.

Over a decade ago, the sociologist, Christian Smith, explored how the American sociology profession was generally devoted to a specific sacred project of

realizing the emancipation, equality, and moral affirmation of all human beings as autonomous, self-directing, individual agents (who should be) out to live their lives as they personally so desire, by constructing their own favored identities, entering and exiting relationships as they choose, and equally enjoying the gratification of experiential, material, and bodily pleasures.³⁸

Smith argues that, having rejected Christianity, it is as if "American sociologists felt compelled to fill in the sacred and eschatological void left in Christianity and Judaism's absence by constructing, embracing, and proselytizing the world with a secular salvation gospel of its own making."³⁹ In pursuit of this sacred project, Smith documents many examples of places where some sociologists have violated all sorts of ethical norms in pursuit of the sacred project. It is not, however, just sociologists who have embraced this project. For years, those in religious studies have been pursuing a holy grail, a religion that is politically progressive (basically one that is following American sociology's

Believe in Cohabitation," *Barna* (website), 24 June 2016, barna.com/research/majority-of-americans-now-believe-in-cohabitation/.

36. "Marriage and Divorce in 2025: Five Trends Shaping Today's Families," *Barna* (website), 12 November 2025, barna.com/trends/marriage-divorce-trends-2025/.

37. Christian Smith, *Why Religion Went Obsolete: The Demise of Traditional Faith in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025), 232–37.

38. Christian Smith, *The Sacred Project of American Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 7–8 (emphasis removed).

39. Smith, *Sacred Project of American Sociology*, 20.

sacred project) that is growing or at least holding its own.⁴⁰ If such a religious movement could only be found and analyzed then perhaps its success could be replicated. Then they could have what they want: a properly politically liberal or progressive Christianity without what they consider all that Christ nonsense — in other words, a discipleship without discipline.

Enter Eliza Griswold, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author and journalist. Her father, Frank Griswold, was the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church from 1998 until 2006, when she was in her late twenties and early thirties. She describes:

When he consecrated the first openly gay bishop in 2003, I watched a modern schism in real time. This wasn't an arcane theological disagreement: it was a profound rift, and divided the church for good. Some evenings after dinner around our kitchen table, I watched my usually reserved dad put his head in his hands and cry over his failure to hold the church together.⁴¹

The younger Griswold wanted to show how progressive evangelicals were flourishing.⁴² One such group was an Anabaptist organization in Philadelphia, the Circle of Hope. In 2019, she asked permission to do an immersive journalism experiment where she embedded herself into the lives and meetings of the pastors to see how the church worked and what they were doing that made them a thriving progressive Christian church so that this could be replicated elsewhere.⁴³ What happened did not exactly go to plan. She wanted to describe the secrets to their success but instead ended up chronicling how the organization tore itself apart so that the Circle of Hope was bankrupt and defunct four years later.⁴⁴

Although Griswold tries to depict each of the pastors sympathetically, none of them comes off particularly favorably. They appear, in her telling, as variously ambitious, money-grubbing, dishonest, immoral, or profane — cheating and backstabbing each other in pursuit of gain,

40. See, for example, Tim Clydesdale and Kathleen Garces-Foley, *The Twenty-Something Soul: Understanding the Religious and Secular Lives of American Young Adults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

41. Eliza Griswold, *Circle of Hope: A Reckoning with Love, Power, and Justice in an American Church* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024), 3–4.

42. Griswold, *Circle of Hope*, 5.

43. Griswold, *Circle of Hope*, 7.

44. Griswold, *Circle of Hope*, 265, 313–15.

power, popularity, the lusts of the flesh, and the things of the world. Most important for our purposes is that Griswold chronicles in great detail the theology that the pastors were reading⁴⁵ and how it changed their thinking so that what they previously thought was good they later considered evil and what they previously thought was evil they came to consider good. Whether or not one agrees with any individual position that any of the pastors took before or after their theological readings, the fact that their theological reading diet reversed their intellectual and especially ethical positions is more than a little disturbing, particularly since all of this thinking was supposedly based on the Bible. Witherington insists that "we need to stop creating churches that essentially serve ourselves and nurture our own way and style of living, and do missions only as a bonus."⁴⁶

The Problem

If I fault Witherington for anything, it is that he does not take his project far enough. According to Witherington, "anachronism in the form of reading things into the text that aren't there is to be discouraged, not encouraged."⁴⁷ Unfortunately, Witherington's project, for reasons he seems only vaguely aware of, is one great anachronism of reading something into the text that is not there. The biggest anachronism that Witherington reads into the Bible is theology itself; theology is a term that never occurs in the Bible. Witherington goes further: "Put bluntly, we do not have 'theology' in the New Testament."⁴⁸ To understand why theology is unbiblical, we need to understand what Jesus and the New Testament authors understood by *theology*.

Plato first introduces the term *theology* in the second book of his *Republic* after a discussion of the perceptions of justice or righteousness (*dikaia*) and injustice or unrighteousness (*adikaia*). Is it better to be righteous or unrighteous? Do the benefits of righteousness accrue from actually being righteous or merely seeming to be righteous? Do

45. Griswold, *Circle of Hope*, 37, 57, 58, 63, 72–75, 77, 94, 98, 113, 141, 148, 162, 171, 217, 267, 295, 300.

46. Witherington, *Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 248. Compare 3 Nephi 27:10–11: "And if it so be that the church is built upon my gospel then will the Father show forth his own works in it. But if it be not built upon my gospel, and is built upon the works of men, or upon the works of the devil, verily I say unto you they have joy in their works for a season, and by and by the end cometh, and they are hewn down and cast into the fire, from whence there is no return."

47. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 166.

48. Witherington, *Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 229.

the benefits of being unrighteous come from being so or seeming to be so? The discussion concludes that one accrues the most benefits by being unrighteous but seeming to be righteous.⁴⁹ (As an aside, this is an important discussion for Christians since Jesus was really righteous but appeared to men not to be.) Plato's discussion then turns to how to best produce a well-ordered society, and the method is through theology.

In the original sense of the term, *theology* is a way of interpreting texts, particularly the poets Homer and Hesiod, who were memorized as part of the educational curriculum at the time.⁵⁰ "The word *theology* (*theologia*) was first introduced into philosophic discourse in Book II of Plato's *Republic*, where it describes models of the 'fine tales' that poets, broadly understood, ought to be required to tell children in a well-ordered city."⁵¹ Plato describes it this way: "First we will tell children (or slaves, *paidiois*) stories (*mythous*), which are on the whole false, but have a little truth."⁵² Then, they would establish censors (or administrators, *epistatêton*) to approve certain works,⁵³ and the ones that are unapproved would be censured, silenced (*sigasthai*), cancelled, or otherwise taken out of circulation.⁵⁴ This exercise of power is to manipulate people for political purposes and craft a society that those in power desire.⁵⁵ And this is called *theology* (*theologias*).⁵⁶ It tries to depict God the way that the theologians want him to be,⁵⁷ whether or not God actually is that way. To put it bluntly: For Plato, *theology* meant lies that men tell about God based on texts they do not think are true to manipulate, for political purposes, people they think are stupid.

In Jesus's day, theology had developed into a way of trying to explain — and mostly to explain away — Homer and Hesiod. It was part of a larger intellectual project of understanding the world through the lens of Greek philosophy, particularly Plato and Aristotle. As such, theology was of no interest to Jesus, his apostles, or the earliest Christians. Why should they care about how non-Christians interpreted Homer?

49. Plato, *Republic* II.361-366.

50. Xenophon, *Symposium* 3.5.

51. Louis Midgley, "Directions that Diverge: 'Jerusalem and Athens' Revisited," *FARMS Review of Books* 11, no. 1 (1999): 58.

52. Plato, *Republic*, II.377a.

53. Plato, *Republic*, II.377b-c.

54. Plato, *Republic*, II.378a.

55. Plato, *Republic*, II.378b-e.

56. Plato, *Republic*, II.379a.

57. Plato, *Republic*, II.379c.

Accordingly, *theology* is not mentioned anywhere in any Christian writing from the first century or so of Christianity. Witherington rightly rejects "ideas . . . that come from Greek philosophy and do not appear to comport with what the Bible says."⁵⁸

There is no explicit condemnation of theology in the New Testament simply because, at the time, theology was the attempt to explain Homer and Hesiod away. It explicitly dealt with texts that were seen not to be true (*mythous*). The apostles were testifying of things that were true, of events that actually happened. "For we have not followed cunningly devised fables (*mythois*), when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Peter 1:16, KJV). Why would they need to bother with something so far afield? Still, they condemned philosophy (Colossians 2:8), and Witherington rightly agrees with them. This changed in the second century.

One of the problems in the Church in the second century was the presence of intellectuals. We know them from the Greek term for intellectuals: *gnostikoi*, or Gnostics. These intellectuals wanted the Church to be intellectually respectable. They tried either to reconcile the philosophies of the day with the gospel, or to portray contemporary philosophy as though it were the gospel. For example, the philosophical treatise, *Eugnostos the Blessed*, which did not even pretend to be Christian, was put into the mouth of Jesus during his forty-day post-resurrection ministry, and retitled the *Sophia Jesu Christi*, or wisdom of Jesus Christ.⁵⁹ This was one way that the intellectuals could make Jesus say what they wanted him to say, by couching their philosophies in words falsely attributed to Jesus. Another thing they did was to try to harmonize the story in Genesis with the current philosophies of the day.

The start of the problem is that any intellectual person at the end of the first century knew that "those who think that bodily matter is mixed with the divine are mistaken."⁶⁰ This meant that Jesus, as God, being incarnate in a physical body was a problem for those who wanted to be intellectually respectable. Philosophers knew that God did not have a body and everyone who wanted to seem intelligent just capitulated

58. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 109.

59. See John Gee, "The Apocryphal Acts of Jesus," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 2 (2012): 158, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/the-apocryphal-acts-of-jesus.

60. Plutarch, *On the Generation of the Soul in the Timaeus* 1022f.

to the philosophers. This extended to Jews rewriting their scriptures to accommodate Greek philosophy by avoiding anthropomorphism, depicting God as having a body and body parts.⁶¹ In Christianity, this coincided with the rise of Docetism, the idea that Jesus only seemed (*dokein*) to suffer on the cross, since every intelligent person of the day knew that God did not feel and certainly could not suffer. Thus, Ignatius at the end of the first century asks from his chains going to his death, “If—as some godless, that is faithless, say—He [Jesus] seemed to suffer (though they are the ones who seem), why am I bound?”⁶² “If these things done by our Lord were only seeming, then I am only seeming to be bound.”⁶³ Ignatius knew the difference between *seeming* and *being* and could see no point dying for a fiction.

One of the goals of philosophy at the time was to produce theology. Plutarch mentions a certain Demetrius the grammarian who proposed a “philosophy which had as its goal theology (*theologian*) as he called it.”⁶⁴ For the philosophers, according to Albinus (or Alcinus), there were three dialectics: the theological, the physical, and the mathematical. “The purpose of the theological dialectic is the knowledge of the cause of the first and the higher and the original things.”⁶⁵ For the philosophers of the day, God was “bodiless,” of course; this was the theological account of “first things (*archōn*).”⁶⁶ They spoke “about the first things (*peri tōn archōn*) and the theological things (*theologikōn*).”⁶⁷ How one got from an immaterial god to matter was accounted for in Plato’s *Timaeus*: Plato posited that the creator was entirely good, and only did good things.⁶⁸ That meant that the cosmos, which had evil, was a copy of something else.⁶⁹ At some point, they were copied badly (*kakōs an aphomoioi*).⁷⁰ Christians jumped on the bandwagon to produce works that were also about the “first things (*archōn*).” Thus, the Gnostics produced a work on “The basis of the

61. Paul V. M. Flesher and Bruce Chilton, *The Targums: A Critical Introduction* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 372–73.

62. Ignatius, *Trallians* 10:1. Compare Ignatius, *Smyrnaeans* 2:1.

63. Ignatius, *Smyrnaeans*, 4:2.

64. Plutarch, *The Obsolescence of Oracles* 410b.

65. Albinus, *Introduction* 7, in Carl Friedrich Hermann, *Platonis Dialogi* (Liepzig: B. G. Teubner, 1873), 6:161.

66. Albinus, *Introduction* 11, in Hermann, *Platonis Dialogi*, 6:166.

67. Albinus, *Introduction* 8, in Hermann, *Platonis Dialogi*, 6:162.

68. Plato, *Timaeus* 29e–30b.

69. Plato, *Timaeus* 29b.

70. Plato, *Timaeus* 50e.

first things (*archōn*)," commonly called *The Hypostasis of the Archons*. Clement of Alexandria wrote a now-lost treatise on the subject called "Explanation of First Things (*archōn*) and Theology."⁷¹ Origen also wrote a treatise on first things (*Peri Archōn*), usually mistranslated "On First Principles."

Tertullian famously solved the problem of Greek philosophy by rejecting Greek philosophy altogether: "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? . . . Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition!"⁷²

Origen's teacher, Clement of Alexandria, himself an intellectual, tried to solve the problem of the intellectuals a different way. He worried that the Gnostic sects were overrunning the Church with philosophy ("There are great crowds of such").⁷³ Revelation was something that was reserved for a future world.⁷⁴ In the present world, "the power that divinely spoke to Hermas through revelation said, 'Visions and revelations are for doubters, who debate in their hearts whether it is or is not so.'"⁷⁵ Not having any other means at his disposal, he turned to Plato's theology, and seems to have been the first Christian to use the term. Clement speaks in terms borrowed from Plato's introduction of *theology*. The sources of theology, Homer and Hesiod, are the same as they were for Plato.⁷⁶ Clement was a philosopher and tried to push philosophy on the Church and even claimed that what the prophets taught was theology.⁷⁷ He distinguishes between barbarian philosophy and true theology,⁷⁸ or right theology.⁷⁹ Clement classified visions and revelations as child's fables (*pais mythos*)⁸⁰ using the same vocabulary as Plato when he first used the term *theology* but in a way that completely reverses the earliest Church's understanding of those terms. Therefore, he reasoned that since "before the appearance of the Lord, the Greeks needed philosophy for righteousness, now it is

71. Clement of Alexandria, *Quis Dives Salvetur* 26.

72. Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics*, 7, as quoted in Witherington, *Rethinking*, 106.

73. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 1.(3).22.1.

74. Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor* 1.6.

75. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 1.(29).181.1.

76. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 5.(4).24.1.

77. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 5.(4).24.1.

78. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 5.(9).56.3.

79. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 5.(8).46.1.

80. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 1.(29).180.5.

useful for piety.”⁸¹ Even an early Christian philosopher like Clement, however, acknowledged that philosophy was not a good guide to the things of God. “Philosophy,” says Clement,

does theology (*theologeí*) in an understandable fashion, but it does not preserve exactness or particular details, for it treats neither the Son of God nor the way things work according to providence as we do, for it does not recognize worship according to God. Consequently, the sects of barbarian philosophy, even if they talk of God, or sing of Christ, talk according to their understanding, but not the truth.⁸²

Even for Clement, who promoted theology, theology was an inferior product. Though both Clement and his student Origen took pains to contrast the theology of the Christians from the pagan sources from which they had borrowed both the term and its usage,⁸³ for the next three hundred years, Christians continued to use the term to mean “theology in the wider sense,” the way it was used in pagan sources.⁸⁴

The adoption of theology, however, did not stop the problems as Clement hoped it would. According to the ecclesiastical historian Socrates, Alexander the bishop of Alexandria

at one time in the presence of the presbyters who were under him and the rest of the clergy, began speculating (*etheologeí*, or doing theology), in a most vainglorious way (*philotimoterón*) concerning the holy Trinity, philosophizing (*philosophōn*) that the Trinity was a monad. A certain presbyter who was under him, Arius, a man not unpossessed of rhetorical skill, . . . taking the opposite position out of ambition (*philoneikias*, or competitive instinct) . . . vehemently responded to the things said by the bishop.⁸⁵

Thus “having constructed an argument from this novel reasoning, he stirred up many to contention, and from a little spark was ignited a great fire.”⁸⁶ The result of doing theology, in this case, was a creed.

81. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 1.(5).28.1.

82. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 6.(15).123.2.

83. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 1.(13); 5.(6); 5.(9).56.3; Origen, *Against Celsus* 7.42.

84. G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 627–28.

85. Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.5.

86. Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.6.

Eusebius, responding to criticism that the creed was not biblical, wrote: "we knew that previous bishops and ancient writers when discussing the theology of the Father and the Son did not use the word *homousios*" but the committee "after extensive examination of the issue, all agreed . . . having unanimously agreed to the stated rationale (*logismois*)."⁸⁷ The teaching was not biblical, but the committee of theologians worked hard and so the Church should simply acquiesce to their doctrine. It is interesting that later, Friedrich III (1559–1576) — having hired Calvinist theologians after firing all the Lutheran theologians in the University of Heidelberg who had been hired only three years earlier to replace the Catholic ones⁸⁸ — had Johann Sylvanus publicly beheaded for pointing out that one could not find the doctrine of the trinity in the Bible,⁸⁹ something that the committee at Nicaea had openly acknowledged a millennium earlier.

Witherington is aware on some level that the earliest Christians avoided theology. He writes: "You will look in vain to find this sort of systematic theologizing in the Apostolic Fathers, or the Patristic Fathers. Indeed, you will not find even a reasonable facsimile of this sort of theology before the later reflections of St. Augustine."⁹⁰ One reason is that, "Put bluntly, we do not have 'theology' in the New Testament."⁹¹ The other reason is that systematic theology, as a branch of theology, does not appear until the eighteenth century. It is, if possible, even less biblical.

If, as Witherington urges us, we should reject Greek philosophy and external frameworks, why should we use theology—a Greek philosophical framework—to understand the Bible or the gospel of Jesus Christ? It seems to me that the tendency for theology to be an eisegetical way of reinterpreting the scriptures to mean whatever the theologian wants it to mean—in Witherington's terms "a pretext for whatever you want it to mean"⁹²—has always been part and parcel of theology. Jesus had no need for theology, why should his followers?

87. Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.8.51-52.

88. Oliver Fink, *Heidelberg: Kleine Stadtgeschichte* (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2005), 48–53.

89. Fink, *Heidelberg*, 53.

90. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 84.

91. Witherington, *Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 229.

92. Witherington, *Rethinking*, ix.

Conclusions

For Latter-day Saints, Witherington's methodology sounds a lot like the "gospel methodology" recommended by Spencer W. Kimball to Brigham Young University,⁹³ as elaborated by the Church Commissioner of Education at the time:

Latter-day Saint scholars will show the way by being able to read firsthand such ancient texts rather than relying on secondary scholarship, as was the case earlier in this dispensation. We will be able to reach such texts through a Latter-day Saint lens rather than relying solely upon able Protestant and Catholic scholars, of whom it is unfair to expect full sensitivity to the fulness of the gospel's doctrines and ordinances.⁹⁴

Latter-day Saint scholars have generally not followed that methodology, particularly not recently. Most self-proclaimed Mormon theologians have no training whatsoever in the original languages, just as they have no training whatsoever in theology. As Witherington wrote,

in an age of biblical illiteracy we must have a renewal of the commitment to contextual study of the N[ew] T[estament], including original language exegesis. We must stop watering down our Christian college and seminary curriculums so that students can escape without a hint of understanding the original languages and contexts in which the Bible was written.⁹⁵

Witherington, nevertheless, has shown what it looks like to read firsthand ancient texts through a Wesleyan lens. In many cases, the view is the same as, or at least similar to, a Latter-day Saint lens, though not in other cases, for which we can hardly blame Witherington. Indeed, we can thank Witherington for showing what following that methodology might look like.

Theology was not condoned by Jesus or the writers of the New Testament. It was a pagan philosophical interpretive framework imposed onto Christianity used from the very beginning to make the text mean whatever the theologian wants it to mean. As such, it has

93. Spencer W. Kimball, "The Second Century of Brigham Young University," in *Envisioning BYU: Foundations and Dreams*, ed. John S. Tanner (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2022), 1:55.

94. Neal A. Maxwell, *Deposition of a Disciple* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 49.

95. Witherington, *Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 227–28.

always been a parasite on the body of Christ. It is precisely because I use a methodology that is similar to Witherington's that I utterly reject theology.



John Gee is the William (Bill) Gay Research Professor in the Department of Asian and Near Eastern Languages at Brigham Young University. He has authored more than 150 publications on topics such as ancient scripture, Aramaic, archaeology, Coptic, Egyptian, history, linguistics, Luwian, rhetoric, Sumerian, textual criticism, and published in journals such as *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, *British Museum Studies in Ancient Egypt and Sudan*, *Bulletin of the Egyptological Seminar*, *BYU Studies*, *Enchoria*, *Ensign*, *FARMS Review*, *Göttinger Miszellen*, *The International Journal of Levant Studies*, *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy*, *Journal of Academic Perspectives*, *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*, *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, *Journal of Egyptian History*, *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities*, *Lingua Aegyptia*, *Review of Biblical Literature*, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, *Studien zur altägyptischen Kultur*, and *Interpreter*, and by such presses as *American University of Cairo Press*, *Archaeopress*, *Association Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth*, *E. J. Brill*, *Carsten Niebuhr Institute of Near Eastern Studies*, *Czech Institute of Egyptology*, *Deseret Book*, *Franco Cosimo Panini*, *de Gruyter*, *Harrassowitz*, *Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale*, *Macmillan*, *Routledge*, *Oxford University Press*, *Peeters*, *Praeger*, *Religious Studies Center*, and *Society of Biblical Literature*. He has published five books and has edited eight books and an international multilingual peer-reviewed professional journal. He served twice as a section chair for the *Society of Biblical Literature*.

Probing Our Culture with Problematic Data

Kyler Rasmussen

Review of Jeff Strong, *Torn: Why People We Love Are Leaving the Church and What We Can Learn from Them* (Midway, UT: Coolstream Publishing, 2026). 300 pages. \$21.95 (paperback).

Abstract: *Torn provides a mountain of new data on disaffiliation from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, based on the author's deeply personal research efforts. Those efforts allow him to present insights into how and why people report exiting the faith, and how loved ones can stay connected with those who turn away. But the picture he paints of disaffiliation trends and Church culture suffers from an overreliance on shaky data. His excellent pastoral prescriptions will be of value to faithful Saints, but those looking for a clear-eyed view of disaffiliation may need to turn elsewhere.*

When someone you know leaves The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it's natural to try to understand why. Is it something about them — their behavior, their personality, or their faithfulness? Is it something about you — how you treated them or how you raised them? Or should blame be leveled toward the Church itself — its policies, its leaders, and its culture?

It's relatively easy to find information on these matters, even if true knowledge is elusive. Given the opportunity, former members will often tell you why they left — sometimes at length. For the statistically inclined, there are a number of large-scale surveys with data on religious experience, affiliation, and retention. However, those with experience understand that seeing a number or hearing a story is not the

same as trusting it. Trust requires more than mere exposure. It requires an assurance that a perspective broadly aligns with an external reality and isn't driven by misunderstanding, hostility, fear, or agenda.

It's here that *Torn*¹ enters the picture, a book aimed at helping faithful members better understand those whose connection to the Church has wavered or severed. It centers on the experience of its author, Jeff Strong — a father of three wayward children, a former mission president, and someone willing to personally bankroll a research program dedicated to those who have disaffiliated.

The author puts forward three main assertions:

1. "Many of our members are leaving . . . because their lived experience in the Church has, for them, become intellectually, relationally, and spiritually empty."
2. "Culture powerfully shapes how [history, doctrine, and leadership] are taught, lived and experienced, often in ways we do not intend Culture can either deepen trust and discipleship — or erode them."
3. "Ordinary, faithful members like you and me have more influence than we realize in cultivating a healthier, more Christlike culture." (pp. 5–6)

He supports these assertions using survey and focus-group responses from over 20,000 current and former members, recruited largely from an online snowball sample² drawn from participants in Latter-day-Saint online venues spanning the belief spectrum (sites such as Scripture Central, Faith Matters, and r/exmormon). His research forthrightly accepts the perspective of former members, presenting their narratives with an uncommon textual and visual clarity. The narratives are paired with exceptionally useful pastoral advice, grounded in scripture and the words of Church leaders, which will resonate with anyone familiar with deconversion. Yet, that advice is marred by three interrelated problems: (1) an overreliance on questionable data, (2) notable blind spots not captured by his research, and (3) a warped view of current Church culture.

1. Jeff Strong, *Torn: Why People We Love Are Leaving the Church and What We Can Learn from Them* (Midway, UT: Coolstream Publishing, 2026).

2. *Snowball sampling* is a technique where survey participants are self-selecting and who participate in the recruitment of additional participants. For further information, see "Snowball Sampling," *Oregon State University*, 14 September 2010, research.oregonstate.edu/ori/irb/policies-and-guidance-investigators/guidance/snowball-sampling.

The author attempts to paint the flow of those leaving the Church as an open and gushing wound, one implied to be a uniquely urgent problem for Latter-day Saints. In shining a light on cultural issues, he falls into the same trap he hoped to correct, adopting a narrowed and skewed vision of disaffiliation. Thankfully, his proposed responses are truly valuable, with a readily evident love for Christ and the Church.

A Brief Note

It is worth noting that I am approaching this review as an analytics-focused government researcher. Strong made it clear in interviews and elsewhere that he doesn't want undue focus on his research findings. But those findings have been the hook by which he has garnered attention, and they are what most would expect someone with my background to comment on.³ Unfortunately, *Torn* is light on methodological detail. I had to reach out to Strong and his research partner, Jeff Dotson (an Associate Professor of Marketing at Ohio State University), to learn more.⁴ They were gracious enough to send me draft, unpublished research reports and met with me briefly to answer my questions. Strong also hoped to make updates to the book with additional printings, so this review—based on the first edition of *Torn*—may not match what winds up in future editions of the book.

A Summary of *Torn*

Before giving my assessment of *Torn*'s strengths and weaknesses, I think it is helpful to provide a summary of the book. The importance comes in ensuring that Strong's reasoning is accurately understood. I try to do so in a matter-of-fact manner, but that approach should not be taken as expressing my agreement with or endorsement of Strong's conclusions. Understanding his positions—and the reasons for those positions—is critical to effectively evaluating *Torn*.

Strong is a former corporate executive (president of Johnson & Johnson), so it is not a surprise that his book reads like it came out of the management section at Barnes and Noble. There are plenty of crisp infographics, (sometimes muddy) analogies, and (maybe too many) bullet-point lists. But with that style comes clear, accessible prose and handy post-chapter takeaways that many will appreciate.

3. Specifically, my background is in data analytics and survey methodology, which seems relevant for a book driven by a large-scale survey.

4. Video call with Jeff Strong and Jeff Dotson, 13 May 2026.

He also includes scripture references, apostolic quotes, and mission stories that show his sincerity as a faithful Latter-day Saint.

The book is shaped by a metaphor of soil, with soil representing the culture in which Church members are planted and nourished. That metaphor has four parts:

1. **Examine the soil.** How many are leaving, who they are, and why they are leaving.
2. **Prepare the soil.** How culture creates conditions that impact the way faith takes root.
3. **Cultivate the soil.** How to balance the tensions that often push people away.
4. **Bring forth good fruit.** How Jesus Christ can help us transform our culture.

These four metaphorical parts are discussed in the following sections. After examining the arguments in each part, I provide my own reflections on those arguments.

Part I: Examine the soil

In these chapters, Strong reports the primary findings of his research, including his headline statistic: 40% of active Church members in the United States have left since the year 2000 (p. 16). This represents the rough lower-bound of several different estimates gleaned from his research and national polling, validated by Church researchers with firsthand knowledge of internal statistics. This includes asking respondents who reported actively attending Church at some point in their lives⁵ whether they had left the Church (42%), how many in their immediate and birth families had left (48%), and how many of their high-school friends had left (47%). This was supplemented with data from the *Harvard Cooperative Election Study* (HCES), which suggested an apparent 55% reduction in Latter-day Saint affiliation since 2008. It was also supplemented by the *Pew Religious Landscape Study* (PRLS), where 46% of 2024 respondents said that they were affiliated at age 16 but had since disaffiliated.

Strong then presents four main reasons for which former members reported stepping away, with four general categories that he terms as *waves* (p. 20). These were established and shaped through focus groups with former members and quantified by his larger survey.

5. Strong does not clarify what he considers active or at what points one would need to be active to be considered a fully active member.

- **Wave I – Lifestyle:** "I couldn't keep living this way" (6%).
- **Wave II – Church History:** "The Church isn't what it claims to be" (42%).
- **Wave III – Social Issues:** "Even if the Church were true, I couldn't support this" (33%).
- **Wave IV – Church Experience:** "The Church isn't led by Christ, and it's not life-giving" (18%).

Strong outlines each wave, including frequently cited issues and triggers as well as connections to other waves. He doesn't talk about any of the specific doctrinal or social issues in depth, but points readers to an endnote with works published by Church-affiliated or Church-friendly presses (for instance, W. Paul Reeve's book on race and the priesthood or Tom Christofferson's book on LGBT issues).

Then comes his second banner claim: that disaffiliation is accelerating. This one is based on his own data, where most disaffiliates had left within the last few years. He treats this as generally representative of historical trends, with a startling chart suggesting that disaffiliation rates have been *eleven times higher since 2020 than in the 2000s* and about double what they were in 2015–2019 (p. 31). He then classifies his respondents in terms of their current Church activity. The classification includes whether they were currently participating in Church (56%), whether those who were participating currently believed in the truth claims of the Church⁶ (about 67% of those currently participating), and whether those who weren't participating were active in another faith and/or believed in a higher power (a little less than half of former members). These statistics are framed as a wake-up call, with disaffiliation becoming an urgent crisis "not because belief itself is weak but because cultural conditions often fail to engage people through disruption, inquiry, and change" (p. 38).

Strong then discusses the experiences of those who left, characterizing their transition as a difficult and often years-long process marked by a discomfort with Church culture and a lack of belonging. For many, the issue became less about questions than conscience, and more about the institution than the reality of God (p. 52). Official Church resources were seen as particularly unhelpful, with nonofficial Latter-day Saint resources, non-Latter-day Saint religious resources,

6. Strong does not specify what he means by *truth claims*, but this would broadly encompass the claims of the Restoration, including Joseph Smith receiving the revelations he claimed and the Book of Mormon being an authentic ancient record.

and social media perceived as more helpful (p. 48). Most reported reaching out to other members as part of their journey, with spouses and friends being more helpful than parents or Church leaders who tended to reframe inquiry as disloyalty. Those who disaffiliate “learn who they can trust with their deepest thoughts and feelings—and who they cannot” (p. 44).

Reflecting on part I

I’ll have plenty to say about the data later in this review, but I’ll note that I don’t take issue with the banner 40% statistic, especially if it aligns with what Church researchers have seen in the internal data. The one I have a problem with is the claim of eleven times acceleration over prior decades, which does not seem reasonable. Strong’s wave categorization is useful enough, though it likely masks some important complexities, such as *Lifestyle* (Wave I) incorporating both “mental health strain” and “controlling culture”; and *Church Experience* (Wave IV) combining “spiritual emptiness” and “social exclusion.”

Readers will find that the narratives attached to each wave are idealized and perhaps even sanitized. Strong acknowledges that these stories can be biased by former members’ needs for “inner congruency and validation” (p. 19), but he expends no effort explaining how the stories might be misleading. Nevertheless, I don’t see Strong’s approach as particularly problematic—it can be viewed as an exercise in seeing these members through their own (and perhaps Christ’s) eyes.

Part II: Prepare the soil

The next few chapters prepare Strong’s readers for the need to alter Church culture. Strong first argues that the light of our gospel experience may be blinding us to problematic cultural elements, just as a car’s headlights can make it more difficult to see objects outside the cone of light in front of us. “Sometimes the very light that guides us can blind us, narrowing our vision just when we need to see more. . . . We cannot respond wisely to what we do not yet see clearly” (p. 61).

He notes that more devout survey respondents were more likely to underestimate the scale of disaffiliation and less likely to correctly identify disaffiliates’ reported reasons for leaving. He frames this in terms of *More Incorrect* reasons (sin, loss of the spirit, led away by the world) and *More Correct* reasons (feeling like they don’t belong, not believing in truth claims, not experiencing the fruits of the gospel)

(p. 60). This suggests an opportunity for active Church members to exercise humility and Christlike love to help them better see and understand the experiences of those who leave.

Strong argues that the more rigid aspects of our culture have served important historical purposes and produced a few positive results but have had unintended side-effects. These side-effects highlight cultural tendencies toward conformity, insularity, and fealty that turn many away from the faith and lead members to react fearfully to external threats (p. 79).

Strong outlines four such threats that he sees as triggering the rise in disaffiliation — the storm that he believes the Church currently faces:

- **Disruptive Technology.** The rise of the Internet and social media have amplified personal expression, spread information, and increased institutional visibility and accountability.
- **Spiritual and Emotional Challenges.** Crises of mental health and loneliness that create a hunger for belonging and meaning.
- **Declining Institutional Trust.** A broad distrust of educational, business, media, government, and community organizations, which has decreased tolerance for perceived institutional shortcomings.
- **Changing Religious Values.** An increased emphasis on religious *experience* and *community* rather than *information* or authority-based *credentials* (p. 98). (Strong doesn't cite a source for this change in values or the way he structures them.)

Strong sees the primary fruit of these changes as *tension* — a feeling of discomfort caused by conflict between internal beliefs and external expectations.

Faithful members are experiencing tension between what they believe, value, and feel called to do in their discipleship and what they perceive they are *expected* to believe, value, and do within Church culture (p. 73). Public perception reflects this tension. A 2023 Pew study found that Latter-day Saints are viewed less favorably than any other religious group in the United States. While misunderstanding and bias play a role, this disparity invites humility and reflection. (p. 99)

Strong uses his survey results to assert that half of active members are uncomfortable with Church culture (p. 82). (Importantly, in his

sample, Strong includes members that were once active but who have left the Church. This greatly qualifies how his findings should be interpreted.) When providing examples of things that cause discomfort, he lists a few items that will sound to some like important doctrines rather than purely cultural practices:

- The idea that God has a plan for each individual.
- Church emphasis on ordinances, covenants, and the temple.
- The emphasis on missionary work and seeking converts, based on the idea that ours is the only true church.

What Strong suggests would make people more comfortable, as an alternative, is emphasizing things that some may find quite familiar:

- God expecting his children to create their own plan for their lives, based on following divine principles and being led by the Holy Ghost.
- Humility, faith, love, and serving others.
- Respecting other faiths as equals, ministering and serving rather than simply converting.

He gives special consideration to the role of women in the Church:

In the modern Church, the public voice and influence of women are often limited. For many, this contrast creates confusion—not about doctrine or priesthood responsibilities but about culture—about whether the Church community today fully reflects the pattern revealed in scripture and the vital role God consistently relied on women to play. (p. 83)

For Strong, the contrast comes from letting traditions or distortions of doctrine take our focus off Christ. He reports that only 47% of “active” respondents see the Church as “very much” Christ-centered (p. 103). He cites several examples, such as promising protection, blessings, and spiritual confirmation that can fail to materialize, refusals to date those who didn’t serve missions, and criticizing those with untraditional clothing and hairstyles (p. 114).

Reflecting on part II

Strong’s point about distortions is a relatable one—it’s hard to go a week without hearing a doctrinal string plucked in a way that’s slightly off-key. (And it’s particularly painful if those off-notes come out of my own mouth.) But he seems to see those distortions as moving in only

one direction. Strong's Christ-focused center of gravity appears to be located squarely with the world's shift in religious values, as adjudicated by public opinion. The storm he outlines is framed as a force of nature, a generational (and directionally correct) values-shift rather than a morally dubious one often aimed at active Church members from those outside the faith. The resulting tension is blamed on faithful members who simply failed to pivot quickly enough in the face of changing winds.

I'm probably not the only one who bristles at these ideas, particularly at the thought that the world would somehow like the Church better if only its members were more humble, Christlike, and service-oriented. (We are already pretty well-known for that!) Those are certainly worthwhile attributes, but it should be noted that Christ's own Christ-like attributes failed to win any popularity contests among the Jews.

Strong's central touchstone through this exploration—the story of *Fiddler on the Roof*—fills me with discouragement rather than hope. That story involves a father bending over backwards to accommodate his children's cultural preferences. But I don't remember that working out well for him, for the village of Anatevka, or for the real-life Jews who remained in Russia over the ensuing decades.

Part III: Cultivate the soil

It is here that Strong dives fully into his soil-based metaphor, outlining what he sees as four cultural imbalances in the soil of our faith and the tensions that result from them, centered on foundational questions about the nature and purpose of the Church:

- **Hard and Unyielding Soil.** A tension between *Acceptance* and *Standards*, centering on the question: Who is the Church really for?
- **Shallow Stony Soil.** A tension between *Growth* and *Sanctuary*, centering on the question: How can the Church best prepare us for the challenges of real life?
- **Thorn-Choked Soil.** A tension between *Agency* and *Faith*, centering on the question: How can we honor God's gift of agency in a culture that expects compliance?
- **Single-Crop Soil.** A tension between *Harmony* and *Conformity*, centering on the question: How can we be one when we are so different? (p. 198)

He then showcases his key method for highlighting those tensions:

survey items meant to compare respondents' personal beliefs with Church expectations (p. 121). Specifically, he asked respondents to rank or rate the importance of specific items from either perspective, such as "Love and Care for the Poor and Needy." In terms of their personal beliefs, respondents rated that item as the most important, with "Attend the Temple" as the least important. They then rated how important those items would be from the perspective of Church expectations. "Attend the Temple" was among the most important, while "Love and Care for the Poor and Needy" was dead last (figure 1).

Again, these items were completed by both current and former members, and versions of these charts appear throughout the soil-oriented chapters as indicators of how Strong believes that Church culture fails to align with most members' personal values.

Instead of trying to summarize these chapters, I'll just include some relevant quotes, because there are some good ones:

Acceptance:

While our cultural soil warmly invites everyone to the meet, we don't allow everyone to run or to run in a way so that they feel they matter. We implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) exclude not by enforcing God's doctrines or standards but by emphasizing lower standards or certain cultural standards above God's higher, essential standards. (p. 130)

Growth:

Tradition sometimes prevented our missionaries from drawing strength from Christ and His gospel. It gave them the wrong approach to facing hard things. They wanted to resolve discomfort by avoiding it or seeking quick, superficial relief rather than patiently working through it. They felt pressured to substitute certainty for faith. (pp. 148–49)

Agency:

Fealty is an unquestioning, unconditioned allegiance to some sovereign power where truth, goodness, choice, responsibility, reasoning, and even personal revelation are surrendered to that sovereign's authority. Christlike obedience retains these elements because they are essential for our growth as children of God. Fealty chokes the plant; obedience nourishes it. (p. 169)

What Matters Most—Personal Belief vs. Cultural Emphasis (Respondents Ranked 8 Religious Priorities)

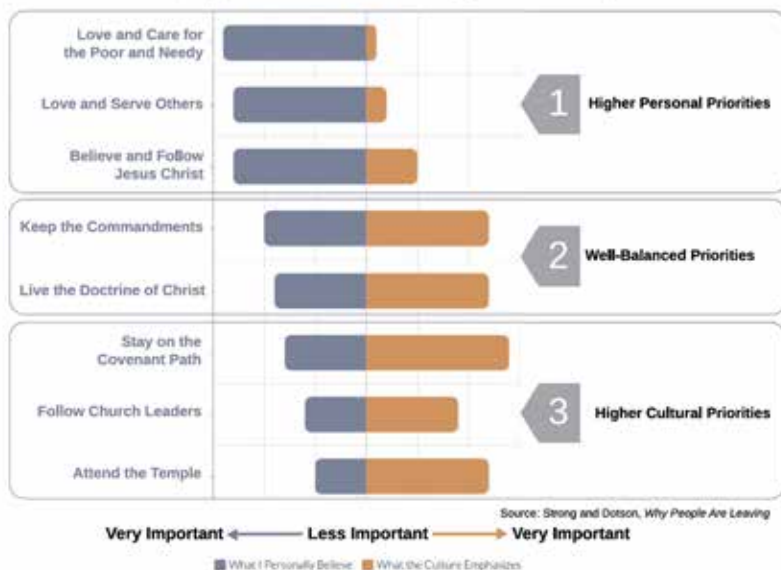


Figure 1. What matters most—personal belief vs. cultural emphasis.
(Source: *Torn*, 121. Reproduced with permission.)

Harmony:

Sameness often feels safe. We instinctively shape the soil of our communities to grow what looks familiar. But when sameness becomes the standard, we lose something vital. Differences of personality, experience, and belief begin to feel like threats instead of gifts. People hide parts of themselves to belong. Something inside them withers. (p.184)

For each, Strong puts forward what he sees as Christ’s pattern for restoring balance to the soil. In the case of *Acceptance*, he encourages readers to “see the one, not just the ninety-nine,” to “make love the measure of belief,” and to “let the Church illuminate, not eclipse.” (pp. 142–43). For *Growth*, the focus is on Christ’s transcendence through suffering and self-sacrifice. For *Agency*, it’s on his pattern of leading through persuasion and long-suffering. For *Harmony*, it is on the balance between law and mercy, forgiveness and accountability. The overall emphasis is on avoiding a *sifting* mentality—it is Christ who will be the one ultimately separating the wheat from the tares.

Reflecting on part III

In these chapters, there is a lot that resonated with me as Strong brought each tension back to Christ's example. But it seemed sometimes controversial when the tensions became more concrete. He gives one example of a professor at a Church university who lost his bishop's endorsement and subsequently his job (pp. 185–86). The reason? Choosing to pay a portion of his tithing to LGBTQ+ organizations rather than to the Church. Strong puts it forward as a harsh example of boundary maintenance based on a "General Handbook definition," particularly in the lack of apparent compassion from university leadership. But his choice of that example feels strangely like *boundary testing* — encouraging dissonance rather than promoting harmony.

In addition, his tensions appear notably one-sided, presenting a misleading (if not false) dichotomy. In each case the tension is between a "balanced" option (such as *Agency*) and an "unbalanced" one (such as *Fealty*). But the imbalance is only on the side purportedly promoted by Church culture — there's no "unbalanced" option on the side of disaffiliates or Church critics (something like *Rebellion*). A more complete view of these issues would highlight the tension that exists on both sides, showing how each would need to compromise to achieve balance.

One can also take issue with how Strong uses and defines a few of his terms. His definition of "fealty" — though useful when characterizing extreme, blind faith — doesn't match how the term was used in an archaic context.⁷ A relationship bound by fealty was closer to the Christlike obedience he describes — a mutual, conditional, covenant-oriented bond maintained by choice and love. And "love" has its interpretations as well. Love can mean setting firm boundaries and helping someone work through and deal with discomfort rather than removing it.⁸

7. Jeb Smith, "Fealty: Love, Loyalty, and Choice in Feudalism," *History Medieval* (blog), 1 December 2024, historymedieval.com/fealty-love-loyalty-and-choice-in-feudalism/.

8. "Is Tough Love Better than Gentle Parenting?," *Oak Health Center* (blog), oak.healthcenter.org/is-tough-love-better-than-gentle-parenting/. I found one quote from this article particularly relevant: "Children don't need parents who bend under pressure. They need parents who can tolerate discomfort without rescuing them from it."

Part IV: Bring forth good fruit

Strong next prepares his readers for letting go of old beliefs in favor of an alternative approach, a renewal akin to the death of the old self in baptism. With the potential for change comes uncertainty and fear, and Strong works to contrast responses rooted in fear with those fueled by faith. He notes that fear doesn't always stem from doubt or self-defense, but in responsibility. Some feel fear because they love the Church and its cherished truths, as well as the people we have stewardship over. Yet when faced with questions or potentially threatening differences, those who are fearful don't have to rush to act on that fear:

When fear rises (as it will), we can pause, breathe, and invite the Spirit to lead our responses: a slower answer, a gentler tone, a question instead of a conclusion, and an open heart instead of a guarded one. (p. 209)

Members' responses can instead be informed by faith—by trust in God and those they care for. He avoids specific prescriptions, but offers some first steps:

- **Begin with Self.** It helps to have carefully and humbly considered issues related to Church history and doctrine—so members don't react reflexively or dismissively and so they can empathize with those questions when they come. (pp. 224–26)
- **Start Where You Have Stewardship.** All members have built-in connections and responsibilities (marriages, families, friendships) where they can practice that approach. (p. 226)
- **When Stewardship Includes Authority.** These conversations can be especially high stakes, where trust can be preserved or lost. Try listening without steadying, controlling, or redirecting. (pp. 226–27)
- **Choosing Love without Agreement.** It's okay to not agree, despite the tension it can create. (pp. 227–28)
- **Resist the Illusion of Control.** Faithfulness doesn't require control over other people's beliefs, outcomes, or journeys. (pp. 228–29)

Conversations that go well may not keep the person in the Church, but conversations that go poorly can damage relationships, deepen

distrust, and make withdrawal more likely. That's because disaffiliation is more about relationships than information:

Facts matter. History matters. Doctrine matters. But in our research, people did not step away primarily because of those things. They stepped away because they no longer felt like they belonged. (p. 213)

Strong ends the book discussing one of his sons, Cale, who left the Church after coming home early from the MTC (and facing Strong's own fear-based reaction). He talks of soil that was once too hard and dreams that had to be adapted. But he also speaks of hope, of wayward children who were able to find and follow their own path, and of a Church that can find renewed strength in Christ. As Strong concludes:

The Church will not be defeated by the things from our past or the outside. Its greatest threat is becoming hollow, performative, less nourishing, and less alive to those who hunger for God and need it most. (p. 235)

Reflecting on part IV

These chapters are Strong at peak strength. Whatever quibbles I might have simply melt in the face of his sincerity and authenticity. He can talk about these conversations because he clearly had many of them where the stakes were high. He listened to dozens of others as they suggested how to instill trust and connection. There is much of value in part IV. However, given the limitations of Strong's research, those morsels felt like precious shafts of wheat within a field of problematic tares.

The Critique

As much as I liked the book and valued Strong's wise counsel, I found myself consistently distracted by gaps, blind spots, and overgeneralizations. They include the following.

An overreliance on questionable data

As mentioned earlier, Strong relies on two main sources: (1) his own survey data, and (2) HCES survey data, as based on an opt-in online panel of respondents from YouGov, a well-known polling firm.⁹ The former is used throughout the book, from disaffiliation rates, to the

9. Tufts University, "About & Methodology," *Cooperative Election Study*, Tisch

beliefs of attending members, to perceptions of Church culture. The latter is used to support some supplementary ideas: that disaffiliation rates have been dramatic enough to substantially reduce overall Church affiliation in the U.S. (the proportion within the U.S. population decreasing by as much as 55%), and that disaffiliation rates are much worse for Latter-day Saints than for other religions (p. 242). Data from Pew is sometimes cited, but not to nearly the extent as the HCES, and not when Pew’s results seem to cut against his narrative.

Strong’s selective snowball

Most of the charts in *Torn* carry this source note: “Strong and Dotson, *Why People Are Leaving*, 2025.” If you try to Google that source, it’s possible you’ll find things that I did not—Strong and his team have plans to publish some summary slide decks, as well as an eventual publicly available package with all the data and survey instruments. But what I found, scattered through a few online articles, was not encouraging. Strong’s survey data was characterized as “not necessarily representative” by members of his own research team,¹⁰ based on its email list, social-media, and snowball-driven sampling. Experts outside the research team were somewhat more forthright, implying that the survey creates “a skewed story that doesn’t reflect reality in an accurate way.”¹¹

My take aligns more closely with the latter. I wouldn’t go so far as to call the data useless—it certainly helps clarify how the Church is viewed by those engaged in the modern Latter-day Saint media landscape. The problem is that Strong shows essentially no restraint in applying the data outside of that limited sphere. He gives lip service to the problem of selection bias but then acts as if that gives him license to interpret the data as fully representative of U.S. membership and those disaffiliating from the Church.

I don’t think that this was maliciously done, but I suspect it was done against the advice of his research team. My impression is that Strong sees selection bias as a minor problem operating on the margins,

College of Civic Life, tischcollege.tufts.edu/research-faculty/research-centers/cooperative-election-study/about-methodology.

10. Jana Riess, “Former LDS Mission President Explains What We Get Wrong About People Leaving the Church,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 5 May 2026, sltrib.com/religion/2026/05/05/jana-riess-former-lds-mission/.

11. Stephen Cranney and Josh Coates, “Unrepresentative Data is Limited in What It Can Show about Latter-day Saints,” *Deseret News*, 7 May 2026, deseret.com/opinion/2026/05/07/latter-day-saint-stats-representative-data/.

skewing his results a few percentage points one way or another. But in this case, selection effects mean that he could be substantially off the mark on just about every question he tries to answer. His conclusion that disaffiliation is speedily ramping up? That is most likely a product of recency bias, as he probably drew disproportionately from those currently dealing with faith crises. And his view that about a third of attending members don't believe the Church's truth claims? Perhaps that is true among those on Reddit, but not in the Church as a whole—his results are flatly contradicted by more representative sources.¹² (The more likely answer is around 5–10%).

The conclusion that 40% of active Church members in the U.S. have left since 2000 at least treats his data as one indicator among many—shown in combination with external indicators and, as he claims, validated by those firmly in the know. Everything else that results from the survey should be taken as representative of his *sample*, which is a very uneven slice of the Church. The sampled population is probably young, probably leans more progressive politically, and almost certainly taps into those who have a high interest in religious issues, Church history, and questions of historicity.

The Harvard Cooperative Election Study

At first glance, survey data from HCES seems like it should be reliable. It has a large annual sample size (around 50,000), includes weights that adjust for gender, age, race, and education, and carries the reputation of both Harvard and YouGov.¹³ But for the purpose for which Strong uses it—focusing on a thin religious minority—the HCES is not the right tool. I see it as problematic for a few reasons:

- **Limited Terminology.** When it comes to stating religious affiliation, the only option available to Latter-day Saints in the HCES is the term “Mormon.” It's possible for people to write in other options and for those to be appropriately recoded, but a significant number of respondents will fail to do that, either skipping the question or responding with “Other.” The survey should be less likely to include those who take issue with the term *Mormon*, particularly since President Nelson's address on the topic in 2018.¹⁴

12. Cranney and Coates, “Unrepresentative Data.”

13. Tufts University, “About & Methodology.”

14. Russell M. Nelson, “The Correct Name of the Church,” *Ensign*, November

- **Panel Drift.** The HCES relies on YouGov's opt-in online panel, from which it attempts to draw a nationally representative set of respondents. Respondents have to download and maintain the YouGov app on their phones and have the option to participate or decline any given survey invitation. That sort of sampling method is prone to *panel drift*, the tendency for the characteristics of a panel to change over time. Looking at the data (which is freely available¹⁵), I was able to find evidence of panel drift (in its measure of political ideology in this case) that closely matches the apparent downward trend of Latter-day Saint affiliation. (See the appendix for details.)
- **Insufficient Weights.** As useful as survey weights can be, they aren't magic—unless sampling is biased in ways researchers are already adjusting for, all weights will do is carry selection bias forward.¹⁶ This can be seen in the panel drift observable in the HCES data, where applying weights does not appear to meaningfully correct that drift (see the appendix). Even if it did, weights are notoriously inadequate when examining small sub-groups like Latter-day Saints and may even amplify error in those cases.¹⁷

These issues would mean little if other available data agreed with what is reported in the HCES. But comparable data from Pew tells a very different story. The PRLS uses a nationally representative telephone and mail-based sample (with mode depending on year) and is specifically designed to measure and track religious affiliation. While the HCES suggests a distinct drop in Latter-day Saint affiliation since the late 2000s, the PRLS shows affiliation staying relatively stable when adjusting for U.S. population growth.¹⁸ The chart in figure 2

2018, 87–90, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2018/11/sunday-morning-session/the-correct-name-of-the-church.

15. Harvard Dataverse, "Cooperative Election Study (CES)," dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7927/H73T-6K92.

16. "For Weighting Online Opt-In Samples, What Matters Most?," *Pew Research Center*, 26 January 2018, [pewresearch.org/methods/2018/01/26/for-weighting-online-opt-in-samples-what-matters-most/](https://www.pewresearch.org/methods/2018/01/26/for-weighting-online-opt-in-samples-what-matters-most/). Also see "Survey Weighting Explained: Methods, Examples & Pitfalls," *Lensym* (blog), 22 February 2026, lensym.com/blog/survey-weighting-guide.

17. Jim Lewis and Jeff Sauro, "To Weight or Not to Weight," *MeasuringU*, 21 January 2025, measuringu.com/to-weight-or-not-to-weight/.

18. Gregory A. Smith et al., "Decline of Christianity in the U.S. Has Slowed, May

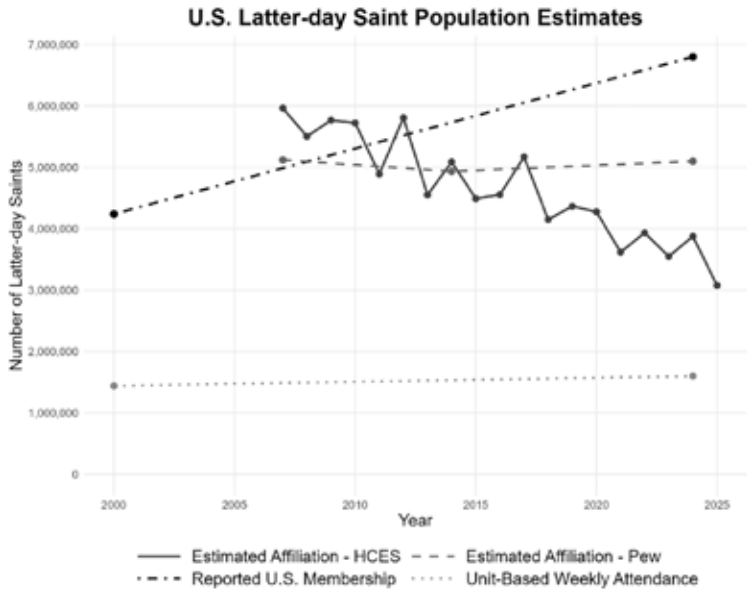


Figure 2. U.S. Latter-day Saint population estimates.
(Data source: *Torn*; Pew Religious Landscape Survey.)

shows both those estimates, in addition to two others that Strong discusses in the appendices of his book: official membership statistics from the Church and implied attendance calculations based on Church unit growth over a similar period.

There is also evidence that Latter-day Saints have weathered the secular storm better than many of their peers, especially when looking at those who still attend services weekly, based on PRLS findings from a Brigham Young University research team led by Justin Dyer:

The Pew Religious Landscape Survey (2024) and the Spiritual Seismology Survey (2025) were used to examine national trends of Latter-day Saint retention. In these surveys, “retention” was defined as the percentage of those raised Latter-day Saint who continue to identify as Latter-day Saint in adulthood. . . . When examining those who were raised in a religion and actively participate in that religion as adults (attending religious services at least monthly)

Have Leveled Off,” *Pew Research Center*, 26 February 2025, [pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/decline-of-christianity-in-the-us-has-slowed-may-have-leveled-off/](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/decline-of-christianity-in-the-us-has-slowed-may-have-leveled-off/).

Latter-day Saints had the highest percentage of "active" retention of all religions at 42%.¹⁹

The raw values (42% of Latter-day Saint youth still attending as adults) are not necessarily good news in and of themselves, and neither are the flat affiliation numbers from Pew, but both significantly undercut Strong's narrative of an urgent crisis, uniquely affecting Latter-day Saints, that can only be addressed through deep-cut cultural reform.

Are disaffiliation rates accelerating?

I mentioned my deep discomfort with Strong's claimed disaffiliation trends and how recency bias might explain them. Yet that doesn't actually answer the question of whether disaffiliation is accelerating and, if so, by how much. Unless researchers happen to be working directly with data from the Church, the honest response here can and should be: "We don't know." But since Strong has created a scary-looking chart based on his interpretation of the data (p. 31), it's only fair to see what other available data might indicate.

I think there are at least three useful (if imperfect) bellwethers of disaffiliation over time. The first is the PRLS data already cited, where the multi-decade trend of decline in the Christian share of the population seems to stabilize after 2021.²⁰ Though this is not a direct indicator for Latter-day Saints, there's little reason to assume that the same trends don't apply to Church membership as well, especially in the context of recent growth in converts, missionary service, and Church education enrollment.²¹

The second comes from Google search data, where trends for the term "exmormon" might be informative. As evident in figure 3, those searches rose rapidly starting in mid-2015 (coinciding exactly with the *Obergefell* decision legalizing U.S. same-sex marriage) and remained strong until the COVID-19 pandemic, after which searches returned

19. W. Justin Dyer et al., "Latter-day Saint Religiousness, Well-Being, and Retention in the United States," *Family Foundations of Youth Development*, Brigham Young University, 16 December 2025, 2, emphasis added, foundations.byu.edu/0000019b-1343-d613-a59b-17df82980000/latterdaysaintreligiosity-pdf.

20. See the chart titled "After years of decline. . ." in Smith, "Decline of Christianity in the U.S. Has Slowed."

21. Tad Walch, "Latter-day Saint Growth Tops 66% Since 2000, after 2025 Shattered Old Record for Convert Baptisms," *Deseret News*, 5 April 2026, deseret.com/faith/2026/04/05/latter-day-saint-growth-tops-66-since-2000-after-2025-shattered-old-record-for-convert-baptisms/.

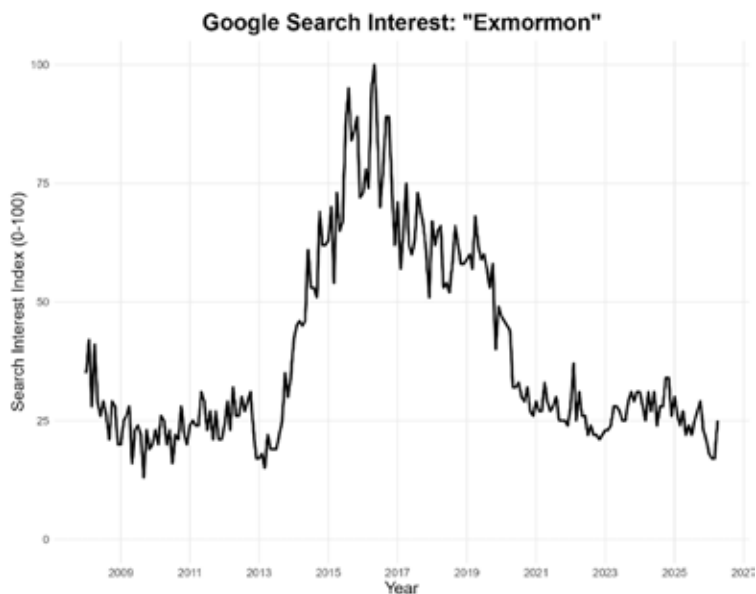


Figure 3. Google Trends results for the search term “exmormon.”
(Source: Google Trends.)

to something resembling a status quo. Some (or much) of that search traffic may have been driven by external interest from those who are curious about people leaving the faith, but it suggests that disaffiliation trends may have long since reached their apex.

The third comes from Reddit subscription data for the *r/exmormon* subreddit (as extracted through an AI search). As the largest online gathering place for former Latter-day Saints, and the source of much of Strong’s survey sampling, the rate of subscriber growth over time (figure 4) may have its own story to tell. Despite some gaps and unfortunate changes to how those subscriber numbers were tracked, those rates suggest that growth exploded starting around 2016, and though growth was consistent through 2022, it is no longer at its heyday.

Together, these indicators tell a somewhat consistent story of slowing disaffiliation, and one that resonates with my personal observations, having watched some in my family and my local wards leave over time. The values-laden storm that Strong presents was real but may be winding down as many of those apt to leave have already made that choice.

Based on this, I think Strong is incorrect, but I don’t think that matters much. Arguing about when and to what degree that trend began

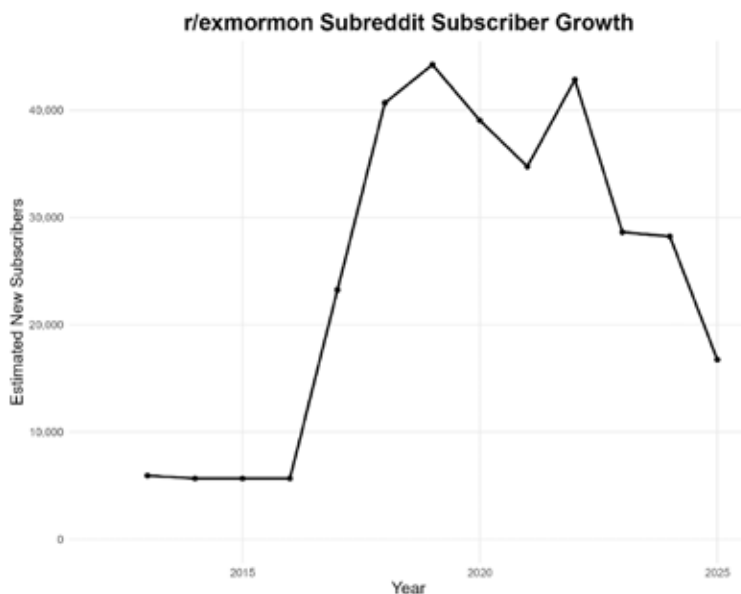


Figure 4. r/exmormon subreddit subscriber growth. (Source: Reddit.) Note: A number of r/exmormon Reddit threads track subscriber growth for the year 2012, 2017, and 2018 to 2025. Values from 2013 to 2017 represent linear annual estimates based on the difference between 2012 and 2017 subscriber values.

or ended doesn't invalidate his overall argument. If his book had come out in 2018 the narrative would've been perfectly applicable, and his diagnosis and cultural recommendations would've been much the same. Even if this current storm is ending, it is only a matter of time before the Church faces a similar cultural challenge. The more pertinent question isn't *when* cultural change might be needed, it's whether that change would accomplish what Strong hopes.

Blind spots at the edge of the light

Strong clearly wants his research to shed light on things that are hard to discern. The irony is that the limitations of his own survey-informed perspective may have created similar blind spots—aspects of disaffiliation and the cultural storm that he either misses or declines to discuss within *Torn*. I cover three of those below.

Missing those who fade away

Examining the broader deconversion literature, there seems to be an entire class of disaffiliates who simply aren't represented in Strong's

four-wave structure: those who “fade away” from activity or who simply aren’t interested in religion. This is a solidly sized portion of those who disaffiliate — in Pew data they represent two of the top three reasons that people leave their childhood faiths, with 38% of respondents selecting each.²² That might be somewhat lower for a high-engagement faith like the Church, but it shouldn’t be zero.

Of the four wave categories, *Lifestyle* might be the best fit here, but that’s not how Strong uses it. For him, that category is about the demands of the religion being too much to sustain full activity. In my discussion with Strong, he confirmed that he did receive some limited responses along the “fade away” lines in early focus groups, but they never made it to the final list of survey items.²³ This isn’t surprising given his focus and his sample: he was looking for people who were actively engaged in resolving questions of faith, not those who felt those questions were unimportant in the first place.

If there is a hidden fifth category of disaffiliation — what someone might term *Apathy* — it is an open question what type of religious culture has the highest probability of keeping them engaged or re-engaging them. I suspect Strong would point to a Christ- and Spirit-focused faith as essential for helping apathetic youth lock-in to the gospel, and I would agree with him. But could clear boundaries and a more straightforward link between behavior and God’s promises also play a role? If our traditional culture helped earlier generations move forward through times of trial, as Strong implies, could removing it make the present one less likely to care?

A room-sized political elephant

There is a consistent thread in *Torn* that is made even more conspicuous by its absence. Strong assiduously avoids any mention of political ideology. In over 298 pages, the word *conservative* appears only once in the context of ideology, though there are plenty of references to conservative estimates. The words *liberal* or *progressive* never appear in *Torn*.

For a book trying to persuade often-conservative members to let go of tradition and culture, this is probably the right strategy. But

22. Becka A. Alper et al., “Why Do Some Americans Leave Their Religion While Others Stay?,” *Pew Research Center*, 15 December 2025, [pewresearch.org/religion/2025/12/15/why-do-some-americans-leave-their-religion-while-others-stay/](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/12/15/why-do-some-americans-leave-their-religion-while-others-stay/).

23. Video call with Jeff Strong and Jeff Dotson, 13 May 2026.

Strong's storm of shifting values occurred at the same approximate timeframe that Latter-day Saints moved their voting intentions nineteen points to the left.²⁴ The impact of social media, the ongoing mental health crisis, and the changing religious emphasis are all deeply intertwined with that ideological shift, even if the direction of causality isn't always clear. And that shift has implications for Strong's proposed solution. Readers get a hint of the ideological change that Strong may want to see in an easy-to-miss paragraph in part II:

Many who leave the Church—and many who stay while feeling conflicted—perceive a gap between what the Church teaches and what they sometimes observe institutionally. They recognize devotion and sacrifice yet do not always see corresponding engagement with the suffering, inequality, and division that mark modern life. For example, calls for peacemaking in contrast to persistent political division in the Church, significant investment in temples in contrast to the plight of the homeless, some who prioritize serving the dead over serving the living, and caring for members in the fold more than for people outside of the fold. (p. 99)

Strong mentions a gap perceived by those who leave the Church. It is not hard to read into that gap a desire for greater alignment with progressive ideals—for the Church to engage more in social justice advocacy, to more clearly call out and condemn conservative strains of thought, to spend (more of) its money in the ways progressive members want it spent, and to otherwise cater more to the preferences of those critical of the Church. Changing Church culture to reduce or eliminate perceived gaps would presumably help progressive members feel more comfortable at Church. But at what point would conservative members start to feel out of place, like *they* didn't belong?

If the focus is on retaining membership, Strong's soil balance would need to cut both ways. *Acceptance* should include those with more traditional beliefs. It should have patience with those at earlier and simpler stages of *Growth* or who use their *Agency* to promote Church traditions. *Harmony* needs to include voices that urge caution and

24. Brad Jones, "Two Decades of Partisanship in the Cooperative Election Study," *YouGov*, 24 March 2026, yougov.com/en-us/articles/54389-two-decades-of-partisanship-in-the-cooperative-election-study. Yes, I'm referencing the HCES data for this. Yes, panel drift could be impacting this too. No, I'm not happy about it.

protection and obedience. That means no one can ever be truly isolated from tension and discomfort. All of those who stay must instead make a choice to carry forward despite uncomfortable feelings.

Rose-colored disaffiliates

In Strong's admirable quest to listen to and understand those who leave the Church, he has purposefully adopted the most charitable lens possible. This approach has undeniable merits, yet it misses the fact that disaffiliation, culture, and conversations are all two-way streets. His intended audience is faithful Latter-day Saints, and he encourages them to look inward to help build the best tools for retaining faith. But the picture of an otherwise-faithful, well-informed, Christlike disaffiliate will not always survive contact with reality. If and when parents and leaders are faced with disaffiliates who appear misinformed, accusatory, and belligerent, they may find the process even more discouraging than Strong suggests. Not all will approach conversations that way, but more than a few will, and Church members wanting to adopt Strong's more open approach may need to be prepared to turn the other cheek when encountering that behavior.

This may be especially true when disaffiliates have internalized some of the cultural elements that Strong is working to adjust. Black-and-white thinking, distortions of doctrine, and uncritical acceptance of (new-found) authority can make open conversations difficult. That doesn't make Strong's approach wrong, but it may make it more difficult (if not impossible) to master.

Strong's lens extends to his forthright acceptance of the views of disaffiliates as accurate by default, whether that be in their reasons for disaffiliation or their perceptions of Church culture, doctrine, and practice. The social psychologist in me²⁵ is keenly aware that survey responses are often self-serving, including when it comes to religious practice.²⁶ Josh Coates, in describing how he interprets responses to his own representative survey, says, "We think this portion of the

25. His heart still beats, deep down, where the government can't find it. See Kyler R. Rasmussen et al., "Social Desirability Bias in Pornography-Related Self-Reports: The Role of Religion," *Journal of Sex Research* 55, no. 3 (2018): 381–94, doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2017.1399196 for a sense of what he looked like.

26. Constantine Sedikides and Jochen E. Gebauer, "Religiosity as Self-Enhancement: A Meta-Analysis of the Relation Between Socially Desirable Responding and Religiosity," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 14, no. 1 (2010): 17–36, doi.org/10.1177/1088868309351002.

survey is only useful in answering the question ‘What do former members prefer to respond when asked on a survey why they left?’”²⁷ Strong seems aware of this as well (p. 19), but that doesn’t stop him from presenting them without meaningful caveat, or from mixing those responses with those of faithful members. This often left me wondering how much the hand of desirability (from either current or former members) affected the results. (Which is even more tragic given how practical it is to measure and adjust for social desirability.)

A warped view of Church culture

Reading through Strong’s culture/personal comparison charts, it doesn’t take long to realize something is off. One can almost immediately see where each sentiment might be coming from (such as Church culture expecting you to “follow the principles, guidance, and counsel provided by Church leaders”; p. 172). But there are also clear distortions that miss or downplay key aspects of that culture, like suggesting that Church culture places little to no importance on “lov[ing] and car[ing] for the poor and needy” (p. 121). Someone should tell that to those making all the weekly Bishop’s Storehouse runs, or those collecting the thousands of food drive bags, or those routinely asked in ministering interviews how that low-income single sister is doing. No one can reasonably say the Church doesn’t have a culture that expects its members to care for the poor.

Strong’s portrayal is, more often than not, a funhouse mirror. Its curves and bulges will be familiar enough to those who have seen the Church and its members at their worst, but the mirror has some severe bends. These bends are rooted in sampling from an unrepresentative subset of its members and by mixing faithful and non-faithful responses. I also suspect it was bent to the breaking point by the way Church culture is set up as a foil.

Strong makes a point of acknowledging that there are many positive aspects to Church culture, but the way he talks about it often equates *culture* with what he sees as negative, doctrinally distorting, and unnecessary. I don’t have a copy of all the survey materials, but even if Strong and his team were trying hard to avoid this problem, I suspect respondents were primed to treat Church culture as an effigy,

27. Jana Riess, “Who Is Leaving the LDS Church? Eight Key Survey Findings,” *Religion News Service*, 7 March 2024, religionnews.com/2024/03/07/who-is-leaving-the-lds-church-8-key-survey-findings/.

one representing everything that's seen as harmful or annoying in Church experience.

This is partly evidenced by the gap between perceived cultural expectations and stated personal beliefs. What is *culture* if not the combined beliefs of a group put into action within a community? Strong defines it as “the shared patterns of meaning, belief, and behavior that shape how a community lives” (p. 74). One could argue that there's a disconnect between the culture that Church leaders are putting forward and what's internalized by the membership, but that doesn't quite fit for a Church with strong lay participation. Many of those taking the survey are the ones teaching the lessons, setting up the ministering routes, organizing the Christmas food drive, and, ostensibly, complaining about the deacon who doesn't wear a tie. They *are* the culture.

If Church culture promotes “following the guidance of Church leaders” as more important than “following Gospel principles and seeking God's inspiration” (rated as 64% and 34% respectively; p. 172), then, presumably, a large portion of Church membership actually believes that. Who are those people? Clearly not the ones filling out the survey. When rating “personal beliefs,” those same items registered at 2% and 62% (p. 172). If someone does believe it, it is someone else; the other; the *Church bogeyman*.

It may be possible to think of people who probably are that bogeyman. Try this, though: Run through the entire ward roster and see how many of them can you find. Is your bishop one of them? Is your Relief Society president? How about your stake president? Perhaps not, and they would almost certainly say they're not if they were filling out the survey. Maybe that survey telegraphed the “wrong” or “cultural” answers, and no one wanted to pick them, but that would be yet another distortion, another bend in the funhouse mirror that further distances Church members from Church culture.

Now, those bends serve a useful purpose. Exaggerating the differences between personal beliefs and cultural expectations can help one see the problematic bits more clearly. But I suspect they better represent the imagined culture of fifty years ago than they do any given ward today.

Will Cultural Change Stem Disaffiliation?

Cultural shifts speak to another element that Strong tends to downplay—there has been real and meaningful change in Church culture across the span of generations, almost exclusively in the directions

that Strong is trying to promote. One doesn't have to look farther than the *For the Strength of Youth* pamphlet to see that kind of change in action.²⁸ He does acknowledge this in spots, but it raises an important question: If the Church has already been adapting its culture, and disaffiliation spiked in the midst of those changes, why should we expect further change to slow or reverse disaffiliation trends?

Unintended effects

As much as Strong promotes responding with faith instead of fear, his approach is, in part, about making the reader afraid—he wants to shock readers into action by depicting a deepening storm of disaffiliation, with fealty as the "virus" that directly produced the storm (p. 170) and for which his cultural remedies are the only cure. Those cultural remedies are more than just trimming around the edges of the closed and more traditional parts of Church culture. They threaten to cut into the flesh-laden skeleton of doctrine—ideas like "God has a plan for us" and "the Spirit will lead us in all things," and whether tithing should be paid to the Church instead of toward whatever recipient the member pleases.

What Strong presents in *Torn* is an alternative cultural vision, not an unvarnished slice of non-culture. Much of it happens to better align with scripture and the recent words of prophets and apostles, and he's worked hard to ground his view on that foundation. But as with the Church's current cultural landscape, his may result in unintended effects that may be hard to see until widely adopted and applied.

There are glimmers of those unintended effects in broader patterns of disaffiliation within Christianity as a whole. From Strong's reasoning, culturally conservative churches should have lost more members than progressive ones, but the opposite occurred.²⁹ Mainline Protestant churches moved their teaching and their doctrine in near lockstep with culturally liberal ideals, and they were the ones that saw the greatest declines in affiliation and engagement. This may be, in part, because those institutions seemed superfluous and interchangeable with political and social advocacy groups. But it was also because

28. *For the Strength of Youth: A Guide for Making Choices* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2022), [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/for-the-strength-of-youth](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/for-the-strength-of-youth).

29. Daniel K. Williams, "The Pew Religious Landscape Study: Is There a Future for Mainline Protestantism?," *Substack*, 2 March 2025, danielkwilliams.substack.com/p/the-pew-religious-landscape-study.

that shift generated conservative schisms that drained large blocks of those institutions' lifeblood, cracking them apart at the foundations.

In that light, and in light of Dyer's analysis of the PRLS data, the Church seems to have done a decent job in walking the tightrope between cultural adaptation and cultural preservation. Accelerating the pace of cultural change could risk upsetting that delicate balance. Rebuilding the Church's institutional apparatus to serve the "one" could create an entirely new slew of "ones" for would-be shepherds to chase.

A lack of intended impacts

Even if the Church's conservative block could be trusted to stay faithful through thick and thin, would changing Church culture have prevented the shock of disaffiliation the Church has experienced? Would changing it bring back those who've already wandered? I'm confident that Strong's more open approach to questions and conversations would have a positive impact for many. The overall effect on disaffiliation, however, might be more muted than he may expect.

Strong talks about not having the Church sort and sift its membership, favoring and promoting certain perspectives over others (p. 218). But he underestimates the extent to which disaffiliation is a self-sifting process. I can appreciate that those who stay and many of those who leave have a lot in common, with a core of faith and love for God. But available data suggest there are also real differences in values and temperament—ones that might make it hard for many to stay even in the best of circumstances. People who disaffiliate tend to be higher in perfectionism than those who stay³⁰ and they share dramatically different moral foundations.³¹ They're lower on average when it comes to valuing loyalty and purity, and, upon deconversion, may experience a personality shift away from Honesty-Humility.³² These differences

30. Justin Dyer and Michael Goodman, "Does Religion Lead to More or Less Perfectionism?," *Deseret News*, 4 January 2025, deseret.com/faith/2025/01/04/faith-and-perfectionism/.

31. Josh Coates and Stephen Cranney, "Applying Moral Foundations Theory to Current and Former Latter-day Saints," *Deseret News*, 16 February 2024, deseret.com/2024/2/16/24074596/applying-moral-foundations-theory-to-current-and-former-latter-day-saints/.

32. Samantha Stronge et al., "Religion and the Development of Character: Personality Changes Before and After Religious Conversion and Deconversion," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 12, no. 5 (2021): 801–11, doi.org/10.1177/1948550620942381.

do not mean members should be content with their disaffiliation, but it does mean members should be prepared for them to make different choices — to sometimes let go of the rod when faced with inevitable dark mists.

Should those who left have been expected to remain in a Church they see as all-too-imperfect, with truth claims and doctrines that they no longer endorse, and which has, at times past and present, emphasized obedience and purity of heart, mind, and action? Would community, belonging, and personal growth be enough to keep them in the pews? (Or at least to check the "Mormon" box when responding to large-scale surveys?) It might be possible to make these individuals *comfortable* at Church, but it's another step entirely to expect them to *value* and *sustain* that Church. Plus, if the conservative schisms witnessed elsewhere in Christendom are any indication, the result may be altogether less valuable to those who remain.

Summary and Conclusion

Having now gone beyond mere exposure when it comes to Strong and to *Torn*, can readers trust the vision of Church culture the book depicts? Is there an assurance that Strong's perspective broadly aligns with an external reality and isn't primarily driven by data rooted in hostility, fear, or agenda? When it comes to the data and the research he presents, I don't think so — there is an external reality that he keeps a toehold on, but that likely bears only a loose connection to what is contained in the book. I don't think he's driven by hostility, but there are hints of both agenda and fear that can't quite be squashed.

What I trust more than his data is his firsthand experiences with those who have disaffiliated; in the connections he built as he listened and tried his best to learn. In that he has done his best to walk a line of devotion to Christ and a love for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, while seeing opportunities for change.

What I trust most is that Strong is right to focus on *trust* — that the ability to help youth and those who question hinges almost entirely on how much the one trying to help is perceived as trustworthy. That places a high responsibility on everyone, particularly those in leadership, to act and communicate in a way that fosters trust. Members cannot do that perfectly, and nobody should expect the Church to be perfect either. But members can haltingly strive to live up to the Christ-centered example laid out by scripture and the Spirit and Church leaders, adapting to change while keeping hold of the rod.

I am only in charge of that change to the degree I have stewardship, and I trust leaders who have a broader stewardship than I do. Strong wants members and leaders to start pushing more strongly for cultural change. Others might think that cultural change has already gone too far. That the Church's retention rates remain high relative to other denominations suggests that it's hit an appropriate balance, and that the trust I have in Christ to help guide our leaders hasn't been misplaced. Even with that trust, I can carefully consider those who may feel like they are on the margins, who feel that the ties binding them to the Church are beginning to fray. My words and actions could add a bit of tension to those edges. Or it could help pull them a bit closer—to those who care, to where they are needed, and, most of all, to Christ, whose ties to humanity are marked in blood, by nail and spear, and whose love will never be frayed or torn.

Appendix

In assessing data from the *Harvard Cooperative Election Study*, I decided to move beyond Latter-day Saint affiliation and look at other variables to see if there were similar trends that seemed to cut against what can be seen in other, more robust sources. One variable with that potential was *political ideology*—specifically, the proportion of respondents who identified as being Conservative or Very Conservative. Large-scale surveys like Gallup and Pew suggest that this variable has been unusually stable over the past 30+ years, usually hovering around 37%.³³

The unweighted HCES data, which provides a look at those who are making up the online panel, shows a substantial drop, and one that closely mirrors the drop seen in Latter-day Saint affiliation over the same period. Where that affiliation departs from those broader conservative trends is around 2018, the year of President Nelson's address on the name "Mormon."³⁴ Figure 5 shows how the unweighted HCES compares to the Gallup polling for political ideology, as well as relative changes in HCES political ideology and Latter-day Saint affiliation.

This is clear evidence of panel drift, where those identifying as *Conservative* or *Very Conservative* (and, by extension, Latter-day Saints, who themselves tend to be conservative) are systematically

33. Megan Brenan, "U.S. Political Parties Historically Polarized Ideologically," *Gallup*, 16 January 2025, news.gallup.com/poll/655190/political-parties-historically-polarized-ideologically.aspx.

34. Nelson, "Correct Name of the Church."

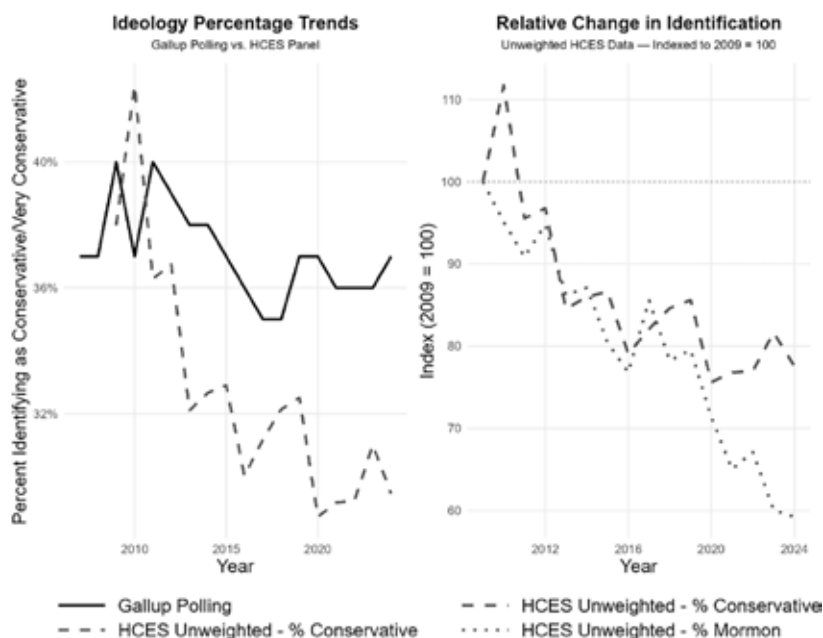


Figure 5. Evidence of panel drift in HCES data. (Source: HCES; Gallup.)

less likely to be part of YouGov’s opt-in panel over time. But does applying weights to the HCES data help stabilize political ideology? Not really, as is shown in figure 6.

The weighted values show notable variability, are often substantially lower than the Gallup data, and still suggest a more dramatic drop over time. If the weights result in noisy and misleading data for a measure that includes 30–40% of the sample, such should inspire deep skepticism about its ability to accurately account for sampling bias in small sub-samples.



Kyler Rasmussen works as the director of an analytics unit in the Government of Alberta, and holds an M.S. and Ph.D. in Experimental Social Psychology from the University of Calgary, as well as a B.S. in Psychology from Brigham Young University. Aside from volunteering with the Interpreter Foundation, Kyler has published in a number of areas including the psychology of revenge and forgiveness, the

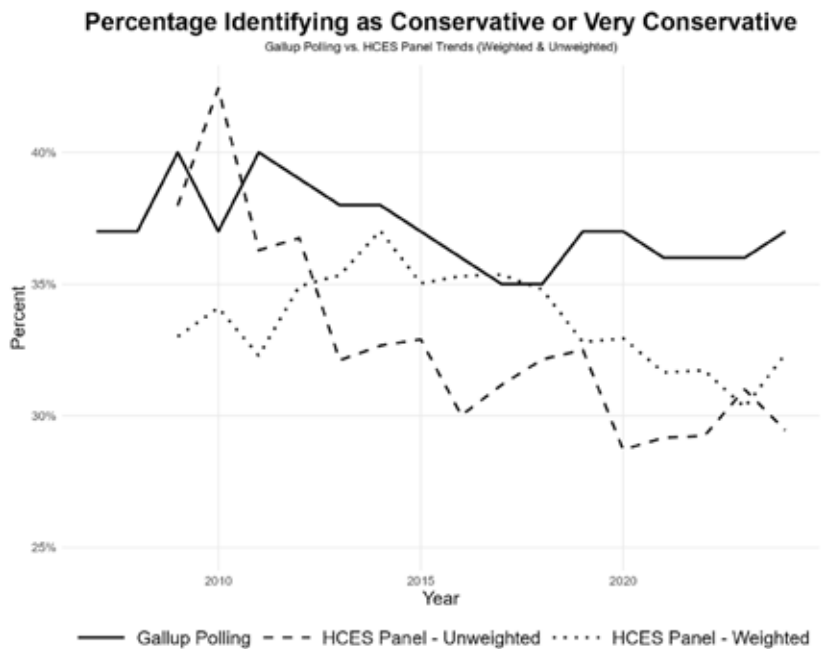


Figure 6. The effects of weighting on HCES panel data. (Source: HCES; Gallup.)

connection between personality and social media use, and the relational impact of pornography. He lives in Edmonton with his wife and three children.

40 Questions on Latter-day Saint Religion: Sincere, Frequently Respectful, Too Often Polemical

Jeffrey D. Lindsay

Review of Kyle Beshears, 40 Questions About Mormonism (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2026). 352 pages; \$26.99 (paperback).

Abstract: *In 40 Questions, Evangelical pastor Dr. Kyle Beshears tries to help readers understand the doctrines, practices, and history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He deals with forty questions, each presented as a short chapter, said to reflect numerous dialogues he has had over the years with members of the Church. Sincere efforts to be factual and dispassionate are found in many portions of the book. Nevertheless, its goal is to help non-LDS Christians better rescue Latter-day Saints. As such, a quest for understanding often takes a back seat to criticism. In discussing doctrines or practices, he sometimes preemptively leads with time-worn arguments, then introduces our beliefs, typically without discussing how informed Latter-day Saints often respond to the opposing arguments. Withholding the strengths, the evidence, and the things that add intellectual satisfaction in the lives of serious Latter-day Saints sometimes results in shadow boxing and contributes to the sense of a polemical agenda. This is especially true in the sections on the Book of Mormon.*

Having faced many “anti-Mormon” works over the years, I was pleased to read the introduction of Kyle Beshears’s recent work on the faith taught by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.¹

1. Kyle Beshears, *40 Questions About Mormonism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel

It seemed that he had changed his approach. Years ago, I reviewed his doctoral thesis for the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary,² where I objected to his scholarship but also to his tone, for he often used the slur *mormonic* (as in *Mormon* + *demonic*) to describe all things related to the Book of Mormon. My review pointed out that he condemned the Book of Mormon for being not enough like the Bible when it comes to praising King David as the standard of a good king (actually rather logical for those with a Northern Kingdom legacy like Lehi) and for not referring to David's Psalms frequently (an incorrect claim), while also complaining that the book was *too much* like the Bible in its use of KJV language and its quoting of Isaiah (this he repeatedly called "plagiarism").³ But in his new book, his introduction pointed to welcome improvements in his approach:

What began as a mission to save Mormons from their beliefs transformed into a genuine quest for understanding. I had to find out the truth, and doing so has led to a lifelong journey of trying to understand Mormonism—not just its doctrines but its people, culture, and the ways its adherents live out their faith. Along the way, I've encountered surprises that challenged my preconceptions. I've found areas of common ground I never expected, and I've gained a deeper appreciation for Latter-day Saint culture. At the same time, I've come to recognize our real differences more clearly, free from the fog of misunderstanding and caricature—differences that are serious and, in some instances, utterly irreconcilable. (p. 11)

A genuine quest for understanding, seeking for the truth, finding new common ground, and deeper appreciation—that all sounds great. These words set the stage for a more careful, respectful, open-minded approach based on dialogue, careful investigation, and a

Academic, 2026).

2. Jeff Lindsay, "Too Little or Too Much Like the Bible? A Novel Critique of the Book of Mormon Involving David and the Psalms," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 29 (2018): 31–64, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/too-little-or-too-much-like-the-bible-a-novel-critique-of-the-book-of-mormon-involving-david-and-the-psalms. The thesis is Kyle Beshears, "Davidic References in the Book of Mormon as Evidence Against its Historicity," Master of Theology thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, May 2016, repository.sbts.edu/entities/publication/5f6c9a19-15be-40b3-b8de-353058c962a0.

3. Beshears, "Davidic References," esp. 33–37.

sincere effort to understand, something I think we all should welcome. With the stage so nicely set, it's a shame the curtains never quite open for the presentation I was hoping for. While less offensive in tone than his earlier thesis, it remains a book more dedicated to undermining our faith than to understanding it. The back cover of the book speaks of "years of dialogue with LDS church members" (in praise from Craig L. Blomberg), but that dialogue has somehow left Beshears seemingly unaware of meaningful Latter-day Saint replies to the many time-worn objections he raises and unaware of significant evidence or arguments in favor of many beliefs, practices, and other issues he criticizes.

Based on his opening words, one might expect Beshears's quest to have embraced the essence of the "three rules of religious understanding" from the highly regarded Krister Stendahl (1921–2008), who served as the dean of Harvard Divinity School and the bishop of Stockholm in the Lutheran Church of Sweden. His three rules were:

1. When you are trying to understand another religion, you should ask the adherents of that religion and not its enemies.
2. Don't compare your best to their worst.
3. Leave room for "holy envy." (By this Stendahl meant that you should be willing to recognize elements in the other religious tradition or faith that you admire and wish could, in some way, be reflected in your own religious tradition or faith.)⁴

Regarding rule #1, Beshears has talked with many Latter-day Saints over the years and has certainly read some Latter-day Saint sources, but too often his reporting on our beliefs seems informed by critics rather than faithful Latter-day Saints, though he seeks to write in a fair tone and frequently is accurate in reported facts. What is sometimes lacking, though, is an *understanding* of how we actually think and believe, and certainly how we might respond to common criticisms. Thus, a Latter-day Saint might frequently feel that what has been said is a mischaracterization, such as saying that we don't believe God is eternal.

As for rule #2, I would characterize *40 Questions* as an effort to repeatedly contrast the obvious truth of "traditional Christianity"

4. Pete Ellertsen, "Here's what Krister Stendahl said, in his own words, about 'holy envy' in the context of effective interfaith dialog," *Ordinary Time* (blog), 3 August 2022, ordinaryzenlutheran.com/2022/08/03/stendahl-on-holy-envy/.

against the benighted views of Latter-day Saints, giving emphasis to what that is perceived as weak and failing to mention our strengths or the evidences supporting our views and practices. Not all chapters are this way, but many are.

Rule #3, “holy envy,” is not to be found in *40 Questions*, unless I am missing something. The book is designed to help those wanting to rescue Latter-day Saints from our allegedly non-Christian state. It does so with relatively nice words, mercifully avoiding terms like *mormonic*, and in a voice that seems dispassionate, but the passionate zeal is revealed in many ways, including what is *not* said.

Nevertheless, the book is well written and nicely organized, and is likely to be well-received by those who question Latter-day Saint doctrines as well as by some Latter-day Saints who wish to know more about why some Evangelicals so strongly object to our faith. Of course, as with any faith, there are conundrums and painful issues that can be raised by critics that aren’t easily resolved with a Bible verse or pithy argument. But there are still answers and thoughts that have been developed within our faith to answer many of the criticisms raised. A person claiming to be on a quest for understanding should at least be aware of those and mention them. That courtesy is often lacking.

Based on the introduction, I recognized that the author would necessarily talk about differences between his faith and ours, but I also had the hope that there would be many moments of recognizing the good in our faith and some of its strengths. I would expect him to have detailed knowledge of that based on extensive dialogues with real members and learning of the blessings and joy that the faith has brought into their lives. I expected to have at least a few questions aimed at recognizing some of the goodness of our faith, such as:

- Why is the Church so noted for raising happy families and strong marriages? What elements in the faith support those outcomes?
- Why does the Church put such emphasis on education?
- Why are highly educated Latter-day Saints so often faithful believers?⁵

5. See Stan L. Albrecht and Tim B. Heaton, “Secularization, Higher Education, and Religiosity,” *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 1 (September 1984): 43–58, [jstor.org/stable/3511041](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3511041).

- What is seminary and how does it affect the lives of young people?
- What things about the Church appeal most to new converts?
- Why does the Church put so much emphasis on temporal welfare, even to the point of having welfare programs that also promote self-reliance and self-respect for those in need?
- Why do Latter-day Saints fast once a month?
- How does the system of "ministering brothers and sisters" work and what is its history? How does it affect the lives of members?
- Why is service given such emphasis in the Church, and what are examples of typical service projects?
- Why do so many Latter-day Saints sacrifice a large part of their lives to serve as missionaries?
- What is Family Home Evening? What are other ways that the Church helps strengthen families?
- Why is morality so important in the Church?
- What are priesthood blessings and patriarchal blessings? How do they affect the lives of members?
- Why do you consider yourself to be Christian? Why do so many critics claim that the Church is not Christian? How do Latter-day Saints answer their objections?
- How important is the Book of Mormon in the lives of faithful members? What are the strengths of the Book of Mormon? How does it help their lives? What are the reasons for accepting it as authentic ancient scripture rather than something Joseph Smith composed?

Perhaps none of these issues were encountered in the author's dialogues and studies. Maybe the focus was on tough but loving questions, not understanding positives. While the tone generally is largely neutral, which is welcome, many chapters seem to follow the pattern of raising controversy about a doctrine or historical issue in the Church, and then criticizing the Church and contrasting its doctrines or practices to what Christians (we don't get included in that category, unfortunately) or "traditional Christians" believe and what the Bible allegedly teaches, leaving little room for common ground and even less for acknowledgement of good.

On the positive side, he does recognize that we use the Bible, support some of the same social issues that Evangelicals often do

(p. 22), and worship Jesus Christ—but a different Jesus, it turns out. He notes that we try to do good and keep commandments, which, however, only shows how poorly we understand grace and the Jesus of the Bible. Apart from these things, I struggle to find positive statements about the Church in this book, even though I planned to lead with a section summarizing such ecumenical comments. I could be missing some nuggets, though I've searched many times.

Much is missing in his treatment, such as the topics listed above with questions I wished he had asked. When there are significant evidences or arguments for our positions, they are generally ignored or whittled down to a mere sliver that can be flicked away. Another gap in his treatment is the failure to sympathetically recognize how significant the effect of past persecution has been on the Church. But he does note that seventeen people were killed by a mob at Haun's Mill, that Joseph was murdered (p. 79), and that violent mobs drove out the Saints (p. 74)—all that in about three sentences. But it's a short book, so long reviews of history would not fit well.

Beshears's stated goal initially was to thoroughly understand our faith and then help others understand it better. When I read that, I wondered if this book would be the fruit of thoughtful and intense dialogues with Latter-day Saints, perhaps like *Claiming Christ: A Mormon-Evangelical Debate* by Latter-day Saint professor Robert L. Millet and the Evangelical professor Gerald R. McDermott.⁶ Or like *How Wide the Divide: A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation*⁷ by Craig L. Blomberg, a professor of the New Testament at Denver Seminary, and Stephen E. Robinson, a professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University, where the two clearly sought to understand the other side with respect and recognition of common ground. Or perhaps he would kindly identify positive aspects of our faith, as did Dr. Steven H. Webb, originally an Evangelical who became Roman Catholic and eventually had much good to say about the Latter-day Saints and our doctrines, evidenced by his book, *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn From the Latter-day Saints*.⁸ Webb deeply understood the beauty and significance of the metaphysics

6. Robert L. Millet and Gerald R. McDermott, *Claiming Christ: A Mormon-Evangelical Debate* (Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2007).

7. Craig L. Blomberg and Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide: A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation* (Lisle, IL: IVP Academic, 1997).

8. Steven H. Webb, *Mormon Christianity: What Other Christians Can Learn from the Latter-day Saints* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

found in modern scripture and other Restoration teachings and says much that could help clarify some of the issues raised by Beshears.

Beshears pursues a different agenda: helping others understand us in order to draw Latter-day Saints away from their faith. That becomes more apparent as he gradually clarifies his stance on why people should learn about our faith. It's more nuanced than dispelling misunderstandings:

- After observing that the Church has large financial resources and "influential roles in business, politics, media, and culture," Beshears warns, "That's a lot of power, and Christians ought to be aware of Mormon influence" (p. 22). Note that the term *Christians* here and elsewhere is apparently exclusionary; it does not include Latter-day Saints.
- On a more practical note, he suggests that "perhaps Christians [again not used inclusively] ought to consider studying Mormonism to aid us in developing closer social alliances. . . . As traditional theology and morality are challenged, traditional Christians and Latter-day Saints will inevitably share common ground. Willingness to get to know our new neighbors may surprise us with fruitful partnerships, like mutual support on social issues" (p. 22).
- A further reason for the need to understand Latter-day Saints is to be able to more fully bring them to Christ: "Why should traditional Christians learn about Mormonism? The standard answer (especially among the missionally minded) is the Great Commission, but the correct answer is the Greatest Commandment because it's impossible to fulfill the former without the latter. . . . Love that lacks a gospel witness has no home in the kingdom of God, but a gospel witness that lacks love is equally foreign. You cannot bear witness to the Lord Jesus while harboring apathy or fear or hate against those for whom he died and rose again. So when it comes to studying Mormonism, first things first. If Christians are called to love their Latter-day Saint neighbors as themselves, how can we possibly do so without knowing anything about them, their beliefs, or their lives?" (p. 23). With this intention, with "love . . . as our chief motivation, our study of Mormonism takes on a virtuous form" (p. 23).

Beshears seeks to arm real Christians with what they need to know

about Latter-day Saints to help them convert to real Christianity. It's a noble goal, and if what he has to say about our faith is correct, it may be a wise goal as well. Sharing one's faith to bless others is a Christian act, so we can respect his intentions. But a book with a primary purpose of helping other Christians convert Latter-day Saints, who from the beginning are depicted as non-Christian, is not likely to be based on a serious quest to accurately *understand* us and our faith. Too much of it is ultimately polemics, raising weary arguments with little awareness of the strengths and goodness of the faith, and with little understanding of how Latter-day Saints might respond to his objections. He has pursued extensive dialogue with Latter-day Saints, but it seems he may have been talking with people unaware of many positives.

Much of his information obviously comes from various publications, some of them rather arcane, rather than from dialogues. The sources are typically used fairly, but a few times serious errors occur ranging from neglecting information that ought to have been included, to more serious mischaracterization.

A disturbing example comes early in the book, when Beshears repeats the common claim that Latter-day Saints once “swore a ritual oath to avenge the blood of Joseph Smith” (p. 30), citing Devery S. Anderson’s *The Development of Latter-day Saint Temple Worship*.⁹ I obtained the Kindle version of the book and, in a search, found that Anderson mentioned this issue three times, all in the context of *asking members to pray* that God might avenge the blood of Joseph and other martyrs. Here is the relevant passage:

He [David H. Cannon] had been asked to explain the law of retribution: The law of retribution is: To *pray the Father to avenge the blood of the prophets and righteous men that has been shed*, etc. In the endowment house this was given [as a personal responsibility] but as persons went there only once, it was not so strongly impressed upon their minds; but in setting in order the [script for] endowments for the dead it was given as it is written in [the] 9[th] Chapter of Revelations[,] and in that language *we importune our Father, not that we may, but that He, our Father, will avenge the blood of martyrs*

9. Devery S. Anderson, ed., *The Development of Latter-day Saint Temple Worship 1846–2000: A Documentary History* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2011), 163–64.

shed for the testimony of Jesus. –Temple Minute Book, St. George, Feb. 22, 1912¹⁰

Perhaps the nineteenth rather than the ninth chapter of Revelation was meant, which states that God “hath avenged the blood of his servants at her hand” (Revelation 19:2). But Revelation 6:9–10 is also relevant, as martyrs for the “testimony” of God cry out, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?”

A footnote added to the passage from Anderson gives further information:

The “oath of vengeance” had its origin in Nauvoo when the shock of the assassinations of Joseph and Hyrum Smith were still fresh. The oath was retained in the Endowment House and in the first four temples in Utah. It received national attention in the U.S. Senate committee hearings to seat Apostle Reed Smoot. “Negative publicity from the Smoot Hearings led to a de-emphasis of this oath in the temple endowment,” wrote historian David John Buerger. When Salt Lake temple president George F. Richards headed a committee in the 1920s to revise the temple ceremony, the oath of vengeance was removed.¹¹

Mormonr.com discusses this issue¹² and also provides the text of the “oath of vengeance” that came up in the Senate committee hearings related to Reed Smoot:

You, and each of you, covenant and agree that you will pray, and never cease to pray, Almighty God to avenge the blood of the prophets upon this nation; and that you will teach the same to your children unto the third and fourth generation. All bow your heads and say yes.¹³

10. Anderson, *Temple Worship*, Kindle ed., location 4294 of 10789, emphasis added.

11. Anderson, *Temple Worship*, Kindle ed., location 4653 of 10789.

12. See “Joseph & Hyrum Smith’s Martyrdom,” *Mormonr* (blog), mormonr.org/qnas/BxkBU/joseph_and_hyrum_smiths_martyrdom; and “Changes to the Temple Endowment,” *Mormonr*, mormonr.org/qnas/8yXbNf/changes_to_the_temple_endowment.

13. Walter M. Wolfe, “Endowment Oaths and Ceremonies,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 9 February 1906, p. 8, mormonr.org/qnas/BxkBU/joseph_and_hyrum_smiths_martyrdom/research#re-6kQ26b-0J7Ly1.

While I recognize that there are conflicting reports about this controversial matter, the source Beshears cites does not support the claim he makes. That's a red flag, but it can be an innocent mistake. One possibility is that he repeated a well-worn claim from critics and then did a brief search to find a reliable source to cite, not noticing that Anderson only presents the issue of vengeance as part of a prayer to God that he might avenge the murders of righteous men, not unlike the prayers of martyrs in Revelation 6:9–10. Beshears cites Anderson a couple more times later, making me think he must have had access to the physical book, but just missed an important detail.

One issue for readers to consider: rather than quoting commonly used and easily accessible sources in discussing Latter-day Saint doctrines (e.g., articles, sermons, and other resources on the Church's website or app, including the *Saints* series on Church history, or other online or commonly owned resources), Beshears tends to use less available materials such as *Early Mormon Documents* by Dan Vogel, some rather obscure sources, and many Church history sources that may be difficult for most members to find. Some documents he cites can be found on the *Joseph Smith Papers* website, but that site is rarely mentioned. I don't think I saw a single URL in the footnotes.

Selected Topics

Commandments: A word subtracted?

As a preliminary observation, in numerous passages across *40 Questions*, Beshears expresses a passionate love for our Savior, Jesus Christ. He summarizes the message of Christ on page after page while suggesting that Latter-day Saints are missing the essence of his Gospel message. In all of these summaries, one word that Jesus emphasized repeatedly seems to be missing: *commandments*. Christ bristles at those who did not keep the commandments or sidestepped them with perversions of the law (Matthew 15:3–9; Mark 7:6–13). He teaches by example as he explains that he is keeping the commandments that he has been given by the Father (John 10:18, 12:49, 14:31), implicitly giving us an example to follow. He then repeatedly urges us to keep the commandments:

Whosoever therefore shall *break one of these least commandments*, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall *do and*

teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:19)

And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God: but *if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments*. (Matthew 19:17; cf. Mark 10:16–22; Luke 18:18–22)

Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. *This is the first and great commandment*. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets*. (Matthew 22:36–40; cf. Mark 12:28–31)

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to *observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you*: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen. (Matthew 28:19–20)

So likewise ye, when ye shall have *done all those things which are commanded you*, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do. (Luke 17:10)

A new *commandment I give unto you*, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. (John 13:34; cf. John 15:12, 17)

If ye love me, *keep my commandments*. (John 14:15)

He that hath *my commandments*, and *keepeth them*, *he it is that loveth me*: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him. (John 14:21)

If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; *even as I have kept my Father's commandments*, and abide in his love. (John 15:10)

Ye are my friends, if ye *do whatsoever I command you*. (John 15:14)

The commandments of God aren't just suggestions, for our response to them can affect our salvation, as Christ taught: "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of

heaven; but *he that doeth the will of my Father* which is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). He who hears Christ’s teachings “and doeth them” is like a wise man that built his house upon a rock (v. 24), while he who “doeth them not” is like a foolish man who built his house on sand, destined to experience a great calamity (vv. 26–27). There’s much more I could say, but the important thing is what Beshears does not say, leaving important and biblical Latter-day Saint beliefs and practices improperly represented and poorly understood.

Though *40 Questions* lacks a subject index, it does have a thorough scripture index showing the hundreds of verses cited and where they occur. I looked up every one of the verses cited in this section so far. Beshears cites only two of these. He does refer to the “Great Commandment” to love one another in Matthew 22:37–40, but only to explain that believers should try to love Latter-day Saints in witnessing to them (p. 23). He also cites Matthew 28:19–20 when he mentions that baptism was included in Christ’s final charge to his apostles (p. 243) but does not mention the part about “teaching them to *observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.*” Of the fifty-three passages from John that are cited, none of them include the verses about the need to do what he has commanded us.

One exception of sorts is on p. 145, when he states that Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice mediated “between God and ‘all that obey him’ (Heb 5:9).” Otherwise, the author seems cautious not to repeat verses that indicate we need to obey God and keep his commandments to be saved—there are many more throughout the New Testament, including many that don’t use words related to commandments.

That silence becomes a strong scolding voice when he addresses our concept of making and keeping temple covenants in chapter 34, “What is the Temple Endowment?” (pp. 283–90). He sees such efforts not only as fruitless, but as an offensive way to revitalize the law. Here, as in other passages, I suspect that he may confuse the fulfilled and now obsolete Law of Moses with the commandments of God and Christ that still apply to us.

When it comes to our redemption, where does the greater emphasis lie: in the promises we make to God, or in the promises God makes to us? The Bible is filled with broken promises to God. . . . Even something like the law of chastity is impossible to keep considering the Sermon on the Mount. “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery” (Matt 5:27), said Jesus, reinforcing the

good command to remain faithful only to one's lawful spouse. But he cautioned that the mere act of lust is tantamount to adultery in the heart (see Matt 5:28). How often have commitments to the law of chastity been broken by the temptations of private lust? Each covenant promise we make with God establishes a new law for ourselves— one that God will hold us accountable to. Since we are imperfect, we will inevitably fail to obey these laws, thereby meriting nothing less than death itself (see 1 Cor 15:56). No wonder Paul cautioned against such law-based, spiritual self-improvement. **Not only is it impossible to be sanctified by making and keeping covenants with God, but it nullifies the gospel's power**, "for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing" (Gal 2:21, NIV). (p. 298)¹⁴

The only covenants we make with God are the ones we break. But praise God that the only covenants he makes with us are those he keeps. . . . The beginning of our redemption is not found in our promises to God but in his promises to himself for us. All people, traditional Christians and Latter-day Saints alike, must tune their ear to hear the sweet "I will" promises of Jesus. . . . "I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:40) for those who place their trust not in their own faithfulness to Christ but in Christ's faithfulness to God alone (see Phil 3:9). (pp. 289–90)

Beshears rejects the concept of making and keeping covenants, arguing that we cannot do that, that all efforts to obey God will fail. Here he seems to miss the joyous message of repentance, a core doctrine of the Gospel of Christ. We can repent and overcome sin. To teach otherwise is dangerous (see Matthew 5:19, quoted above). It is true that we all have sinned, and thus need repentance, but the Bible clearly teaches that there are people who are righteous and keep the commandments. Of Zacharias the priest and his wife Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, Luke 1:6 states, "And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless." Christ repeatedly asked us to follow him, to follow his example, and even to "be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Of course, it is

14. In any quotations from *40 Questions*, bold text represents emphasis that I have added.

coming unto Christ and accepting his grace that gives us power to repent fully, but effort and sacrifice on our part to follow Christ and keep his commandments is clearly required. We must choose to follow Christ, pressing toward him day by day.

Beshears's denunciation of covenant making above concludes with Philippians 3:9. Let's consider that in context with v. 8:

Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith. (Philippians 3:8–9)

Paul has sacrificed much and “suffered the loss of all things” in his quest to follow Christ, “that [he] may win Christ.” Paul goes on to urge us to pursue that goal as he does, following his quest and his example:

Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you.

Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing. Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample. (Philippians 3:12–17)

Paul's example that we are to follow is one of an *urgent effort* to follow Christ. It is Christ's grace that saves us, but we must follow him. Beshears may view our position as irreconcilable with his theology, but it's not irreconcilable with the scriptures.

Faith and grace: Recall their original meanings to better grasp the “irreconcilable” views of Latter-day Saints

Beshears observes that Latter-day Saints use a lot of the same words as his kind of Christians do, but they can have different

meanings—this is the point of Beshears’s chapter 28, “What Are Common Terms about Salvation Shared by Traditional Christians and Latter-day Saints” (pp. 235–41). This is a fair point, and even Beshears may not realize how right he is. A large portion of the seemingly irreconcilable gap between our views and those of Beshears and many of his religious compatriots is rooted in the linguistic gap between the current and the ancient meanings of two essential words, *faith* and *grace*. Faith is mentioned as one of the words where we may have different definitions, but he does not follow up and discuss the difference in chapter 28. I hoped that our differing definitions for faith and grace might have been addressed in that chapter, but they are not.

Another missed opportunity occurs in chapter 37, “What Are the Concerns Latter-day Saints Have About Traditional Christianity?” (pp. 309–14), where concerns over the different definitions of key terms such as *faith*, *grace*, and *Christian* might have made that chapter much more interesting. (It is still interesting, though. See the discussion later in this paper.)

Scholars have long recognized that the way we use *faith* today is quite different than how the related Greek word, *pistis* (πίστις), was understood in the era of the New Testament (also true of *fides* in Latin). The same applies to the Greek word, *charis* (χάρις), often translated as “grace,” and its Latin counterpart, *gratia*. The shifts in meaning are significant and have had a profound impact on modern theology that few Christians recognize today.

Here I must recommend to Beshears, to his audience, and to anyone seeking to better understand the doctrines of the Latter-day Saints, two important works of scholarship that trace the loss of the ancient meaning of *pistis* and *charis* (and their Latin counterparts). These works are both by Dr. Brent J. Schmidt, who has a Ph.D. in classics and is on the Brigham Young University New Testament Commentary Series board, where he is a co-author with John W. Welch for several volumes on the New Testament. The books are *Relational Faith: The Transformation and Restoration of Pistis as Knowledge, Trust, Confidence, and Covenantal Faithfulness*¹⁵ and his earlier *Relational Grace: The Reciprocal and Binding Covenant of Charis*.¹⁶

15. Brent J. Schmidt, *Relational Faith: The Transformation and Restoration of Pistis as Knowledge, Trust, Confidence, and Covenantal Faithfulness* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2022).

16. Brent J. Schmidt, *Relational Grace: The Reciprocal and Binding Covenant of Charis* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015).

Schmidt shows that both faith and grace in the Mediterranean world of Paul had long invoked relationships rooted in reciprocity. To have faith was to be *faithful* and *true* to another in a relationship, such as a covenant relationship. As Schmidt puts it,

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 primarily to mean conformity of belief or emotional, mystical inner feelings equated with instant salvation. Many of Paul's writings have been distorted in translation and have become difficult to understand because the original context has been lost. . . .

For the Gentile and Hellenized Jewish audiences that Paul and others addressed, *pistis* implied action, including knowledge, understanding, faithfulness, and trust within covenantal relationships. . . .¹⁷

In the first century, *pistis* implied active loyalty, trust, hope, knowledge, and persuasion in the patron-client relationship or within the new covenant brought about through Christ's Atonement. Atonement or "at-one-ment" implies the restoration to a preexisting, covenantal relationship. Even in instances where the *pist-* words [variants of *pistis* related to "faith"] cannot be directly translated as "loyalty," they frequently reflect active forms of conduct that are consistent with such meanings.¹⁸

Changes in the meaning of *faith* from the teachings of Augustine and later theologians resulted in concepts such the Rule of Faith (the need to agree with the Catholic church) and salvation by "faith alone" that seem distant from the faith, covenants, and requirements for salvation in the New Testament — as it would have been understood in New Testament times. For example, the doctrine of "faith alone" seems puzzling when one considers that "faith only" and "faith . . . alone" are each mentioned only once in the KJB, and only *negatively*:

17. Schmidt, *Relational Faith*, 2.

18. Schmidt, *Relational Faith*, 11–12.

Even so *faith*, if it hath not works, is dead, being *alone*. (James 2:17)

Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and *not by faith only*. (James 2:24)

On the other hand, a connection between faith and obedience or commandment keeping or avoiding sin is found in numerous passages (e.g., Acts 6:7, 26:18; Hebrews 11:8; Revelation 14:12, etc.). One example is from Paul in Romans 16:26:

But now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the *obedience of faith*.

Paul uses the same Greek phrase, ὑπακοὴν πίστεως (*hypakoēn pisteōs*), also in Romans 1:5:

By whom we have received grace and apostleship, for *obedience to the faith* among all nations, for his name.

There was certainly a connection between *pistis* and obedience in Paul's day that seems to have been lost in much of modern Christianity. That drift was a serious loss for *pistis*, but was perhaps more serious for the related Latin word with similar relational and covenantal overtones, *fides*, which was largely replaced in the Latin church with a word lacking all connections to *pistis*:

Scholars have noted that later developments in Christian history resulted in a disturbing semantic shift of *pistis* from the idea of loyal faithfulness through a covenant relationship to an amorphous idea that was intricate, confusing, complex, and ultimately passive on the part of the would-be believer. The Latin-speaking church chose *credo*, meaning "I believe" as defined by one's heart and emotions, from the Latin *cor* (heart), as its term for self-commitment and the oath of loyalty; it began to use creeds as a testimony at baptismal services. In time, the Latin-speaking church opted for *credo* to signify in its Latin translations of the Bible the standard interpretation of *pisteuō*, "the having of faith." Although *pistis* had direct cultural ties to *fides*, there was no linguistic connection between *pistis* and *credo*. By subordinating *fides* to *credo*, later Christians lost their connections to the obligations, rites, and covenants with God that first-century Christians associated with the doctrine and with the word

pistis. In the Latin-speaking Western church, “faith” gradually became devoid of knowledge, emphasis on proper Christian action, and the ordinances earlier associated with faith.¹⁹

In extensive detail and with impressive support from numerous primary sources, Schmidt illustrates how concepts of faith in Greek culture, Roman culture, and Jewish culture were based in relationships and rooted in loyalty, trust, and reciprocity. Faith, whether referred to with the Greek *pistis*, the Latin *fides*, or the Hebrew *’emunah*, was not about intellectual belief in the correct creeds or a mysterious gift that ensured salvation, but about relationships, and often expressed in language consistent with loyalty in a covenant relationship.

Similar praise can be offered for Schmidt’s treatment of the Greek *charis* or Latin *gratia*, for these terms were anchored in systems of client-patron relationships where gifts played an important role in reciprocal relationships and where faithfulness was often crucial. Parent-child relationships also helped inform that nature of gifts and the reciprocity involved.²⁰ But the meaning of grace shifted, especially after Augustine’s innovation of “grace alone” (*sola gratia*), original sin, predestination, and Trinitarian concepts. Such developments had the result of “making it seem impossible for faith to be an active principle leading to repentance and covenants relationships with a loving, physical Heavenly Father.”²¹

The famed New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright, has expressed views that are aligned with basic aspects of Schmidt’s work. Wright, for example, recognizes the importance of faithfulness and covenant relationships in Paul’s writings and discusses *pistis* in that context. For example, in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Wright speaks of the importance of believers to be “marked” by their own *pistis*:

The outpouring of the spirit indicated to Paul that the promises of Deuteronomy 30, and the echoing promises of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, had been fulfilled. The Messiah had been vindicated; but he was not alone. Somehow, he would share his status and role with his people. **There was now already a circumcised-heart people, in whose common life and individual transformation a strange new**

19. Schmidt, *Relational Faith*, 17.

20. Schmidt, *Relational Grace*, 104–6.

21. Schmidt, *Relational Faith*, 236.

form of "law-keeping," both related and unrelated to the Pharisaic keeping of Torah, had now appeared. This offered a kind of parallel to the Pharisaic hope of a present zealous keeping of Torah through which one might be marked out in the present with a "righteousness," a covenant status, that would be vindicated in the future. But the new kind of life was of an utterly different kind, not least in that it was a fresh and free gift from the covenant God himself. In particular, the first and most characteristic sign of this people, which became its badge, had nothing to do with the "works of Torah" which marked out the Jew from the pagan (or with the sectarian "works of Torah" which marked out one sect from another. . .). **Its badge was the Messiah-badge, namely *pistis*.** This is the explanation . . . of why ***pistis* is the single badge by which the single Abraham-family, "justified sinners," are recognized.** *Pistis* is, in other words, the Israel-characteristic which, according to Romans 3.2 and 3.22, was lacking in Israel itself and provided by the Messiah. ***Pistis* is therefore the appropriate sign that a human being is a Messiah-person, "in the Messiah," "belonging to the Messiah": part of the covenant people,** one of those about whom the covenant God himself declares, in advance of the final declaration which will consist in resurrection itself, that this person is *dikaïos* [righteous], **part of Abraham's single, sin-forgiven covenant family. Within this *pistis* we must therefore include all that Paul includes: cross-and-resurrection-shaped belief, trust and faithfulness.**²²

The Messiah's faithful obedience to the divine plan for Israel means that **the identifying mark of the Messiah's people is precisely their own *pistis*,** indeed their own *hypakoē pisteōs*, "**obedience of faith**" (which Paul would have said, and sometimes did say, was the result of the spirit's work through the gospel). . . . His central answer to the question, "Who are we?" is: We are the Messiah's people, defined

22. N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 2:931, bold added, archive.org/details/paulfaithfulness0034wrig/page/930/mode/2up.

by our membership “in” him, marked by our sharing of his *pistis*.²³

Those who believe the gospel, “who believe in the one who raised from the dead Jesus our lord” ([Romans] 4.24), are thus appropriately **marked out by that badge of *pistis*, their own *pistis***, not as an arbitrary sign, not because it means that they have had some kind of religious experience and so must have been converted, not because “faith” is a special, meritorious form of interiority which this God decides to reward, **but because *pistis*, faithfulness**, (a) always was supposed to be the badge of Israel, (b) now has been the badge of Jesus, and so (c) **is the appropriate badge—the only badge!—by which Jesus’ followers are to be marked out**.²⁴

The gift of Christ’s faithfulness in doing all that he was called to do, redeeming us and conquering sin and death, is truly a free gift, but not one without reciprocity. The people who accept this gift are expected to follow Christ and also display trust and faithfulness as the badge they wear to be a light to the world and servants of God. “The *status* of being ‘justified,’ declared to be ‘in the right’ and a member of the people of the one God, is given on the basis of *pistis*, the ‘faith’ of the believer which identifies him or her as part of the family of the ‘faithful’ Messiah.”²⁵ In his monumental *History and Theology*, Wright discusses the significance of the new covenant through the successful mission of Christ: “The result is that those who belong to Jesus and *follow him faithfully* are welcomed into the heavenly sanctuary ([Hebrews] 12.18–24).”²⁶

Wright recognizes the importance of obedience not just in the old covenant but also in the new, as we see in his discussion on Paul and the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4–5): “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is

23. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1:544, bold added, archive.org/details/paulfaithfulness0012wrig/page/544/mode/2up.

24. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2:839–40, bold added, archive.org/details/paulfaithfulness0034wrig/page/838/mode/2up.

25. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2:832, archive.org/details/paulfaithfulness0034wrig/page/832/mode/2up.

26. N. T. Wright, *History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), Kindle ed., 244, emphasis added.

one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might." Wright states:

The connection between [Romans] 8.27 and 8.28 is important: Paul is not plucking "those who love God" as a new category out of the air, but is indicating that "loving God" is the proper way to describe what is going on at the heart of the experience he is describing. The inarticulate groaning of the spirit deep within God's people is heard and understood by the listening "heart-searcher." God works all things together for good, he says, "to those who love him": in other words, **to those who keep the great command** that belongs with "Hear, O Israel," **to love YHWH with all the heart, life and strength, that is the "obedience"** that Jewish monotheism requires. *The spirit enables God's people to keep the Shema.*

The very word **Shema**, in fact, means not merely "hear," as in "allow your ears to take in the sound," **but "hear" as in "hear and obey."** A case can be made, in this light, for allowing **Paul's remarkable phrase "the obedience of faith,"** *hypakoē pisteōs*, **to resonate closely with the Shema: this is the "obedience" in which the "hearing" takes place, namely pistis.**²⁷

Incidentally, Schmidt explains that Wright has objected to the concept of salvation by "faith alone" (*sola fide*) because it neglects the Bible's frequently reiterated doctrine of a final judgment according to works.²⁸ This is one of many concerns Latter-day Saints also have about modern Evangelical discourse. The downplaying of commandment keeping and covenant keeping has led to overlooking key issues to be considered on the day of judgment (e.g., Revelation 20:12–15).

An important observation from Schmidt in both of his works is that the original covenant and relational aspects of faith and grace were restored in Joseph Smith's work, especially in the Book of Mormon but also in Joseph's other revelations. For example, Schmidt explores the question of what is required in return for grace in exploring King Benjamin's speech in Mosiah 2–5:

As King Benjamin teaches of mercy, atonement, service,

27. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2:721–22, bold added, archive.org/details/paulfaithfulness0034wrig/page/720/mode/2up.

28. Schmidt, *Relational Faith*, 232.

obedience, wisdom, power, and justice (Mosiah 2:39; 3:26; 4:2; 5:15), he teaches that disciples should serve God and others, even though in so doing they still remained unprofitable servants and unable to repay God for his gifts; the very air we breathe is a gift from God (Mosiah 2:22). Even though no one can come close to repaying God for his offer of forgiveness, resurrection, and eternal life, there is still much that disciples must do. Benjamin does not say that nothing is required in return. The recognition of this obligation to keep God's commandments and praise and thank him parallels the ancient idea of reciprocity. Benjamin's teachings thus align with the view of *hesed*²⁹ and *charis* in the ancient Mediterranean world.³⁰

Indeed, the temple themes that Wright also sees as important but neglected aspects of the New Testament, with their emphasis on covenants, have also been restored. Beshears's chiding of covenant making and modern temples will not wear well with time, in my view.

Again, for those who wish to understand the status of some of the biggest clashes between "traditional Christianity" since the 1500s and what we might call Restored Christianity, reading Brent Schmidt's works on *pistis* and *charis* can open new horizons and hopefully fresh, more fruitful dialogues and a recognition that there may be more to Latter-day Saint doctrine than meets the critical eye.

Another problematic definition: Beshears's claim that our God is not "eternal"

One further preliminary comment involving definitions is needed. It seems that Beshears's greatest objection to our faith is the claim that God is not "eternal." The same objection applies to our views on Christ. Examples of his objections:

In Latter-day Saint thought, **God is immortal but not eternal.** (p. 178)

Jesus, then, is the "only begotten" Son of the Father who became so—but was not always so—by virtue of being

29. Schmidt discusses *hesed* earlier, describing it as a Hebrew word that can connote "the reciprocal relationship between God and people" and means "faithful love, enduring lovingkindness, and persistent mercy" and can imply "an extended, covenantal relationship." Schmidt, *Relational Grace*, 42.

30. Schmidt, *Relational Grace*, 158–59.

born first and achieving exaltation prior to us, his spiritual younger siblings, who receive glorified states through our elder brother. Thus, **the glorified nature of the Son is not truly eternal (having no beginning)** and neither is his membership in the Godhead. . . . In this way, Latter-day Saint Christology departs significantly from orthodox Christology. (p. 183)

According to Mormonism, Jesus is literally the Son of God, the firstborn child of God the Father and Heavenly Mother, making Christ our eldest spirit brother, **whose membership in the Godhead is not timeless** but began after his ascent to godhood by personal progression. (p. 180)

We thus are said to worship a "different God" and "another Jesus" because our teachings supposedly don't recognize God or the Son as eternal. The first thing I hope Beshears might have done here is to ask Latter-day Saints what the Church actually teaches about the "eternal" nature of God. What he says about us directly contradicts our scriptures. A sampling of the many verses on the eternal nature of God and Christ follows:

By these things we know that there is a God in heaven, who is *infinite and eternal, from everlasting to everlasting the same unchangeable God*, the framer of heaven and earth, and all things which are in them. (Doctrine and Covenants 20:17)

Which Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are *one God, infinite and eternal*, without end. Amen. (Doctrine and Covenants 20:28)

O *God, the Eternal Father*, we ask thee in the name of thy Son, Jesus Christ, to bless and sanctify this bread to the souls of all those who partake of it. . . . (Doctrine and Covenants 20:77)

O *God, the Eternal Father*, we ask thee in the name of thy Son, Jesus Christ, to bless and sanctify this wine to the souls of all those who drink of it. . . . (Doctrine and Covenants 20:79)

Listen to the voice of the Lord your God, even Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, whose course is *one eternal round, the same today as yesterday, and forever*. (Doctrine and Covenants 35:1)

According to that which was ordained in the midst of the *Council of the Eternal God* of all other gods before this world was, that should be reserved unto the finishing and the end thereof, when every man shall enter into *his eternal presence* and into his immortal rest. (Doctrine and Covenants 121:32)

And they are one God, yea, the very *Eternal Father* of heaven and of earth. (Mosiah 15:4)

Teach them that redemption cometh through *Christ the Lord, who is the very Eternal Father*. Amen. (Mosiah 16:15)

And also to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that *JESUS is the CHRIST, the ETERNAL GOD*, manifesting himself unto all nations. (Title Page of the Book of Mormon)

And the angel said unto me: Behold *the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father!* Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw? (1 Nephi 11:21)

And as I spake concerning the convincing of the Jews, that Jesus is the very Christ, it must needs be that the Gentiles be convinced also that *Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God*. (2 Nephi 26:12)

Now Zeezrom saith again unto him: Is the Son of God the very Eternal Father? And Amulek said unto him: Yea, he is the very *Eternal Father* of heaven and of earth, and all things which in them are; he is the beginning and the end, the first and the last. (Alma 11:38–39)

And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask *God, the Eternal Father*, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost. (Moroni 10:4)

And thou art after the order of *him who was without beginning of days or end of years, from all eternity to all eternity*. (Moses 6:67)

And Enoch said unto *the Lord*: How is it that thou canst weep, seeing thou art holy, and *from all eternity to all eternity*? (Moses 7:29)

Behold, I am God; Man of Holiness is my name; Man of Counsel is my name; and *Endless and Eternal is my name*, also. (Moses 7:35)

Beshears might then wish to consider what the Greek behind the word "eternal" in the New Testament means. That word is αἰώνιος (*aiōnios*), related to αἰών (*aiōn*), the source of the English word eon. Turning to William Arndt and Wilbur Gingrich's *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*,³¹ we find three definitions for *aiōnios*: 1) without beginning, 2) without beginning or end, and 3) without end. These parallel some of the meanings for *aiōn*, such as 1) very long time, eternity; 1a) of time gone by: the past, earliest times, then eternity; 1b) of time to come which, if it has no end, is also known as eternity; 2) a segment of time, age.³² Thus, we can say that Christ has a glorious and "eternal" body because it will never end, but it had a beginning. Similarly, in the future, if we accept Christ and follow him in faith (with true *pistis*), we will receive fully of his grace (*charis*) and have eternal life (ζωὴν αἰώνιον, *zōēn aiōnion*). Our lives will be eternal, and we will be eternal, in spite of a beginning, though we also believe that we are eternal beings with God and Christ, but our "eternal life" has a specific beginning point. That word allows for several possibilities, none of which necessarily poses an irreconcilable problem. God and Christ are eternal.

Change seems to be the real issue for Beshears. No reasonable definition for "eternal" eliminates change. An eternal Jesus Christ absolutely could come to earth, be born as an infant in a little human body, grow up, suffer and die, and become spirit only again without losing the right to be called eternal. He could then return to earth and take up his body, turning it into a glorious, eternal resurrected body, without losing his status as eternal. Given all those changes, will Beshears still insist that any change such as obtaining a physical or spirit body would make God or Christ non-eternal?

Unfortunately, Beshears is troubled by the thought that God can grow or "progress," even though Christ obviously did. A God that increases in any way apparently is impermissible. But in revelation given to Moses, God declared that "this is my work and my glory — to

31. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: and Other Early Christian Literature*, 4th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), s.v. "αἰώνιος," 27–28, archive.org/details/greek-englishlexi0000will_j9a5/page/26/mode/2up.

32. Arndt and Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. "αἰών," 26.

bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). With each baby born, with each human soul that grows and comes unto Christ, with each Christian sharing the Gospel with another person, with each prayer and song of praise, God’s work is moving forward and his infinite glory is increased. That’s his joy and his work, and thus I would suggest that his increase is unstoppable and something to be celebrated. He does not change his love, his work, his principles, but surely the expansion of his marvelous, endless work represents a form of growth.

Beshears makes much of the uncanonized but influential King Follett discourse where Joseph taught a variety of doctrines, including the unclear concept that God the Father also must have once been a Son. The details of what that means (was it even in this universe — when, where, how?) remain mysterious and frankly is something that Latter-day Saints tend to “put on the back burner” and rarely discuss, especially since this incomplete idea is in tension with other basic statements about God in our scriptures and in other sermons from Joseph Smith. In my view, it does not define our faith nor affect our worship of God the Eternal Father. Beshears treats that discourse as completely clear and extrapolates it to suggest that God was just an ordinary mortal whose “personal progress” led him to become God the Father. I don’t accept his views and don’t think they do justice to what faithful Latter-day Saints teach and believe nor to what our scriptures teach. We tend to (or at least ought to) refrain from making major extrapolations on topics where we know very little.

The scriptures refer to God as eternal, but Beshears demands more than this. He demands that God be *anarchos* (ἀναρχος, without a beginning) — a word not used in the Bible:

For Smith, however, God is immortal — he’s forever unending — not *anarchos* nor immutable, or unchanging. . . . The only truly eternal thing to God is his intelligence and matter (attributes we share with him as humans), but God as he is has not always been so. (p. 174)

If the Bible requires God to be *anarchos*, why is that absent in the Greek New Testament? Here is another non-biblical concept imported into the requirements for Christians and used to reject the Christian faith of the Latter-day Saints. We believe God is eternal, as taught in all our scriptures. But for Beshears, there is a special narrow definition: being eternal must mean having no change and having no

beginning. He's welcome to believe that, but don't hold us accountable for not importing the same extra-biblical paradigms into our faith.

We'll now examine a number of Beshears's forty chapters. We'll start with my longest response on what was one of the most problematic portions of the book, the chapters dealing with the Book of Mormon, and then cover several other chapters.

The Book of Mormon (Chapters 13 and 14)

After reading the introduction, I was anxious to see the fruits of Beshears's growth in understanding since writing his problematic doctoral thesis. Had he come to learn in his dialogues that the Book of Mormon has, in the opinion of some scholars in the Church, only become stronger over time, in light of evidence from both the Old and New Worlds and through a deeper understanding of the ancient literary aspects of the text? Did he recognize how intellectual Saints can greatly appreciate the Book of Mormon as an ancient text relevant for our day, with profound messages and evidences pertaining to the divinity and mission of Christ? Could there be a kind word or two for the book and those who cherish it? I'm afraid not, but that's understandable given his mission.

Beshears is highly factual in chapter 13, "What is the Book of Mormon?" (pp. 105–10), one of his most neutral chapters, as he describes some basic aspects of the story of the Book of Mormon and its content, just missing some subtleties that may not be well known. One understandable gap is characterizing the English text as *Jacobean English*, when a surprising and growing body of scholarship points to a significant influence of non-Jacobean syntax from the Early Modern English era.³³ Though apologetics played no role in this data-driven discovery, the implications strongly suggest that

33. This feature was first observed by Royal Skousen in his studies of the original text of the Book of Mormon. See, for example, Royal Skousen, "The Language of the Original Text of the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2018): 81–110, byustudies.byu.edu/article/the-language-of-the-original-text-of-the-book-of-mormon/. For a rapid overview of some key issues uncovered in the research of Stanford Carmack on the presence of Early Modern English syntax in the Book of Mormon, see Stanford Carmack, "A Plain Exposition of Book of Mormon English by Means of Short Questions and Informed Answers," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 63 (2025): 107–20, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/a-plain-exposition-of-book-of-mormon-english-by-means-of-short-questions-and-informed-answers. For a large fraction of his papers on this topic, see the

Joseph Smith was not the author of the English text since the unusual language he dictated not only is demonstrably inconsistent with the King James Bible, it also is not found in pseudo-biblical texts seeking to imitate KJV language, nor can it be explained as Joseph's dialect. Careful analysis of the text suggests that Joseph produced the Book of Mormon by seeing and reading aloud text that his scribes then wrote.³⁴ It truly was a miraculous translation process with a linguistic signature distinguishing the text from the language of the Bible, from the vernacular of Joseph's day, and from his own language.

Chapter 14, "Where Did the Book of Mormon Come From?" (pp. 111–19), is more problematic. To Beshears's credit, he recognizes that it is "unlikely" that Joseph was the author of the Book of Mormon, since writings from him during the time of producing the Book of Mormon show poor literacy, plus "he seems to have grown more familiar with the text over time, which is peculiar if he made it up" (p. 112) — these are positive indications that he has talked with some knowledgeable Latter-day Saints. Beshears notes that a popular theory is that Joseph and his peers obtained a manuscript from someone else, such as Solomon Spaulding, that they used to create the Book of Mormon. He generously grants that there is "insufficient evidence" to prove this theory definitively and even provides a footnote accurately stating that the discovery of Spaulding's "Manuscript Lost" caused the theory to "deteriorate" (p. 112). Bravo!

He then claims that the Book of Mormon deals with topics from debates among Protestants in the nineteenth century and is "keenly attuned to the religious *Zeitgeist* of the day. If Smith and ancient authors are both excluded from possibilities, then its authorship remains a mystery" (p. 113). Beshears argues that textual clues point to someone "with an American Protestant background and immense creativity, capable literacy, and theological acumen. From this perspective, the Book of Mormon is American pseudepigrapha" (p. 113).

Beshears dismisses ancient authors too hastily, but this is understandable for a non-believer. However, there is nothing in the text that is uniquely nineteenth century.³⁵ Discourse over theology and salvation

current set of Carmack's articles at *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*, interpreterfoundation.org/all/author/stanfordc.

34. Stanford Carmack, "Joseph Smith Read the Words," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 18, no. 1 (2016): 41–64, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/joseph-smith-read-the-words.

35. For some treatments of common allegations of nineteenth-century influence, see "Possible 19th Century Influences on the Book of Mormon," FAIR

is not unique to Joseph's era, and the various parallels that critics have proposed do not withstand scrutiny nor offer explanatory power for the origins of the text with its many hallmarks of antiquity. For example, America's Revolution and its system of government have only superficial resemblance to the establishment of the reign of judges during a portion of Nephite history.³⁶ King Benjamin's speech at a Nephite temple has much more in common with ancient coronation assemblies than a frontier revival meeting and has remarkable ties to ancient Near Eastern covenant-making patterns (the covenant formulary).³⁷ Questions over infant baptism have occurred over many centuries and could have arisen independently in the New World.³⁸ Numerous factors in the text, ranging from rhetorical and literary tools such as chiasmus to many unusual scenarios that are more at home in, say, ancient Mesoamerica than nineteenth century New York all offer evidence that the Book of Mormon is derived from an ancient text, as has been discussed at length by authors such as Hugh Nibley, Brant Gardner, John L. Sorensen, Noel Reynolds, and many others.

In this chapter, Beshears makes a statement on the historicity of the Book of Mormon that may be easily misunderstood if not misleading for many readers:

Throughout the history of Mormonism, Latter-day Saints have been guilty of approaching the text primarily in an apologetic posture to prove, if possible, its historicity. It's important to note, then, how **LDS apostle Neal A. Maxwell argued that the substance of the Book of Mormon is "basically spiritual, not historical"** during a time of growing interest in its theological message. Today, an enormous

(website), fairlatterdaysaints.org/answers/Possible_19th_Century_influences_on_Book_of_Mormon.

36. Richard L. Bushman, "The Book of Mormon and the American Revolution," in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University [BYU], 1982), 189–212, rsc.byu.edu/book-mormon-authorship/book-mormon-american-revolution.
37. Stephen D. Ricks, "The Treaty/Covenant Pattern in King Benjamin's Address (Mosiah 1–6)," *BYU Studies* 24, no. 2 (Spring 1984): 151–62, byustudies.byu.edu/article/the-treaty-covenant-pattern-in-king-benjamins-address-mosiah-16 (a PDF file is also available at that link).
38. Scripture Central Staff, "Why Did Moroni Include Mormon's Condemnation of Infant Baptism?," Scripture Central, KnoWhy 253, 21 August 2019, scripturecentral.org/knowwhy/why-did-moroni-include-mormons-condemnation-of-infant-baptism.

body of work ranging anywhere from lay devotionals to scholarly exegesis and commentaries is made available by Latter-day Saint scholars and authors. Still, effort exists to discover both external and internal evidence of its historical nature.

Some Latter-day Saints take the position that the Book of Mormon is not a historical document but is still inspired. Proponents of “inspired fiction” do not believe the Book of Mormon is a historical record but nevertheless argue that abandoning its historicity need not jeopardize its authority or veracity for the believing reader. Others, however, recognize the potential pitfalls of rejecting its historicity. (p. 113)

Beshears is quoting Neal A. Maxwell in *Plain and Precious Things*.³⁹ Maxwell was not downplaying the authenticity of the Book of Mormon or hinting that there are reasons to doubt its historicity, as Beshears’s characterization of Maxwell’s statement may suggest—Elder Maxwell was adamant in affirming the reality and authenticity of the Book of Mormon throughout his life, and was interested in the kind of apologetic efforts that Beshears mentions. Maxwell was explaining that the “richness” of the book is in its spiritual message, not the historical details. Here is his quote in context:

Throughout these books of scriptures [scriptures other than the Book of Mormon], we see the summational and recurring themes that dominate in the Lord’s declarations given in various dispensations. He is not random in His observations; He keeps them focused on the things that matter most—for which we should be everlastingly grateful. . . .

Inevitably, it is the very doctrinal and spiritual content of these other books of scripture that one marvels and rejoices over. The structure, setting, and plot of the Book of Mormon, for instance, are interesting—much more complex and instructive than casual readers imagine as to style, form, and symbolism. But even so, by divine design such features are secondary to the book’s major theme and messages.

The richness of the Book of Mormon is basically spiritual, not historical. It is one thing to focus on stage and scenery and quite another to focus on substance. The spiritual

39. Neal A. Maxwell, *Plain and Precious Things* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983).

dimensions of this book of scripture are what this present volume focuses on. How reassuring and reverberating are its teachings about Jesus and the promises, perils, and purposes of this mortal life. And how real the perils in this earthly probation!⁴⁰

Here I fear that Beshears's conviction that the Book of Mormon is not historical may have hindered his understanding of what Elder Maxwell was teaching.

Book of Mormon evidence: Did it ever come up in the dialogues?

While many Latter-day Saints don't spend a lot of time exploring Book of Mormon evidence, there is still a broad awareness of some of the exciting developments. This includes the discovery of chiasmus and many other ancient rhetorical tools in the Book of Mormon; the heavy use of apparent Hebrew or even Egyptian wordplays around names in the Book of Mormon, especially as described in the work of Matthew Bowen;⁴¹ details of ancient American society and civilization that add meaning to Book of Mormon details; geographical and even geological details in the Book of Mormon that support authenticity; scholarly linguistic analysis of Uto-Aztec languages that support the idea of infusions of Ancient Near Eastern languages into the Americas; and especially an abundance of discoveries in the Arabian Peninsula that profoundly support the ancient origins of the book of 1 Nephi.

The most basic evidence: Book of Mormon witnesses

Of course, perhaps the most significant basic Book of Mormon evidence to consider is the many witnesses to the physical reality of the gold plates, including the Three Witnesses who saw them under miraculous conditions with an angel present and the voice of God being heard, plus the Eight Witnesses who saw and handled the plates under entirely mundane conditions, along with a number of other witnesses. The carefully scrutinized histories of the Three Witnesses and the Eight Witnesses, who all remained true to their witness — in spite of differences with Joseph Smith or the Church that eventually led some to leave the Church — provides impressive evidence that they testified of real experiences.

40. Maxwell, *Plain and Precious Things*, 2.

41. Matthew L. Bowen, *Name as Key-Word: Collected Essays on Onomastic Wordplay and the Temple in Mormon Scripture* (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2018).

There is much that could be said about the importance of the evidence from the many witnesses, as well as the witnesses of the translation. But Beshears finds a rather parsimonious way to summarize the evidence:

Some witnesses claimed to have seen the plates. . . . The first witnesses claimed to have “seen the engravings which are upon the plates,” while the second witnesses said that they handled the plates, having “hefted” them. (p. 117)

There is no recognition of the diversity of these experiences: one miraculous with an angel showing the plates to the Three and the voice of God being heard, the other mundane, with the plates being shown in ordinary circumstances to the Eight as they felt and lifted the plates. There is no recognition of the lifelong impact of the experience on all the witnesses, no recognition of the extensive scholarship on the witnesses, nor acknowledgement of the others who were additional witnesses in various ways, giving a total of perhaps twenty witnesses.

Beshears does recognize that one witness, John Whitmer, maintained his testimony even after being excommunicated, “lending credence to his word” (p. 117) — one of the most generous admissions Beshears makes.

Martin Harris, on the other hand, “complicated his testimony by having ‘repeatedly admitted the internal, subjective nature of his visionary experience,’ argued one historian [Dan Vogel]” (pp. 117–18). It is not Harris that “complicated his testimony,” but hostile sources who provided the hearsay statements that historian and noted critic Dan Vogel favors over Harris’s actual words and actions.⁴² Even if Harris did tell someone about seeing with, say, “spiritual eyes” in his angelic vision involving the plates, this does not mean that the vision was not real. Christians are widely aware of Paul relaying a powerful vision with a question about the uncertain physics of it: “Whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth” (2 Corinthians 12:2). If “out of the body,” one is probably seeing with spiritual eyes, but still seeing nonetheless. But one can also have a divine encounter while in the body and still call the experience spiritual:

Although skeptics over the centuries have represented visions and spiritual sight as being distinct from natural

42. Steven C. Harper, “Evaluating the Book of Mormon Witnesses,” *Religious Educator* 11, no. 2 (2010): 37–49, rsc.byu.edu/vol-11-no-2-2010/evaluating-book-mormon-witnesses.

experience, this does not reflect how the Witnesses understood their own experience. David Whitmer explained, “Of course we were in the spirit when we had the view, for no man can behold the face of an angel, except in a spiritual view, but we were in the body also, and everything was as natural to us, as it is at any time.”⁴³

There is a bounty of historical work that has been carried out on the witnesses of the Book of Mormon. The testimony of Martin Harris is strong and compelling,⁴⁴ as are those of the other witnesses.⁴⁵ Rather than suggesting that his experience was something subjective and questionable, Harris said, “Gentlemen, do you see that hand? Are you sure you see it? Are your eyes playing a trick or something? No. Well, as sure as you see my hand so sure did I see the angel and the plates.”⁴⁶

To understand faithful Latter-day Saints, it’s important to understand and properly characterize the inspiration and compelling evidence provided by the many witnesses of the Book of Mormon. They play an important role in our faith, and their voices should not be hushed—if one’s goal is to promote understanding of our faith and the intellectual girders that can strengthen it.

Other evidences?

Beshears also addresses other external evidences for the Book of Mormon, while saying almost nothing about the substance of the internal evidences except to suggest that they have little value. External evidences are discussed after first reminding readers how extensive

43. Scripture Central Staff, “Why Did Martin Harris Sometimes Say He Saw the Plates with Spiritual Eyes?,” KnoWhy 775, 28 January 2025, scripturecentral.org/knowwhy/why-did-martin-harris-sometimes-say-he-saw-the-plates-with-spiritual-eyes. The quotation from David Whitmer is in a letter from David Whitmer to Anthony Metcalfe, 2 April 1887; see Dan Vogel, ed. and comp., *Early Mormon Documents*, (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2003), 5:193, archive.org/details/volume-5_202011/page/193/mode/2up.

44. Susan Easton Black and Larry C. Porter, *Martin Harris: Uncompromising Witness of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2018).

45. See, for example, Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981).

46. Statement of William M. Glenn in C. Frenk Steele, “Harris Testimony Recalled: Canadian Tells of Seeing Witness,” *Deseret News*, Church Edition, 2 October 1943, 6. The source is available at [Newspapers.com](https://newspapers.com), but shows as page 32 in their database because the Church Edition begins on page 27; see newspapers.com/image/595244182/.

the evidence for the Bible is compared to the paucity for the Book of Mormon. Beshears does admit that writing on gold plates adds a “very speculative” degree of plausibility for the concept of a record on gold plates (p. 114). But “no archaeological findings in the Americas have definitively established any connections between ancient ruins, like those of Mesoamerica, and the people and events described in the Book of Mormon” (p. 114). These are carefully chosen words that excise Old World archaeology where extremely clear archaeological evidence for some aspects of the book of 1 Nephi has been found.

The load-bearing strut in Beshears’s claim of no significant archaeological findings in the Americas isn’t just the exclusion of the Old World to excise some of the most impressive finds so far, but rather the demanding limitation that to be counted as evidence, archaeological finds must “have **definitively established** any connections between ancient ruins, like those of Mesoamerica, and the people and events described in the Book of Mormon” (p. 114). I believe he means that the Book of Mormon connections must be clearly established such that critics and scholars outside the Church will look at the data and say, to their chagrin, “Yes, we have to admit, this site is definitely Zarahemla as described by the Book of Mormon.”

That’s quite a high bar for a part of the world where almost all written records were destroyed by invaders, where we know almost none of the names that various sites originally bore, where the various civilizations that once occupied major sites were destroyed and replaced with new peoples, sometimes multiple times, and where archaeology is still in its infancy with less than 10% of known sites having been excavated. Further, if Mesoamerica is indeed the setting for the Book of Mormon as many Latter-day Saint scholars conclude, that is a part of the world where plants and erosion tend to cover and destroy much more than happens in the Near East.

We don’t expect evidence to be so definitive that no faith will be needed to accept the Book of Mormon. But for those willing to seek, there are marvelous hints that can help overcome obstacles to faith.

Beshears has become somewhat more generous in discussing Book of Mormon evidence than he was in his doctoral thesis. For his thesis, I was critical of his failure to consider any of the many external evidences for the Book of Mormon, a complaint that is only partly true

of *40 Questions*. Here is an excerpt from my critique,⁴⁷ with the footnotes being those given in that passage:

The complete unawareness of any external evidence relevant to the Book of Mormon is unfortunate, and if he wishes to update his work, I hope Beshears will consider the significance of, say, the many hard evidences (non-LDS archaeological evidence included) from the Arabian Peninsula described in, for example, Warren Aston's *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*,⁴⁸ or works related to the New World such as John Sorenson's *Mormon's Codex*,⁴⁹ Brant Gardner's *Traditions of the Fathers*,⁵⁰ Jerry Grover's *Geology of the Book of Mormon*,⁵¹ and Brian Stubbs's works on Uto-Aztec language and relationships to Hebrew and Egyptian such as *Changes in Languages from Nephi to Now*⁵² and *Exploring the Explanatory Power of Semitic and Egyptian in Uto-Aztec*.⁵³

Good news: Nahom is mentioned

I'm happy to report that Beshears has now mentioned a publication by the first of the authors I recommended, Warren Aston, famous among Latter-day Saint scholars for his personal explorations in the Arabian Peninsula related to the Book of Mormon. Rather than the extensive

47. Lindsay, "Too Little or Too Much Like the Bible?," 33–34.

48. Warren P. Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia: The Old World Setting of the Book of Mormon* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris Publishing, 2015).

49. John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013).

50. Brant Gardner, *Traditions of the Fathers: The Book of Mormon as History* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015).

51. Jerry D. Grover Jr., *Geology of the Book of Mormon* (Vineyard, UT: Grover Publications, 2014), academia.edu/18172439/Geology_of_the_Book_of_Mormon.

52. Brian D. Stubbs, *Changes in Languages from Nephi to Now* (Blanding, UT: Four Corners Digital Design, 2016); 3rd edition available at jefflindsay.com/Stubbs-Changes-in-Languages.pdf. Designed for general readers, this explores how languages change over time and then considers a sampling of the evidence for infusions of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Egyptian into the Uto-Aztec language family of North America in ways that are consistent with the Book of Mormon.

53. Brian D. Stubbs, *Exploring the Explanatory Power of Semitic and Egyptian in Uto-Aztec*, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: Grover Publications, 2023), PDF at jefflindsay.com/Stubbs-Explanatory-Power.pdf. This is a work for linguists showing linguistic evidence for infusions of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Egyptian into the Uto-Aztec language family, with 1,650 cognates involved.

book I recommended, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*, Beshears cites an older, brief academic paper, but it's still a valuable one: "A History of NaHoM."⁵⁴ Recognizing that Nahom is part of the external evidence for the Book of Mormon and citing a paper by Warren Aston is a significant breakthrough for which I am grateful. But there is also a problem or two. To explain, I must first review what the finds related to Nahom can mean for Latter-day Saints who take the Book of Mormon seriously.

Background on Nahom and the associated complex of Arabian Peninsula evidence

Aston's "A History of NaHoM" describes the significance of archaeological data showing that the modern Yemeni Nihm tribe, which is represented in ancient inscriptions with the three consonants NHM, had been in substantially that same area from before Lehi's day to now. The ancient NHM name corresponds well with Nephi's report in 1 Nephi 16:34 that mentions "the place which was called Nahom," where Ishmael was buried.

Three recently discovered stone altars from a member of the NHM tribe found at an ancient temple site in Marib, Yemen, dated to roughly 800 to 700 BC, well before Lehi's journey, confirm that the tribe was in the same general region as the Nihm tribe today, part of a long chain of evidence for the geographical stability of that tribe. Contrary to what some critics claim, the name NHM is not merely a family name or tribal name. Such tribal names can also be place names.⁵⁵ Further, as Neal Rappleye demonstrates, "the name *Nihm* (and its variant spellings) has deep roots far into the past as both a tribal name and a toponym and is part of a long-standing, ancient tradition in Yemen, where tribes have been strongly linked to their territories for millennia."⁵⁶

Adding to the excitement is the location of the Nihm tribal lands relative to other key sites on Lehi's Trail, including Wadi Tayyib al Ism, the stunning candidate for the River of Laman and Valley of Lemuel,

54. Warren P. Aston, "A History of NaHoM," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2012): 79–98, byustudies.byu.edu/article/a-history-of-nahom.

55. Jeff Lindsay, "Nahom/NHM: Only a Tribe, Not a Place?," *Arise from the Dust* (blog), 5 August 2022, arisefromthedust.com/nahom-nhm-only-a-tribe-not-a-place/.

56. Neal Rappleye, "The Place—or the Tribe—Called Nahom? NHM as Both a Tribal and Geographic Name in Modern and Ancient Yemen," *BYU Studies* 62, no. 2 (2023): 71, byustudies.byu.edu/article/the-place-or-the-tribe-called-nahom.

first documented by George Potter and Richard Wellington⁵⁷ and further examined by Warren Aston.⁵⁸ Another site of great importance is Khor Kharfot, the primary candidate for Bountiful, as named by Lehi's group, the unexpected fertile wonder on the east coast of Oman that, according to other publications of Aston, meets all twelve criteria that can be extracted from the text of 1 Nephi.⁵⁹ This is a type of place critics have long mocked as impossible but now may be the most impressive Book of Mormon site found so far — certainly the one that I think has received the most attention among Latter-day Saints, but the River Laman in the Valley of Lemuel may be equally surprising and impressive.

Each of these locations individually provides important evidence for the authenticity of at least a portion of 1 Nephi, suggesting that whoever wrote the text must have been to these locations that were unknown to the West until recent years. But what makes them collectively so impressive is their geographical relationship to one another in light of the Book of Mormon, which gives specific directions of travel: Lehi's group generally travelled *south-southeast* (1 Nephi 16:13) after leaving their encampment and walking across the shallow stream/river in the Valley of Lemuel, where there is a hidden exit from the valley that can lead them to their next stop four days later, and that south-southeast direction is consistent with the direction heading toward Nihm tribal lands far to the south, a few miles northeast of Sana'a in Yemen.

More surprising is the issue of the eastward turn that Lehi's family makes after reaching Nahom. For travelers going south-southeast beginning near the Gulf of Aqaba (more specifically, Wadi Tayyib Al Ism), changing to a direction of "nearly eastward" (1 Nephi 17:1) to reach the eastern coast of the Peninsula is quite a challenge. It would be a fatal mistake at almost any point along the south-southeast vector from

57. George Potter and Richard Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness: 81 New Documented Evidences that the Book of Mormon is a True History* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2003).

58. Warren P. Aston, "Lehi and Sariah's Escape from Jerusalem, Perspectives Suggested by New Fieldwork," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (2019): 99–126, byustudies.byu.edu/article/into-arabia-lehi-and-sariahs-escape-from-jerusalem-perspectives-suggested-by-new-fieldwork.

59. Warren P. Aston, "Nephi's 'Bountiful': Contrasting Both Candidates," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 55 (2023): 219–68, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/nephis-bountiful-contrasting-both-candidates. Also see Aston, *Lehi and Sariah in Arabia*.

the River Laman/Wadi Tayib Al Ism (near the Gulf of Aqaba) through the region of Sana'a and beyond to the southern coast of Yemen, for eastward of such a path one typically would encounter difficult sand and a complete lack of water. But there is one place where such a turn is possible, and that happens to be the precise region of the Nihm area, as Warren Aston noted in the article that Beshears cites:

Only recently has satellite-assisted mapping enabled us to appreciate that after traveling southward into Arabia, as the Lehitese did, people are prevented from easterly travel by the shifting, waterless dunes of the vast Empty Quarter, as much today as in the past. However, a narrow band of flat plateaus beginning in the Nihm area, marking the southern end of the Empty Quarter, presents the first opportunity for travel in an easterly direction. . . .

Perhaps assisted by the Liahona, which arrived on the very morning the Lehite group departed into Arabia, Nephi makes it clear that he could distinguish quite precise cardinal directions, not merely southeast or a generic “southwards” for example [i.e., in 1 Nephi 16:13, Nephi states that their direction away from the River Laman was generally south-southeast, or SSE]. A route ENE or ESE from Nahom leads into the Empty Quarter or into the equally forbidding Ramlat Saba'tayn desert. Very significantly, the direction of travel from Nahom is specified by Nephi as *nearly* eastward, a direction that we now know is possible across the plateau.

Finally, only in recent decades has research shown that eastward from Nihm is the only fertile area in over a thousand miles of coastline, the few miles of coast in Oman touched by the annual monsoon rains. This small fertile region lies within just a degree or two (thus “nearly”) of being directly east of Nihm.⁶⁰

Nahom is important not just because it shows that a rare place name in the Arabian Peninsula actually did exist before and after Lehi's day in a plausible location, but also because it is in exactly the right place to be connected to two distant sites once said to be impossible and now confirmed as plausible based on fieldwork. These sites are the River Laman and the leading candidate for Bountiful, a surprisingly

60. Aston, “A History of NaHoM,” 84–85.

fertile site on the east coast of Oman that can be accessed by going nearly eastward (but not ENE or ESE) from Nahom, as Nephi states.

In other words, when faithful, informed Latter-day Saints in their dialogues with others mention Book of Mormon evidence from the Arabian Peninsula, they aren’t just talking about a cartographical coincidence in which a Book of Mormon place name ends up being a real name in antiquity. They are talking about a network of evidences involving multiple sites and multiple disciplines showing unexpected treasures in the right place and right time in ways that go beyond random luck or advanced research using information available in 1829. The evidence demands a modicum of respect. It merits recognition that a growing number of Latter-day Saints see intellectual strength in and positive evidence for Book of Mormon authenticity, most famously in the journey of Lehi across the Arabian Peninsula. Outsiders don’t need to change their faith to recognize that we have some noteworthy external evidence for the Christ-centric Book of Mormon, or to notice that scholarship continues to bear unexpected fruit for our scriptures and our faith.

There’s much more to consider, by the way. The body of evidence, for example, includes the finding of a burial marker in Nihm tribal lands dating to the sixth century BC for an apparent foreigner with the name *Ishmael*, as Neal Rappleye has demonstrated: “The inscribed $y s'm'$ is exactly how the Hebrew name $yšm'$ (לאעמשי) — typically rendered as ‘Ishmael’ in English — would be spelled in Epigraphic South Arabian.”⁶¹ (Note that Rappleye is not arguing that this was the Ishmael of the Book of Mormon, but it certainly escalates the plausibility of that story.) Many other subtle details in the text are also bearing fruit when tools of scholarship are applied, as shown in recent work by Godfrey Ellis on the eight-year journey to (or including the stay at) Bountiful.⁶²

It’s also noteworthy that immediately after Nahom is introduced in 1 Nephi 16:34, an apparent word play based on the Hebrew meaning of Nahom occurs in v. 35.⁶³ That’s an example of the numerous internal evidences whose existence Beshears mentions in passing (p. 114)

61. Neal Rappleye, “An Ishmael Buried Near Nahom,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 48 (2021): 33–48, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/an-ishmael-buried-near-nahom.

62. Godfrey J. Ellis, “Nephi’s Eight Years in the ‘Wilderness’: Reconsidering Definitions and Details,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 57 (2023): 281–356, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/nephis-eight-years-in-the-wilderness-reconsidering-definitions-and-details.

63. Scripture Central Staff, “Book of Mormon Evidence: Wordplay on Nahom,”

without any details or footnotes, though issues such as abundant and sophisticated chiasmus, numerous word plays (see, for example, the numerous word plays on Book of Mormon names detected by Matthew Bowen in his book *Name as Key-Word*), many Hebraisms, and ancient rhetorical devices are compelling evidence of ancient origins that cannot be plausibly explained away.

Downsizing Nahom to a ho-hum

So, what does Beshears have to say about Nahom and the associated body of Arabian Peninsula evidence, the topic of multiple books and dozens of scholarly articles, including many popular articles and videos? He manages to condense it neatly into two sentences, reducing not just three ancient altars into one, but reducing almost everything else in a master stroke of brevity:

And in the 1990s, when archaeologists discovered an ancient altar in Yemen inscribed with a reference to *Nhm*, Latter-day Saints took notice. The altar, they argue, is potentially located in a place the Book of Mormon called “Nahom” (1 Nephi 16:34), which is not something a nineteenth-century author could have known. (p. 114)

That’s a welcome morsel, but there’s no mention of Bountiful, the River Laman, specific directions, the eastward crossing, etc.

Beshears doesn’t just stop with noting the existence of a name similar to Nahom, but his mission, it seems, drives him to add a critical footnote:

As one critic pointed out, however, it could just as easily be argued that Nahom is a variation of biblical names like Naham (1 Chr 4:19), Nehum (Neh 7:7), or Nahum (Nah 1:1). See Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, 609. (p. 114n20)

So since personal names (not place names) with the NHM consonants exist in the Bible, the mention of Nahom can be neatly explained away, with Vogel’s help. This reduces the nexus of interrelated bodies of evidence from each of three sites into a mere piece of luck: there was once a place with a name that sounds like a random place mentioned once in the Book of Mormon, and that one lucky name can “just

as easily” be explained by plucking a personal name from the Bible. Yawn.

Sadly, Beshears remains unaware of what the NHM discoveries in context mean to Book of Mormon believers, at least those who have noticed the dramatic evidence. Our critics want to reduce Nahom and the associated Arabian evidence to a meaningless coincidence of just three letters that Joseph could have obtained from anywhere.⁶⁴ Beshears seems aligned with them and has downsized Nahom to a ho-hum.

So, after summarizing Book of Mormon evidence as the discovery of one place name and miscellaneous internal evidences not worthy of specific mention, he says the real value of the Book of Mormon is in understanding the issues of the nineteenth century. It’s not a witness of, nor a lens into, the divine work of the Messiah anciently, but a way of understanding the contentions of bickering men in the nineteenth century.

Sadly, *40 Questions* will not help readers *understand* why the Book of Mormon still inspires Latter-day Saints and often brings intellectual satisfaction to educated members of the Church.

With the disappointing results of digging into this treatment of the Book of Mormon, I wasn’t surprised to face similar disappointments across the rest of *40 Questions*. Beshears was often fair but certainly more focused, perhaps unintentionally, on pointing out flaws, problems, and weaknesses rather than helping others understand our faith.

In more brevity, we now consider a number of other chapters treated by Beshears.

Chapters 4 and 5: Who Was Joseph Smith? Why Was He Considered a Prophet?

As with many chapters, Beshears leads with arguments against the Latter-day Saint position. In the first paragraph, Beshears asks,

Was he truly a prophet of God, as he said? If so, then how do his believers reconcile the unpolished character of his mission and message? Smith himself expected this dilemma: “I never told you I was perfect,” he confessed. . . . Those who don’t believe him are faced with deciding whether he was a

64. Jeff Lindsay, “The Significance of Nahom: Just Three Letters?,” *Arise from the Dust* (blog), 13 December 2013, arisefromthedust.com/the-significance-of-nahom-just-three/.

fallen prophet, misguided visionary, pious fraud, con man, or something else altogether. (p. 39)

Beshears is being far gentler than many, but it's still not a great start in understanding why Latter-day Saints revere Joseph Smith.

Many people have attempted to solve the prophet puzzle, which has proven to be a herculean task. First, there's the fact that it's a *prophet* puzzle. . . . Was he a true prophet or a false one, and how could we tell? Was he even a prophet at all if, "in these last days" (Heb 1:2) God has spoken finally by his only begotten Son, the Word of God (see John 1:1), and not a mere man? (pp. 39–40)

This is a common tactic: introducing a topic with a front-loaded polemical spiel to undermine the Latter-day Saint view, apparently as a key part of promoting understanding. Scriptural language is thrown out with an implicit assumption that the Evangelical spin is the correct interpretation. Throw in a word or two to strongly shift the meaning in the desired direction. It sounds like God has said that his speaking to us "in the last days" was all wrapped up when he spoke "finally" through Jesus Christ—thus no need for prophets in the last days. But "finally" is not found in Hebrews 1:2. We will hear similar arguments again, as if the Bible explains that there is no more revelation needed apart from the Bible itself—a most unbiblical doctrine.

Here I would like to ask Beshears why Christ said that "man shall not live by bread alone, but by *every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*" (Matthew 4:4, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3). He did not say that we should live only by words written centuries ago. Since he said this early in his ministry, with many more new teachings from the mouth of God yet to come, surely, he was not telling people to only live by ancient writings but to also accept words yet to be spoken by the mouth of the living God to his prophets and apostles. How, then, can Beshears be so certain that only ancient words can be accepted—but certainly not the ancient words from newly uncovered sacred texts like the Book of Mormon?

Beshears goes on to repeat many of the most popular criticisms of Joseph, including treasure hunting, money digging, and "magical seer stones" (p. 41), along with the claims of numerous people that Joseph and his family were "destitute of that moral character" required to gain the trust of a community (p. 41). We are introduced to Joseph's duplicity in denying polygamy, his short temper, and other flaws, with

occasional acknowledgement that he tried to be compassionate. Latter-day Saints know that there were flaws in Joseph but still accept him as a prophet of God. Perhaps reasons for that will come up later in the book, one might assume, for surely this had to be a topic in some of the numerous dialogues that Beshears had. But I think that will remain a mystery to readers unfamiliar with Latter-day Saints.

Chapter 5, "Why Was Joseph Smith Considered a Prophet, Seer, Revelator, and Translator" (pp. 47–53), suggests that we might learn why Latter-day Saints revere his divine callings that led to the Restoration. Rather, the chapter focuses on how Joseph heaped these titles upon himself. But having already told us about how flawed Joseph Smith was, Beshears further guides his readers by explaining how holiness is needed to be a prophet of God:

Ideally, righteous prophets who faithfully modeled God's purposes delivered his word, and a single sour note in the harmony of his prophetic choir warranted the rejection of a fallen or false prophet (see Deut 18:22). (pp. 49–50)

Deuteronomy 18:22 says that if a prophecy does not come to pass, the prophet can be ignored. However, this is a problematic test in mortal hands, especially critical hands, for sometimes a prophecy is fulfilled in ways that are not expected, or may take longer than expected to be fulfilled, or may be made moot by the actions of humans. Shalom Paul, who was Yehezkel Kaufman Professor Emeritus of Bible at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and chair of the Dead Sea Scrolls Foundation, pointed to the danger of strict use of this verse:

The true prophet, as intercessor, was ready to risk a confrontation with God, in contrast to his counterpart, the false prophet. The problem of distinguishing between them was indeed perplexing, as is shown by two separate passages in Deuteronomy. According to Deut. 13:2ff., if a prophet delivers an oracle (even if it is subsequently confirmed by an external sign) to worship other gods, he obviously is a false prophet. In turn, Deut. 18:20–22 raises the question, "How can we know that the oracle [uttered in God's name] was not spoken by the LORD?" The answer given is that if the "oracle does not come true, that oracle was not spoken by the LORD; the prophet uttered it presumptuously." *This, however, cannot serve as an infallible criterion, because there are several occasions when an oracle delivered by a true*

prophet did not materialize even in his own lifetime. Such unfulfilled prophecies include Jeremiah's prediction of the ignominious fate of king Jehoiakim (Jer. 22:19), which was belied by 2 Kings 24:6, and Ezekiel's foretelling the destruction of Tyre by Nebuchadnezzar (Ezek. 26:7–21), which later was admitted to have failed but was to be compensated by the Babylonian king's attack on Egypt (29:17–20).⁶⁵

For further thoughts on Deuteronomy 18:22, such as how its strict application would turn many real prophets of the Bible into false prophets, or for details on alleged errant prophecies of Joseph Smith, see the FAIR Latter-day Saints website.⁶⁶

For Beshears, one sour note requires that a prophet be rejected, but the divine standard for Christians is quite different. In fact, trying to “faithfully model” God’s word is futile and dangerous, it seems. Beshears explains his views in chapter 34, “What Is the Temple Endowment” (pp. 283–90), where he argues about the folly of making and keeping covenants:

Each covenant promise we make with God establishes a new law for ourselves—one that God will hold us

65. Shalom M. Paul, “Prophecy and Prophets,” in *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*, David L. Lieber, ed., (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 1410–11, emphasis added, archive.org/details/etzhayimtorahcom0000unse/page/n1435/mode/2up. Also see related issues involving a test in Deuteronomy 18: “Abuse of a Bible Test for Joseph Smith: A Case Study,” FAIR (website), fairlatterdaysaints.org/answers/Biblical_Keys_for_Discerning_True_and_False_Prophets/Considering_Joseph_Smith/Abuse_of_a_Bible_test?title=Biblical_Keys_for_Discerning_True_and_False_Prophets%2FConsidering_Joseph_Smith%2FABuse_of_a_Bible_test&mw=1782345328808.

66. On the strict application of Deuteronomy 18:22, see “Question: Are there biblical examples of prophets which evangelical interpretations of Deuteronomy 18 would cause one to have to reject as true prophets?,” FAIR (website), fairlatterdaysaints.org/answers/Question:_Are_there_biblical_examples_of_prophets_which_evangelical_interpretations_of_Deuteronomy_18_would_cause_one_to_have_to_reject_as_true_prophets%3F. On alleged false prophecies of Joseph Smith, see “Question: Does Joseph Smith fail the ‘prophetic test’ found in Deuteronomy 18?,” FAIR, fairlatterdaysaints.org/answers/Question:_Does_Joseph_Smith_fail_the_%22prophetic_test%22_found_in_Deuteronomy_18%3F?title=Question%3A_Does_Joseph_Smith_fail_the_%22prophetic_test%22_found_in_Deuteronomy_18%3F&mw=1782345800994; and John A. Tvedtnes, “The Nature of Prophets and Prophecy,” FAIR, fairlatterdaysaints.org/archive/publications/the-nature-of-prophets-and-prophecy-2.

accountable to. Since we are imperfect, we will inevitably fail to obey these laws, thereby meriting nothing less than death itself (see 1 Cor 15:56). No wonder Paul cautioned against such law-based, spiritual self-improvement. **Not only is it impossible to be sanctified by making and keeping covenants with God, but it nullifies the gospel's power**, "for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing" (Gal 2:21, NIV).

The only covenants we make with God are the ones we break. But praise God that the only covenants he makes with us are those he keeps. . . . The beginning of our redemption is not found in our promises to God but in his promises to himself for us. (p. 289)

I suggest God wants holiness of prophets as well as the rest of us, but we do not require near-infallibility from prophets, though we may need patience and faith in seeing how and when prophecies from real prophets may be fulfilled. And no, of course the law (i.e., the Law of Moses) does not bring salvation. But that law was not what Christ referred to when, responding to the question, "Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?," he said, "If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments" (Matthew 19:16–17), asking him also to "come *and* follow me" (v. 21). Of course, we may have difficulty in following Christ and keeping his commandments. That's why he died for us and makes repentance possible. The response to our weakness is not to pretend that covenants no longer matter, or to conflate God's commandments to us with the fulfilled and now inapplicable Law of Moses, but to embrace the gift of grace Christ offers by repenting and continuing to follow him, even until the end (Matthew 24:13).

The primary objection Beshears makes against Joseph Smith as a prophet is that Joseph insisted on "expansion" (p. 51), adding more, and did not do what real Christian preachers and visionaries have done, which is, "They looked back to **prophets and apostles who reminded the Christians of what they already knew** to be true: **the sufficient message of the Bible** called them to delight in and serve God" (p. 51).

This is a common theme for Beshears. The Bible is all that we have ever needed and ever will need. All modern ministers, preachers, or apostles should do is what ancient prophets and apostles did,

which is just remind people to follow the Bible. Here, Beshears seems to completely miss the theme of continuing revelation in the original church of Jesus Christ.

In the early church, Peter, the man who held the keys of authority (Matthew 16:19), received the revelation that the Gentiles should be welcomed in the church (Acts 10, 11). This did not come by reviewing the scriptures of their day but by direct revelation from God to the leader of the church. But this expansion in the work of the ministry led to debates over circumcision and other aspects of the Law of Moses with respect to the Gentiles. A decision was made to hold a council in Jerusalem with the apostles. Peter declared that they should not put an unnecessary yoke upon the Gentile converts (Acts 15:10). They then heard from Paul and Barnabas, after which James made a proposal that the Gentiles not be burdened with circumcision but follow the dietary prohibitions against eating blood and strangled things and avoid idols and fornication (Acts 15:19–20). The group approved this and sent out letters with the new guidance from the leaders of the church, including a statement on how that decision was reached. Latter-day Saint author Richard L. Anderson describes the significance of that statement:

The apostles' letter to Antioch underlined not only the decision, but how the decision was reached: "*It seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things*" (Acts 15:28). Few Christians today see the implications of this powerful ruling of the Twelve. Conservatives today search the Bible for answers, but had the apostles done this, they would have required circumcision for the Gentiles, since it is commanded in the Bible. *The apostles were inspired to go beyond the Bible, to reverse the lesser law given earlier and to extend the higher law through Christ. In other words, not past scripture but new revelation was the foundation of the Church of Christ.* What guided the apostles was not the New Testament, for their acts created it. The Bible does not make the true church, but the true church makes the Bible. Past scriptures are a guide to truth, but living prophets give new scripture.⁶⁷

Revelation to prophets and apostles was a critical and necessary

67. Richard L. Anderson, *Understanding Paul* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 53.

feature of the early church. It's an important mechanism by which Christians can "live . . . by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). Suggesting that the leaders of the early church only reminded people of the sufficient message of the Bible seems to require overlooking if not subtracting much of the text of the Bible. How could any of its books ever come into existence if apostles and prophets could not "expand" the word of God or fulfill God's commands to create new things, whether it was a tabernacle, temple, church organization, mission activity, new policies to meet the needs of new converts, or sharing whatever new information or directions that God wished to reveal by his mouth at that time? To me, the Bible demonstrates the ongoing *expansion* of God's work and word among men, one revelation at a time, one prophet at a time, with no hint that humanity has had or ever will have enough of the word of God and that all we need is the Bible and the post-biblical doctrine of *sola scriptura*.

Of course, there is the command to not add or subtract—meaning that unauthorized humans should not change words that God has revealed. Otherwise, why did Moses continue writing scripture after he revealed God's command in Deuteronomy 4:2?

Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you.

Moses is referring to the words that he has written and *will continue to write*, as inspired by God. God, of course, can add all he wishes to, in spite of errant humans insisting that we now have enough and no more is needed now, thank you. But unauthorized humans have no right to tinker with God's words.

The command against adding or subtracting in Revelation 22:18 obviously refers to the words of the book that John the Revelator was writing. There was no compiled Bible then, just waiting for John's final chapter to seal up the work and officially shut off the spigot of revelation. If revelation to prophets and apostles ceased, might it be because mankind rejected them and murdered them, causing the loss of apostolic authority in the Church?

Beshears in his tradition cannot see that. I can understand why and would not say that he is not a Christian for having doctrines I disagree with. But I hope he'll consider the conundrum here. If he thinks Joseph should have acted like the prophets and apostles of old in just talking

about the sufficiency of the Bible, I would ask him to look at what they actually did and compare that to Joseph. The real prophets and apostles of the past challenged the status quo, brought new revelation, wrote new scripture, drew opposition from the powerful in established religion or government, and often ended up as martyrs. This is usually not the fruit of simply reminding people of what they already know.

Beshears sees Joseph's expansion as absolutely incompatible with traditional Christianity since Christ has achieved everything we need, so how can there be more?

Christians believe that **God has spoken fully and finally** in his Son, the very Word of God incarnate (John 1:1, 14), who has **fulfilled all divine purposes and plans** for redemption as communicated **by his gospel and the teachings of his apostles in the Bible** (see John 1:1, 14; Heb 1:1–3). From this view, Smith's additional revelations are not merely unnecessary; rather, they are **incompatible**. (p. 51)

So, someone thinking we need something more than the Bible, such as apostles and prophets again, more revelation, etc., is incompatible with the Bible, per Beshears. Has he noticed that *all* the words of the New Testament were written *after* Christ had come, spoken, completed his work, and ascended to heaven? If God “has spoken fully and finally” by sending his Son, why do we need the letters of Paul written decades later, or the Revelation of John?

Beshears declares that God's words are done, but that's the declaration of Beshears, something not found in the purportedly sufficient message of the Bible. If no more revelation is a given, will Christ remain silent when he comes again and rules on earth in the great Millennium? The angels who precede Christ's return don't plan on silence, per John's Revelation (e.g., Revelation 14:6). And if no more prophets are needed, Revelation 11:1–10 needs some serious subtracting, since as now written, it tells of “two prophets” (v. 10) or “two witnesses” (v. 3) in the future who shall prophesy (v. 3) and work miracles for 1,260 days (vv. 3–6). Then, as has often happened to God's prophets, the outraged forces of wickedness will slay them (v. 7). Those two prophets may be joined by yet others, as Joel prophesied of a time before the great day of the Lord when the spirit would be poured on mankind and “your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions” (Joel 2:28). The Lord is not done with revelations and his mouth may yet have more words

to utter, though many humans may refuse to listen and will mock the idea of continuing revelation.

We don't need to look to the last days to see prophets playing an important role following the ascension of Christ into heaven. Prophets and apostles were an integral part of the original Church that Christ founded. The apostles, of course, were chosen by Christ and given authority to run his Church.

For example, Acts 11 tells us something valuable about Antioch. That is where the disciples were first called *Christians* (v. 26), and then in the next verse, we read, "And in these days came **prophets** from Jerusalem unto Antioch" (v. 27). So as soon as Christians are first mentioned in the Bible, we learn that they were being visited by prophets from Jerusalem, apparently the center or headquarters of the Church. Having living prophets does not make a church antithetical to Christianity—it was an original characteristic of Christianity. (In fact, if one were to rely on the Bible to define who is "Christian" and who is not, having prophets must be one of the criteria for which groups are real Christians, per Acts 11:26–27.) That's not to say that their role and manner of operation is precisely the same as in the modern Church of Jesus Christ, but both prophets and apostles were among the essential offices in the established original Church and played an important role in work of the Church, as Paul explained:

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive. (Ephesians 4:11–14)

Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord. (Ephesians 2:19–21)

Christ is the chief corner stone, but not the only stone in the Church,

which should be framed with the offices and powers God gave it to serve as a holy temple unto God.

If there were apostles and prophets in the early Church, and at least two prophets will be on earth shortly before the Millennium, what is the canonical basis for declaring that we no longer need prophets? Has Christianity with its thousands of churches achieved a unity of the faith? Have Christians developed their “knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ,” free from the influence of Satan? Or do we still have a long way to go?

If we remain fractured, scattered, contentious, and filled with sin and deception, that’s precisely why we need authorized prophets and apostles sent by God in these days to get us back on course. Since the apostles were rejected, persecuted, and slain long ago, surely there is a need for a restoration of divine authority and divinely called offices that the Church may operate as intended, under their direction, acting as representatives of Christ.

Beshears lacks justification in declaring that all the truth and revelation we will ever need is already in the Bible. He also lacks authority to tell us *which Bible* has the full, inerrant word of God—could it be bibles based on the very ancient *Codex Sinaiticus*, which contains several books not in the KJB, such as the Pastor of Hermas with its lengthy treatment of early Christian baptism for the dead?

The Church is meant to be guided by revelation through apostles and prophets. Latter-day Saints rejoice that these offices and the required authority have been restored. One can disagree with them and our doctrines, but if seeking to help others understand the views of Latter-day Saints, it’s helpful to at least point out the obvious issue of missing prophets and apostles in Christianity, selected by revelation and ordained with authority from Christ, to lead, guide, and unify his church. Readers should understand why we feel they are a part of the prophesied “restitution of all things” (Acts 3:19–21).

Beshears complains that the Restoration has apostate if not satanic overtones since it is like “another Gospel,” “another spirit,” and “another Jesus” (2 Corinthians 11:4) (p. 52). The age-old “another Jesus” charge will be levied again in a following chapter. Believing that we need the apostles, prophets, and ongoing revelation that Christ installed in his original Church seems like a poor reason to accuse someone of worshipping a different Jesus.

A final issue in painting Joseph Smith as a self-aggrandizer is the

issue of the title of "Prophet, Priest, and King" that he received from the Council of Fifty. Beshears objects since this is "traditionally reserved by Christians for Christ alone" (p. 52). That term is not in the Bible, but comes from John Calvin. As with many parts of his book, Beshears calls attention to Latter-day Saint arcana that are not really a part of what Latter-day Saints teach and think about. If asked who should be given the title of king, Latter-day Saints (in any nation without kings) would almost certainly say that it is Christ (apart from inevitable wise-cracks about politicians). Few heard of the event where that title for Joseph was proposed and voted on. A helpful discussion comes from the highly documented Mormonr.com website, which indicates that Joseph had some hesitancy about the "king" part of that essentially unused title, and that the Council of course recognized that the Lord is the "King of Kings."⁶⁸

Overall, while Beshears is doing a good job at maintaining a reasonable tone and sharing basic facts, he could do much more to reflect the views and arguments of Latter-day Saints. But his book may help other Evangelicals have some basic talking points against Latter-day Saints and may help some Latter-day Saints understand some of the reasons why some Evangelicals find our faith so problematic.

Chapter 6: The Great Apostasy

Chapter 6 in *40 Questions* treats what is sometimes called "the Great Apostasy." Here Beshears begins with counterarguments. "Jesus promised the disciples that he would build his church through them and that 'the gates of hell shall not prevail against it' (Matt 16:18)" (p. 55). Christ also sent his apostles into the world with another "promise: 'I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Matt 28:20 CSB)" (p. 52). Beshears notes that Christianity would face many challenges, including external opposition and internal heresy, apathy, and rebellion. Such apostasy (of some) was prophesied by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:3, a passage Latter-day Saints see as more foreboding than simply the occasional apostasy of some individuals or factions. For Beshears, there can be no need for a restoration, for Christ already won the victory, established a church that could not be overcome by the forces of evil, and would be with that church to the end.

After the preemptive arguments, though, Beshears succinctly and

68. "Joseph Smith's Presidential Campaign," *Mormonr* (website), mormonr.org/qnas/4pB28/joseph_smiths_presidential_campaign.

fairly explains Latter-day Saint views, including the recognition that much truth and beauty was preserved by other Christian faiths in spite of the loss of such things as apostles, prophets, and priesthood authority. He also notes our tendency now to say less about apostasy and more about the blessings of the Restoration.

Then he further explains how wrong it is to think that a restoration would be needed, for it would impugn Christ. Christ said, “I have overcome the world” (John 16:33), also reflecting the victory that his church would have, in Beshears’s view. Christ’s promise to always be with his disciples “unto the end of the world” (Matthew 28:20) is repeated. Here Beshears could prevent potential confusion among readers by pointing out that Christ’s Great Commission was being given not to his disciples in general, but to “the eleven disciples” (v. 16 — that it’s the eleven is also made clear in Mark 16:14–15). And then one should wonder, “How can Christ be with his apostles to the end when the apostles already ended long ago?” He certainly was with them as long as there were true apostles. But the lack of apostles is a serious problem for the Church, one that required the Restoration.

Also repeated is the passage about the gates of hell not prevailing against the Church. Because in that passage, Christ says, “I will build my church,” Beshears explains that it is *his* church, not the result of the disciples but the work of Christ. Therefore, “the Great Apostasy suggests a great failure not of Christians but of their Christ. It assumes Christ failed to build his church like he promised, which is a prospect no one — neither traditional Christian nor Latter-day Saints — should entertain” (pp. 60–61).

I was rather stunned at this logic. God built the house of Israel and freed them from captivity, gave them the law of Moses, and even gave them his temple that he built for them through his servants. These blessings were meant to be “everlasting,” “perpetual,” and “for all generations.” For example, consider Solomon’s temple:

And it came to pass, when Solomon had finished the building of the house of the Lord, and the king’s house, and all Solomon’s desire which he was pleased to do,

That the Lord appeared to Solomon the second time, as he had appeared unto him at Gibeon. And the Lord said unto him, I have heard thy prayer and thy supplication, that thou hast made before me: I have hallowed this house, which thou hast built, to put my name there *for ever*; and mine eyes and mine heart shall be there *perpetually*. (1 Kings 9:1–3)

God built it, accepted it, and put his name there forever, where his eyes and heart will be perpetually — so where is that temple today? Due to the wickedness and apostasy within the house of Israel, it was ultimately desecrated and completely destroyed. The house of Israel was scattered, first the Ten Tribes and then the rest, exiled into captivity. The throne of David was vacated and destroyed, contrary to the expectations that Judah would forever be safe because of the promise to David in 2 Samuel 7:16: "Thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever." When David's kingdom was overthrown, it was hard to reconcile that with the tragedy of the Exile.

The blessings of the Lord are often contingent on obeying him. Wickedness and apostasy led to tragic loss, both for the Ten Tribes and for the House of David. Fortunately, many centuries later the Son of David came and completed his mission and now sits on the throne as the King of Kings, and yet will do much to gather Israel back into a covenant relationship.

The blessing of Solomon's temple, the house of the Lord, intended to be perpetual, was utterly destroyed, requiring the temple to later be rebuilt. Then, as Christ prophesied, the day came when Herod's temple also would be destroyed, with not one stone left on top of another. If the sacred temple can be destroyed — twice — when its people rebel and fall into wickedness, this does not impugn God, but those who broke their covenants with him.

Likewise, if the original Church of Jesus Christ, founded on Christ the cornerstone with a foundation of apostles and prophets, which was once "fitly framed together" and once grew "unto an holy temple in the Lord" (Ephesians 2:19–21), should reject God's servants (the prophets and apostles of Ephesians 2:20) and fall into wickedness, is there no risk that it, too, like the temple, could be lost, or at least lose the gift of revelatory leadership and priesthood authority from the apostles and prophets? The temple could fall and need to be rebuilt, and the Church could stray and need to be restored. It has been, and the temple of God has been restored as well.

If the losses of the past were just a temporary apostasy of a few people followed by course correction, whether by the Protestant Reformation or other movements, we might ask where are the divinely authorized apostles and prophets of the church, the foundation (with Christ being the chief cornerstone) of the church, according to Paul? We might also ask where is the corrective force to recover the lost

meanings of the New Testament words for *faith* and *grace*, as discussed above and in the scholarship of Brent Schmidt,⁶⁹ which has led to so much confusion and erosion of scriptural knowledge even among famed pastors of our day? And if Christ is to return suddenly to his temple at the beginning of the Second Coming (Malachi 3:1), how will that temple be built unless there is revelation by God to those who understand what it is?

It is not only Latter-day Saints who bemoan the loss of important knowledge since Bible days. In his monumental *History and Eschatology*, N. T. Wright discusses the gradual loss of understanding regarding temple themes in the Christian message, that were understood and informed the earliest Christians:

But all the signs are that they were bringing into fresh focus biblical themes and ideas which were already current, rather than drawing attention to those biblical themes and ideas in a way which had no parallel or forerunner.

There is of course a sharp difference between this way of approaching a Christian assessment of Jesus and the kind of thing we find among the Fathers of the third or fourth century. It seems to me that the worldview, thought-forms and implicit narrative embedded within what I am calling a Temple-cosmology and a Sabbath-eschatology were *not so much rejected by the later church as simply not grasped*. The music of the scriptures was being played in a different echo-chamber. Different resonances were being set up.

If that was so in the third and fourth centuries, how much more was it the case in the middle ages, and then at the time of what we now call the rise of historical exegesis in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Within on the one hand mediaeval Aristotelianism and on the other hand the Epicureanism that was coming into its own with the Enlightenment, the whole idea of a temple as a place where heaven and earth would be drawn together was straightforwardly incomprehensible.⁷⁰

Wright is focused on Christian theology and the temple and sabbath themes that should guide our understanding of what Christ has achieved for us, and is not calling for a restoration of the physical

69. Schmidt, *Relational Grace* and Schmidt, *Relational Faith*.

70. Wright, *History and Eschatology*, 244.

temple itself. But he might be pleased to understand that the ancient temple has been restored, along with a growing awareness of long-lost ancient temple themes. The Latter-day Saint temple is directly linked to the Sabbath and is a place that unites heaven and earth.

For Latter-day Saints, long-neglected temple themes and motifs from the ancient world infuse the temple beautifully and are a testament to its ancient and inspired origins. It's unfortunate that Beshears did not pick up this awareness from those members of the Church that he has engaged with. I don't expect him to accept the temple as a divine institution, but to understand it from the Latter-day Saint perspective, and why it is so spiritually and intellectually fulfilling for at least some of us. He could have noted the positives we can find in the way it aligns with ancient temple cosmology, sabbath eschatology, covenant-making patterns, and the early Christian views of Christ's merciful ministry to the dead. We are energized by the temple and can understand why the Saints in the great Millennium will serve God there day and night (Revelation 7:15), doing far more than merely meditating. There is sacred work to be done!

Beshears makes his points passionately and clearly, but to help others understand the Latter-day Saint view properly, there should be consideration of the positives that we see in the Restoration and our various responses to his arguments against it.

For example, how do Latter-day Saints respond to the statements about the gates of hell? Surely, he has heard some kind of response to this basic argument. Latter-day Saints may point out, for example, that the Greek word used for *hell* is *Hades*, the world of the dead. Did the gates of Hades, or death, prevail against Christ? No! Though he died, he broke down those gates and became the first fruits of the Resurrection. He died, but only for a while. His body would be brought back to life, restored to its perfect form, reunited with his spirit and made immortal and glorious.

If Christ, against whom the gates of death did not prevail, could die, then is it not possible that His Church could also die—and later be brought back to life (restored)? And is it really "the church" when it is many hundreds of different churches with many disagreements on doctrines and practices? How is that the "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" that Paul spoke of (Ephesians 4:5)?

Those in the Church, who have faith in Christ, have repented of their sins, have been baptized, and endure in following Christ to the end (Matthew 24:13), will also have victory through Christ over the gates of

death, for they will be freed from death and freed from spiritual death because their sins have been removed. The gates of hell do not prevail against those who come unto Christ. But this does not guarantee that the church as an organization turned over to mortals will remain intact and on course. It also can suffer death and need to be revived.

Beshears argues that the Church persisted, and all we need to do is seek for unity among its divisions to return to the foundation, the Bible. Here he overlooks that the work of establishing unity was an important task of the specific apostolic organization Christ gave the Church (see Ephesians 4:11–14).

The Lord's mechanism for bringing the unity that Beshears advocates, and the means for helping individuals avoid false doctrine and personal apostasy, is the existence of Christ's authorized leadership in the Church, especially the existence of apostles and prophets who can receive revelatory guidance.

The importance of revelation from prophets and apostles in the Church of Christ was noted by Paul one chapter earlier, as he discusses the "dispensation of the grace of God" (Ephesians 3:2):

If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward: How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words, Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ) Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is *now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets* by the Spirit; That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel: Whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power. (Ephesians 3:2–7)

After Christ had ascended into heaven, God's "holy apostles and prophets" were active in revealing "the mystery of Christ" and in leading the work to bring the gospel to the world. Was their role meant to cease? Why, then, was Judas replaced with Matthias and other apostles added later? Were they meant to no longer be present in the last days? How did the Church transcend them without losing the authority and vital function they provided? Micah foresaw a time when "the sun shall go down over the prophets," a time when "there is no answer

of God” (Micah 3:6–7). This was something to mourn, a time of dark apostasy.

Chapters 21 and 22: On the Nature of God and Christ

Some of my most frustrating experiences in discussing the gospel with other Christians has been the widespread claim, especially from Evangelicals, that we aren’t Christian at all, in spite of our faith in Christ, our testimony of him, our desire to follow him, our daily prayers in his name, and our belief that it is only through his infinite grace that we can be saved.

The problem typically is that we don’t accept some particular point from the post-biblical creeds or because we understand one or more verses of scripture differently than another faith does, thus making our Jesus “different” than theirs. It’s not just that our theology is imperfect — our purported misunderstanding makes our faith in and worship of Christ utterly vain and without salvific power because we don’t get a perfect score on the Great Theology Quiz (GTQ) that God apparently gives on the day of judgment. In other words, we will be eternally damned for misinterpreting some particular verses of scripture. Salvation, apparently, is “by grace alone” plus a perfect GTQ score. The Jesus in my Bible never seemed to be a stickler on metaphysics and theology among the masses he taught, but maybe I’ve been reading a different Bible as well.

After reading Beshears’s welcome introductory words, I looked forward to his thoughts on our status as Christians. I was hoping to encounter gentle views on the fraught question of whether Latter-day Saints should be considered Christians by those who disagree with us. I was hoping that with his newly deepened understanding of our faith and scriptures, he might encourage some of our harshest critics to back off and at least respect the fact that we look to the Jesus Christ of the Bible for salvation and should be recognized as fellow Christians in spite of our differences. On this crucial issue, I was disappointed.

In chapter 22, “What Is the Latter-day Saint View of Jesus Christ?” (pp. 179–85), some of the arguments are deeply puzzling. Beshears begins by warning about the danger of giving an incorrect answer to the question that Christ asked Peter: “Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?” (Matthew 16:13).

Answering incorrectly risks reducing Jesus to a mere prophet or moral teacher in the long tradition of God’s

representatives to Israel. Certainly, this was the case for those who equated him with John the Baptist or “one of the prophets” (Matt 16:14). To answer correctly, though, as Peter did, was to recognize not only that God sent his Messiah to secure our redemption, but that the Son of God himself was dwelling among us on earth, our Immanuel, God with us. So, Peter confessed, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16). (p. 179)

Wonderful, I thought—he knows that’s exactly what we believe and is going to show us a little love here. Emphasis on *little*, I’m afraid. The next paragraph fired off one of the strangest arguments I’ve heard:

An early LDS revelation echoed Peter’s confession, describing the Messiah as “Jesus Christ the Son of the living God,” and signaling Joseph Smith’s intent for his future church. Jesus Christ would play the central role in what would become The Church of *Jesus Christ* of Latter-day Saints.⁷¹ Yet, as the revelation continued, it also promised the imminent restoration of “the fulness of [Christ’s] gospel,” **implying the church he promised to build on Peter’s confession was somehow incomplete** (see Matt 16:18). The Christ of traditional Christianity was insufficient; something more was needed, which latter-day revelation gradually supplied. Thus, the Jesus presented by Mormonism is both familiar and foreign to traditional Christians. Claiming that Latter-day Saints worship an utterly different Jesus than traditional Christians is both rashly uncharitable and **yet precisely true**. (pp. 179–80)

The problem is this:

According to Mormonism, Jesus is literally the Son of God, the firstborn child of God the Father and Heavenly Mother, making Christ our eldest spirit brother, whose membership in the Godhead is not timeless but began after his ascent to godhood by personal progression. **These differences overshadow every shared conviction between traditional Christianity and Mormonism about the nature of the Son of God.** (p. 180)

71. This may be the only time that “The,” in the official name of the Church, is properly capitalized in *40 Questions*.

First, I must point out that we really don't know much about all that happened before the Creation, except that Christ was the Chosen One and was the agent through whom God carried out the Creation. When I hear the term "personal progress," that sounds like what we try to do in mortality with continued growth being possible thereafter. But when it comes to Christ's "personal progress," such as his growth in mortality, his learning, his victory over all and his exaltation, what little we know comes largely from the New Testament:

And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him. (Luke 2:40)

And *Jesus increased in wisdom and stature*, and in favour with God and man. (Luke 2:52)

Though he were a Son, *yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered*; And *being made perfect*, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him. (Hebrews 5:8–9)

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, *he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death*, even the death of the cross. *Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him*, and given him a name which is above every name. (Philippians 2:5–9)

But while he grew, learned, and was exalted by God, he also had glory with God before the world was made and was our Savior and the Lamb of God from the beginning.

Per Beshears, it seems that nothing else that we believe about Christ—his role as our Creator, our Savior, the author and finisher of our faith, the Lamb of God who sacrificed himself for the sins of all mankind, the Messiah, the Resurrection and the Life, the One we seek to follow to the end—none of this matters because we think the one who called himself the Son of God, the one who said, "My Father is greater than I" (John 14:28), the Only Begotten Son, is *literally* the Son of God, contrary to the metaphysics of a fifth-century creed that insists he must be "begotten, not made." The "Father of Spirits" (Hebrews 12:9) must not be the father of the spirit of Christ, because he then

would not be timeless, even though we believe that his essence or “intelligence” was not created and is co-eternal with God (as are we), and importantly, that Christ declared, “Behold, I am Jesus Christ the Son of God. I created the heavens and the earth, and all things that in them are. I was with the Father from the beginning. I am in the Father, and the Father in me; and in me hath the Father glorified his name” (3 Nephi 9:15).

While we know almost nothing of the era before this mortal existence, I may still ask this question: If Christ could transition from a glorious spirit in the presence of God to obtain a mortal body and then a glorified resurrected body, without giving us any just cause to reject his divinity for going through such a change, is it then unthinkable that Christ also could have gone through some kind of transition to obtain whatever a spirit body is, becoming the First Born of God? Would that limit him, make him less united with the Father, less worthy of our worship, less able to be the Creator and our Redeemer? I see no reasonable cause for objecting to the Christ we worship, the Only Begotten and literal Son of God, the Christ of the Bible. Perhaps the problem is that we simply take the Bible too literally.

In any case, the idea that Christ might actually have been the literal Son of God means that differences between our views create “two familiar yet distinct visions of Jesus Christ **and God’s means of salvation**” (p. 185). I may have missed something, but I have not found where he explains why a difference in understanding a detail about the Son of God changes anything about His salvific power, his role as our Redeemer, our need to repent and follow him, etc. Christ is the means of salvation. We may differ on the interpretation of things he said or what or where his body is and whether baptism is essential or just a great idea, but what is it about the means of salvation that is affected—unless one assumes that we are saved by grace, plus a perfect score on some Great Theology Quiz on the day of judgment.

Beshears is adamant that “there is no genetic relationship, so to speak, between God and humanity” (p. 271) and apparently between the Father and the Only Begotten Son. Twice Beshears quotes one phrase of Acts 17:28, “For in him we live, and move, and have our being” (pp. 182, 223), but leaves off the more interesting words that follow:

For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, *For we are also his offspring. Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we*

ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device.

Knowing that God is our Father, even the "Father of spirits" (Hebrews 12:9 — another unmentioned verse in *40 Questions*), suggests that being God's offspring is not merely metaphorical. Since the Father is a living God and we are in his image; he is not an inert material. But the heritage of all mankind as children of God is not enough. We need to let God also be the author of our salvation by coming unto him, for Christ "became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him" (Hebrews 5:9). Yes, just as Christ obeyed, we are expected to obey and follow Christ — though we will fail repeatedly and may need to repent — not to earn anything, but to accept his grace in a covenant relationship, for "blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life" (Revelation 22:14).

Ultimately, I think it is the possibility of change that is especially difficult for Beshears to bear. "I change not," Beshears reminds us, from God's words in Malachi 3:6. But surely Christ's ministry on Earth reflects some aspects of change: taking on a body, growing, being slain, and taking up that body again, but in a glorious, resurrected form. But these changes do not change his truths, his grace, his love, his status as Creator and Savior, and the path for human redemption. Yet even Paul notes that through that ministry, he was made perfect (Hebrews 5:9). And of course, the Law of Moses was changed and other details of worship. It's sometimes problematic to stretch a short verse into broad worlds of meaning that it was not meant to cover.

The nature of God and Christ: Can we rely on antiquated views about matter?

What happened to the body of Christ after he was killed? When Mary and others came to his tomb after three days, it was empty. Mary then saw Christ and apparently threw her arms around the resurrected Lord, for he asked her to "hold me not" (JST John 20:17, more true to the Greek than the KJV's "touch me not") since he had not yet ascended to His Father in heaven. So apparently that missing body was now his again. Mary was not hugging or touching an immaterial being but the tangible Son of God. Even in the resurrected state, having conquered all, it is clear that relative to Jesus, the Father was physically separate and remote. If he were literally One Being with the Father, there would be no need to ascend to return to himself, no need to pray to the Father when he is alone in the Garden of Gethsemane, and no need

to fast forty days to draw closer to the Father. But now he needed to leave Mary's arms and ascend back to His Father — with his body, of course, a body in the image of the Father, a body such that to see Christ is to see the Father (John 14:9), not because they are the same Being, but because the Son is in the physical image of the Father.

Paul adds another perspective in Hebrews 1:3 when he declares that the resurrected Christ is “the express image of his person,” where the Greek word translated as “express image,” *χαρακτήρ* (*charaktēr*), conveys “an exact representation of his (=God's) nature” or person,⁷² where “nature” or “person” is *ὑπόστασις* (*hypostasis*), the underlying, fundamental or substantial nature of someone, essence, actual being, reality.⁷³

Shortly after Mary's encounter with the resurrected Lord, Christ walks with two disciples on the road to Emmaus and ends up dining with them, holding bread in his hands, breaking it, and then eating it. He showed them in multiple ways that he has a physical body — one that can walk, see, talk, hear, hold, tear, chew, and swallow. He taught this lesson after showing his apostles his hands and his feet, and when he asked for food and then ate broiled fish and honeycomb before them (Luke 24:36–43). He would teach this same lesson in John 20 as he came to some disciples on the shore of Galilee and asked if they had any fish. He took that fish and dined with them, undoubtedly using his tangible hands to put it in his tangible mouth, and then surely chewed it and swallowed it. His actions again taught them a vital truth: I am the resurrected Lord. This body is real and physical.

When he appeared to his puzzled disciples in Luke 24, they were afraid and thought he was a ghost (or spirit). The Master left no doubt about the materiality of the Resurrection and his physical body:

And he said unto them, Why are ye troubled? and why do thoughts arise in your hearts? Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have. (Luke 24:38–39)

Was Christ merely deceiving them when he spoke about having flesh and bones now, unlike a spirit and certainly unlike an immaterial being? Surely not!

72. Arndt and Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “χαρακτήρ,” 884, archive.org/details/greekenglishlexi0000will_j9a5/page/884/mode/2up.

73. Arndt and Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. “ὑπόστασις,” 854, archive.org/details/greekenglishlexi0000will_j9a5/page/854/mode/2up.

That he was certainly alive was confirmed during the forty-day ministry after the Resurrection in Acts 1:3–11, with “many infallible proofs.” Paul also mentions that he was seen by over 500 brethren at the same time (1 Corinthians 15:6) — of course, in his body. He was later seen by Stephen as he was being martyred, who saw Christ standing next to the Father (Acts 7:55–56) — two Beings, glorified, but in whose image we are created. When Christ returns, we will see him again and know that it is he, the living Lord, with his physical, tangible body.

When our day of resurrection comes, if we have accepted Christ, we, too will be resurrected with a glorious body like his. Will that resurrected body limit us? Does it limit Christ? Does it make him less divine? Paul did not seem to think so:

For our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: Who *shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself.* (Philippians 3:20–21)

Paul shows no awareness of Plato’s ancient foundational doctrine about immaterial “forms” being superior to anything made of matter. He does not think that Christ would be limited by having a physical body. In fact, he writes that it is *through Christ’s glorious body* that he is *able* to subdue all things. The body is a divine *tool* that gives him great power. The fusion of spirit and matter in the resurrected body may be some great key to control over all forms of matter and energy, but we have no idea how this works.

The philosophies of men teach that a body is limiting because it is in only one place and because immateriality is higher or more perfect. This is based on imagination coupled with science somewhere in the range of the stone age to the medieval era, where you could only see and know of things in your immediate vicinity. The paradigms of the fourth- and fifth-century creeds have been challenged by minor advances in human science since then. From the world of physics, we know that matter and energy can be equivalent or converted from one to another (Einstein’s $E=mc^2$), that energy in all its forms is not immaterial, that matter can have wave properties as well as particle properties, that matter includes many strange types of particles such as neutrinos that only weakly or rarely interact with matter and bizarre forms that we only learned of recently, especially “dark matter” and “dark energy” that together comprise about 95% of the cosmos, making the

matter-energy that we can interact with and think we understand only a tiny fraction of what we are surrounded by.⁷⁴ Matter and energy are vastly more complex and interesting than we ever imagined.

Stephen Webb in *Mormon Christianity* writes about the implications of new knowledge about the complex nature of matter:

More importantly, scientists have demonstrated that the nature of the material world is much more perplexing than anyone could have imagined prior to the twentieth century. Scientists keep discovering new forms of matter with strange names like quark-gluon plasmas and Bose-Einstein condensates, and nobody knows what dark matter is, even though it constitutes more than 80 percent of the mass of the universe. Physicists have poked so many holes in the atom that there seems to be little left of our common-sense preconceptions of what matter is. The world all around us is not as solid as it once appeared to be.

Scientists have changed their minds about matter, but have theologians? And if theologians did change their minds about matter, wouldn't they have to change their minds about God? Not every Christian doctrine is implicated in theories about matter, but what about those that are?⁷⁵

It seems that all the matter and energy we can see and interact with turns out to be about 5% of the matter-energy of the very material but wondrously mysterious cosmos. Its matter is dominated by the strange "dark matter" that Webb mentions, which has profound effects on galaxies and their motion or structure, but it remains a mystery. Weighing even more heavily on the scales of the cosmos is a strange form of energy that is moving galaxies apart, counteracting gravitational attraction with great power, the so-called "dark energy." Deducting the combined impact of dark matter and dark energy from the matter-energy budget of the cosmos leaves that 5% number for the "normal" matter and energy we can manipulate. There could be still other forms of fine, invisible matter or new energy forms that we

74. See, for example, Chelsea Gohd, "Dark Matter," NASA, (website), science.nasa.gov/dark-matter/; Saul Perlmutter, "Supernovae, Dark Energy, and the Accelerating Universe," *Physics Today*, April 2003, 53–60, supernova.lbl.gov/PDFs/PhysicsTodayArticle.pdf; and Gianfranco Bertone and Dan Hooper, "A History of Dark Matter," Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory Publication (FERMILAB-PUB-16-157-A), Arxiv.org, 26 May 2016, arxiv.org/pdf/1605.04909.

75. Webb, *Mormon Christianity*, 6–7.

still haven't detected in our gazing of the heavens and our experiments in labs. When we finally understand matter and energy, we may be much more ready to understand God and his nature. For now, we must trust God and not make assumptions about what he can or cannot be based on the guesswork and maxims of ancient philosophers with almost no knowledge of what matter and energy are.

Some of these advances in knowledge about matter and energy and how they can be used have supported profound advances in technologies. Today a human being in a weak mortal body can sit on a little chair in a small, isolated room and almost instantly communicate with people all over the world while observing live images not just of numerous parts of the world but of many parts of the heavens. That person may have access to hundreds of sensors or data feeds that can allow him or her to understand what is happening in the economy or the stock market, on a battlefield, an airplane, a naval vessel, or an orbiting space station, and to even take actions that affect any of those. In some cases, this person may have dozens of other intelligent people working with him or her, all handling large tasks, carrying out instructions based on thousands of sources of information that are continuously updated. The fact that this person, as a mortal, may have many physical limitations such as bad knees, poor hearing in one ear, a need for eyeglasses, and a bad case of acne makes little difference.

When the creeds were formulated, a physical body in one place absolutely limited one's knowledge and power—not to mention the problem in Neoplatonic philosophy of a body being made with inferior, lowly matter. But today there is no valid reason to believe that the glorious tangible body of Christ is a limitation that he has long since abandoned, and no valid reason to think that God would have some huge advantage if he were completely immaterial. I think Paul's views on this are more worthy of respect than those of the creeds. It's time for Christian theology to update its views related to matter.

That person sitting on a chair in a small room can literally be in only one place at a time, while having extensive access to and influence over many places. Just based on lessons from our primitive technologies today, the idea that God must be immaterial and cannot have a physical body due to its limitations and the limitations of matter can be viewed as an archaic relic. We know a little more today, including a lot about how much we don't know, but what we do know suggests that we need to update old metaphysical paradigms about God.

A big step toward such an update has been revealed in the

“metaphysics” given to Joseph Smith about the material nature of spirit, the importance of physical bodies, the lack of “immaterial matter,” etc. But for those who don’t want to listen to Joseph, at least listen to Paul: the glorious physical body of Christ (and thus of God the Father as well) adds to his power, for through the majestic tool of that body, “he is able even to subdue all things unto himself.”

Christ and the Father are real and tangible. They have glorious bodies. Christ was not fooling believers when he ate and swallowed food or asked them to feel his hands and his feet. We are created in their image. We will be even more fully in their image once we resurrect.

But Beshears argues that our belief in a God with a physical body is an apostate doctrine. I suggest that were it not for the heavy influence of Neoplatonic Greek philosophy in the early era of Christianity, it would be difficult to see how one could read the witness of the New Testament and conclude that Christ and God are one immaterial Being and that the “image” we are created in has nothing to do with the physical appearance of Jesus Christ and the Father, whose image Christ bears. Only by studious reworking or “wresting” of the scriptures can this thesis be maintained, in my opinion. It’s necessary to support the incomprehensible proclamations of post-biblical creeds. Though we agree with most of the contents in the creeds, the metaphysics are not from the revelations of God.

The revelations of God show us a glorious Being with whom Moses spoke face to face (Exodus 33:11), whose feet the elders of Israel saw (Exodus 24:9–11), whose body hundreds in Israel saw while in the mortal flesh and then in the resurrected flesh (Acts 1 and 1 Corinthians 15:6), whose resurrected hands and feet his disciples felt (Luke 24:36–39). The witness of Stephen about Christ standing at the right hand of the Father (Acts 7:55–56) was not a dangerous “expansion” by Joseph Smith, but a restoration of truth that occurred when Joseph Smith saw the two Beings standing above his head in glorious light. Beshears suggests that if verses about the arms or hands of God suggest that God has a body, then does a poetical metaphor about God being like a bird protecting its young mean that God has feathers and wings? He cites Psalm 91:4 for this: “He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth *shall be thy* shield and buckler.” A quick answer to Beshears’s question is “of course not.” Readers need to recognize when poetic metaphors are being applied. The hands and feet of Christ in Jerusalem or of God on the mount don’t appear to be mere metaphors. A more thorough

answer might appeal to the Book of Mormon, where Psalm 91:4 may be alluded to when the voice of Christ speaks to the Nephite peoples right after his Crucifixion, telling them “how oft would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens, and ye would not” (3 Nephi 10:4–6). They would later see and witness the resurrected Jesus, seeing and handling the marks in his hands and feet, and feeling the mark of a wound in his side, seeing that he is real, physical, triumphant, and glorious — that prior touch of poetry apparently causing no confusion at all.

Beshears also may surprise readers by telling them that we think God “is neither omnipotent (all-powerful overall) nor omniscient (all-knowing overall)” (p. 178). I did not notice this charge supported in chapter 21 or elsewhere. Perhaps there is some trick question behind this, such as “Can God make all numbers even integers only?” But for any practical purposes related to faith, our scriptures repeatedly declare that God knows everything and is all-powerful. Beshears uses the extremely rare terms “maxipotent” and “maxiscient” to distinguish us from traditional Christian belief. According to Google’s Gemini, maxipotent is “a concept in theology and philosophy describing a being with the highest possible power *within the constraints of logic*, distinct from ‘omnipotence,’ which implies unlimited power without logical restrictions.” Of course God should not be expected to do the logically impossible. I don’t think there is real distinction of maxiscient over omniscient, which apparently means knowing the most that is possible to know. That should be enough for all faiths. In any case, I think Beshears’s argument here verges on the maxivacuous.

The oneness of God

The oneness of God occurs multiple times in *40 Questions*, such as in chapter 24, “What Is the Latter-day Saint View of the Trinity” (pp. 195–203). Beshears characterizes our doctrine of the unity of the Godhead as in opposition to the concept of one God (p. 195). Beshears may not recognize that Latter-day Saints are comfortable with the statement that “my Father and I are one” (John 10:30) or “God is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4). The issue is not oneness, but *what kind* of oneness?

Beshears fails to understand or engage with common Latter-day Saint arguments to explain our views. Some of these arguments are important passages in the Bible. While there are prooftexts to support the modern view of the Trinity, key aspects of the confusing doctrine

are not found in the Bible, such as the issues of “one essence” (pp. 183, 197, 270) or being “coessential with God” (p. 197), or being “consubstantial” (p. 201) that Beshears emphasizes to contrast the Latter-day Saint view. Yet these are used to rule out our views as impossible (for example, pp. 201–2).

The simplicity of the New Testament witness of Christ is hard to extricate from the Nicene Creed, for example. Contrast this with the clarity on the nature of the oneness of God provided by Christ himself in his great intercessory prayer in John 17:

And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, *that they may be one, as we are*. (John 17:11)

Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, *that they also may be one in us*: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.

And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that *they may be one, even as we are one*: I in them, and thou in me, that *they may be made perfect in one*; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me. (John 17:20–23)

Other passages indicating that humans, too, can be one, include:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for *ye are all one in Christ Jesus*. (Galatians 3:28)

Stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel. (Philippians 1:27)

So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. (Romans 12:5)

While Christ fully represents God, and all three members of the Godhead have perfect unity in purpose and will, making them truly one, the Bible abounds in indications that distinct beings are involved. Such arguments have been made many times but are not acknowledged by Beshears. Examples include the popular John 3:16, where the great poignancy of sending one’s Son is weakened if God is not an actual Father sending an actual Son to suffer and die, John 14:28 (“my Father is greater than I”), Matthew 24:36 (“But of that day and

hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only”), Luke 22:42 (“Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done”), Luke 23:46 (“Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit”), the various prayers of Christ to the Father, John 5:30 (“I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me”), etc.

On the issue of the Trinity, as with other issues, Beshears mentions our doctrines but not the logic and support behind them, as if we have blindly accepted heretical, unbiblical doctrines that just need a verse or two to be quoted by a loving reader for our eyes to finally be opened. That may be my main complaint about *40 Questions*: it’s shadowboxing that does not reflect an understanding of *the strengths* of the Latter-day Saint position. It seems he’s just attempting to unveil our weaknesses, sometimes real, often merely alleged.

What the book delivers is a far cry from his opening statements about impressive replies from missionaries and an obvious need to dig deeper to understand Latter-day Saints. I don’t believe he delivers on that aspiration. The focus on weaknesses and the neglect of strengths may cumulatively reflect a caricature of our faith rather than provide a deeper understanding for those outside the Church.

Is the Book of Mormon trinitarian?

There are passages in the Book of Mormon declaring God and the Son are one God, and this can sound Trinitarian. This is a fair point, but here Beshears may have missed its clear explanation, very similar to the explanation on John 17, about the nature of this oneness. When Christ blesses the Three Nephites—his disciples in the Americas who asked that their lives might be extended to continue ministering until the Second Coming—his blessing taught important principles about the way God and Christ are one:

And again, ye shall not have pain while ye shall dwell in the flesh, neither sorrow save it be for the sins of the world; and all this will I do because of the thing which ye have desired of me, for ye have desired that ye might bring the souls of men unto me, while the world shall stand. And for this cause ye shall have fulness of joy; and ye shall sit down in the kingdom of my Father; yea, *your joy shall be full, even as the Father hath given me fulness of joy; and ye shall be even as I am, and I am even as the Father; and the Father and I are one.* (3 Nephi 28:9–10)

They are, of course, subservient to God and Christ. They are the creatures, not the Creator. They are the redeemed, not the Redeemer. But as children of God, they can share their joy, a “fullness of joy,” and be like them.

Chapter 23: Failing to Understand the Gift of the Holy Ghost

In chapter 23, on our view of the Holy Spirit, most of the chapter is about Beshears’s views on the Holy Spirit, with a few basics about our views at the end and in the first couple of paragraphs. Not until the last page does Beshears mention the distinction between the working of the Spirit, which can influence anybody, versus the unique “*gift* of the Holy Ghost” which comes by the laying on of hands after repentance and baptism, and is most effective in our lives if we seek to be in tune with the Spirit (yes, that means seeking to obey God and shun sin, repenting as needed).

After pointing out that Latter-day Saints believe repentance and worthiness are needed for the Holy Spirit (no, but they are needed for the effective operation of the gift of the Holy Ghost), Beshears critiques the idea that worthiness could play any role. He says, “The Holy Spirit does not depart the saint when they sin” (p. 188). He asks if a doctor leaves a patient when they are ill, at the time the doctor is needed most.

Of course not. . . . So it is with the Comforter of God. **Personal qualification or worthiness neither invites nor maintains one’s companionship with the Holy Spirit**; instead, it is the Spirit’s love for sinners . . . that keeps his residence in our heart. We do not make ourselves worthy to receive the Holy Spirit rather, the Holy Spirit is received by faith as a gift to make us worthy. (p. 189)

As with common Evangelical assertions that commandment keeping, covenants, and obedience are not needed, I struggle with the claim that our actions do not affect the *companionship* of the Holy Spirit, but again, the Spirit can briefly move sinners but not provide the blessings of the gift of the Holy Ghost. Obedience certainly plays a role. As Acts 5:32 states, “We are his witnesses of these things; and so is also *the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him.*”

In all such discussions, it may be helpful to remind our Evangelical friends that it is possible to depart from God and fall from grace, as Paul explains several times in Hebrews alone:

Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end. (Hebrews 3:12–14)

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were *made partakers of the Holy Ghost*, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, *If they shall fall away*, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame. (Hebrews 6:4–6)

Follow peace with all men, and *holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God*; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled. (Hebrews 12:14–15)

A distinction between being touched by the Spirit and having the enduring gift of or the companionship of the Holy Ghost seems to occur in Acts 2:37–38. After the Spirit “pricked” listeners in their heart, stirring a desire to learn more, they asked the apostles what they should do. Peter answered, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.”

The gift of the Holy Ghost can be considered a fruit of the “baptism by fire and the Holy Ghost” that can accompany baptism (or, in some cases, precede it as may have happened with some Gentiles in Acts 10:45). It can not only purify us and help us remember the things of truth, but can give us comfort and guidance—revelation from God for our personal lives. It is given as a special priesthood ordinance by one with proper authority through “the laying on of hands” (see Acts 8:13–18)—a short prayer given in which the recipient is confirmed as a member of the Church and is told to “receive the Holy Ghost.” Having that gift manifest in our lives as constant companionship does require that we seek to be in tune with the Spirit.

Chapters 27 and 28: Salvation

Chapters 27 and 28 address the Latter-day Saint view of salvation, rehashing many old arguments. I was disappointed that Beshears ignored most Latter-day Saint arguments, such as Christ's response to the rich young man that asked about salvation:

And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, *what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?* And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God: but *if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.* (Matthew 19:16–17)

I have had Evangelical pastors tell me that Christ here is mocking the rich young man by talking about commandment keeping, which we all should know is impossible. But sarcasm is clearly not the tone. The version in Mark 10 makes that especially clear:

Then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me. (Mark 10:21)

Jesus *loved* him and gave a loving answer tailored for his situation. It was an invitation of love to come follow Jesus. He could have done it. It was not impossible. But he loved his riches more, sadly.

Despite the numerous passages that show how sin puts souls at risk and that believers can fall, Beshears introduces the term “perseverance” as he argues that God won’t let the saints fall. Does this include saints who think that Christ is literally the Son of God? I’m not sure. Beshears cites John 10:28 for this claim, shown here in context:

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and *they follow me*: And *I give unto them eternal life*; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. (John 10:27–28)

Of course those who follow Christ will have eternal life. And that implies that they don’t depart from following Christ but endure in the faith, for as Christ said, “He that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved” (Matthew 24:13). It is important to always recall that promises of blessings are contingent upon following God. God does not remove the freedom to rebel.

Chapter 30: “What Is the Latter-day Saint View of Marriage and Family”

This chapter flounders with questions and speculation that reminded me of the Pharisees throwing wild marriage scenarios at Christ to object to the doctrine of resurrection. There are speculations about God and Heavenly Mother and the procreation of spirit children. We don’t know about this. Beshears’s speculations seem more meant to ridicule than to promote understanding. But Beshears soon gets back to more familiar ground by objecting that people “neither marry nor are given in marriage” in the resurrection (Matthew 22:30). They aren’t baptized, either, nor ordained to the priesthood nor given the gift of the Holy Ghost. We believe that these ordinances need to be taken care of on earth before the resurrection and entering into heaven. Christ’s rather evasive answer from people that were looking for trouble, not an explanation, needs to be considered in context.

One of Beshears’s frustrating questions is aimed at eternal marriage: “Whom do we look forward to being with the most in the after-life? Our spouse and families, or God? If the answer is not the latter, then marriage and family have become an idol.” Ouch. Why not both? This is not an either-or question relevant to the eternities. God has given us both. Eternal relationships with God and loved ones will be the greatest blessing of heaven. Loving our families with joy and perfect charity in the next life is not idolatry.

This chapter is also another place for Beshears to raise the specter of polygamy.

Chapter 34: The Temple

Beshears reports that there is a Freemasonry influence in the Temple. This is a topic many Latter-day Saints can discuss — perhaps he was aware of the numerous works of scholarship showing the alleged Masonic influence does little to explain the temple, though some superficial elements were borrowed. Jeffrey Bradshaw’s recent book may be especially helpful.⁷⁶

Most troubling, though, is the harsh take on covenants. He sees covenant-making to follow God to be a corrupt practice: “Not only is it impossible to be sanctified by making and keeping covenants with

76. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *Freemasonry and the Origins of Latter-day Saint Temple Ordinances* (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2022).

God, but it **nullifies the gospel's power**, 'for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing' (Gal 2:21, NIV)" (p. 289). Note, however, that Paul's many references to the law are to the Law of Moses, not the gospel of Jesus Christ which also has commandments. Equating all obedience with the law (the Law of Moses) is improper.

Given the number of times that Christ urges us and warns us to keep the commandments, to follow his teachings, to reject sin, etc., I am dismayed that one's theology can dim such teachings so much that they are virtually subtracted. Following Christ and living his teachings are what we are supposed to do—this enhances the gospel's power to help us do more good, overcome more sin, resist the power of darkness, and serve God with all our heart, might, and strength. It is what faith (the ancient concept of *pistis*) is all about: faithfulness in a covenant relationship, not just intellectual belief.

Chapter 35: "Why Do Latter-day Saints Baptize for the Dead?"

The Bible, according to Beshears, excludes the possibility of baptism for the dead or for preaching to the dead, for Hebrews 9:27 teaches us that "it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (p. 298). I think the logic is that since preaching of the gospel is not mentioned between dying and the judgment, it cannot happen. This is a logical fallacy. The judgment *does* come after death—but that does not mean nothing else can occur before the judgment.

This logic is especially problematic given that Peter twice points to the mercy of the gospel being preached to the dead. To his credit, Beshears cites both passages, 1 Peter 3:18–20 and 1 Peter 4:6, as passages Joseph Smith used, but does not quote them or discuss their content. 1 Peter 4:6 is quite clear: "For for this cause *was the gospel preached also to them that are dead*, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit." The other passage tells us that after Christ was killed, "he went and *preached unto the spirits in prison*" (1 Peter 3:19). These are evidences supporting Latter-day Saint views, along with 1 Corinthians 15:29, "Else what shall they do which are *baptized for the dead*, if the dead rise not at all? why are they then baptized for the dead?" These passages are not the source of our teachings and practices related to baptism for the dead. Rather, it was direct revelation to Joseph Smith that gave us knowledge of this practice and instructions on how to do it.

Beshears suggests that many confusing possibilities have been introduced by scholars on what 1 Corinthians 15:29 really means (pp. 296–97), and so they have been left “shrugging their shoulders” because it is so uncertain (p. 297n30). Here is where I hope dialogues with informed Latter-day Saints might have helped him recognize the growing evidence related to baptism for the dead as a legitimate Christian practice and the preaching to the dead as a serious aspect of early Christianity.⁷⁷

One of the most important sources is the *Pastor of Hermas*, the early Christian text that was accepted as scripture by some early Christians and even is present in *Codex Sinaiticus*, the fourth century manuscript that is one of the earliest Bibles we have. (To avoid adding or subtracting from scripture, maybe it’s time to bring Hermas back.) Similitude 9 in Hermas is the section where baptism for the dead is introduced as a parable. Richard L. Andersen explains:

The Shepherd of Hermas is not a source for new doctrine, for its main theme is preserving the faith. Its author is dutiful and conservative, seeking to hold to what he had been taught in a Christian career going back to the turn of the century and Clement of Rome, whom he mentions. . . . Thus, he is a source for the common doctrines and practices of the Christian Church. And he welds preaching to the dead to baptism for the dead. These doctrines come in the allegory of building the tower, which the angel defines as the Church [Anderson cites *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Similitude 9.16.2–4⁷⁸]. The three lower courses of stones represent the foundation generations of the righteous men of the Old Testament, with the last and largest number of 40 represent-

77. See, for example, David L. Paulsen and Brock M. Mason, “Baptism for the Dead in Early Christianity,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 19, no. 2 (2010): 22–49, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol19/iss2/4/; David L. Paulsen, Roger D. Cook, and Kendel J. Christensen, “The Harrowing of Hell: Salvation for the Dead in Early Christianity,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 19, no. 1 (2010): 56–77, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol19/iss1/7/; and Janet Ewell, “Easter and Doctrine and Covenants 138: Our Harrowing of Hell, Our *Descensus Christi ad Inferos*, Our Anastasis,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 68 (2026): 243–88, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/easter-and-doctrine-and-covenants-138-our-harrowing-of-hell-our-descensus-christi-ad-inferos-our-anastasis.

78. An online version of *Pastor of Hermas* is *The Shepherd of Hermas* (Book III), New Advent (website), newadvent.org/fathers/02013.htm.

ing the “prophets and teachers of the preaching of the Son of God.” These have the seal, clearly defined as baptism by (1) the requirement “to come up through the water that they might be made alive”; (2) the quotation of John 3:5, referring to water as the way to “enter into the kingdom of God”; and (3) the summary, “the seal, then, is the water.” As the following passage begins, Hermas’s messenger is explaining that the pre-Christian dead — “who had fallen asleep” — were also baptized; this is followed by the explanation that the New Testament priesthood bearers had been baptized again to make this possible [Anderson cites Sim. 9.16.3–7; see also *The Third Book of Hermas*, Sim. 9, vs. 152–160]:

“So these also who had fallen asleep received the seal of the Son of God and ‘entered into the kingdom of God’. . . . This seal, then, was preached to them also, and they made use of it ‘to enter into the kingdom of God.’”

“Why, Sir,” said I, “did the 40 stones also come up with them from the deep, although they had received the seal already?”

“Because,” said he, “these apostles and teachers who preached the name of the Son of God, having fallen asleep in the power and faith of the Son of God, preached also to those who had fallen asleep before them, and themselves gave to them the seal of the preaching. They went down therefore with them into the water and came up again, but the latter went down alive and came up alive, while the former, who had fallen asleep before, went down dead but came up alive. Through them, therefore, they were made alive, and received the knowledge of the name of the Son of God. . . . For they had fallen asleep in righteousness and in great purity, only they had not received this seal. You have then the explanation of these things also.”

Some parts of the above message are obvious, and others are clear in the light of Hermas’s purpose in writing. Since the above words explain the vision-parable or allegory, they relate to Christian doctrine and practice. The

plainest point is that after death the "apostles and teachers" continued their missionary labors in the spirit world, adding the dimension that preaching to the dead continued after Christ. The consequences of that doctrine are revolutionary. Thus, the spirits do not merely receive an announcement of Christ's victory; continued preaching assumes individual growth there and acceptance of gospel principles beyond simple belief. Thus, the emphasis on baptism for the pre-Christian righteous logically fits the scheme. But what kind of baptism? . . .

Hermas's book proves that he is a Christian traditionalist, and the spirit-world passage underlines the point by three repetitions of the words of John 3:5 on entering the kingdom of God through water. He is so bound by scripture that he cannot imagine salvation without baptism, and he obviously writes with consciousness of Peter's words on preaching in the spirit world. Thus, Hermas also writes with awareness of Paul's reference to baptisms of the living for the dead. Those "fallen asleep" in his passage are, of course, the dead, and his subject closes with plain words about the righteous who had died without baptism. So Hermas is discussing what Christians believe about baptism for the dead; so this "pious and conscientious" author certainly refers to the known baptism for the dead and not the unknown. That explains his question to the angel, for he found it contradictory that the New Testament priesthood leaders went into the deep again, the symbol of their personal baptisms. If they would merely baptize others, there could be no puzzle. So Hermas's question was really about rebaptism of those already baptized. The explanation was that both groups go into the water, but the effect of remission of sins is only for those dying without baptism. This cooperative baptism is proxy baptism, the only type mentioned by the "apostles and teachers" that he refers to. The joint immersion in water is part of the symbolism not expressly interpreted, referring to the earthly baptisms that were a shared experience of the living and the dead.⁷⁹

79. Richard L. Anderson, *Understanding Paul* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 408–10.

Beshears gives a reasonable summary of our practice of baptism for the dead, without mentioning how it is prized by many members as a wonderful expression of God's mercy, ensuring that all will have a chance to hear the Gospel and accept it if they will.

He concludes by suggesting that baptism isn't really essential:

In the end, the eternally blessed are those whom God ushers into his celestial presence—who “enter the city by the gates” (Rev 22:14 ESV)—with cleansed robes, not having washed their souls by water but having “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb” (Rev 7:14 ESV). (p. 298)

This passage reflects another logical fallacy: those who have their robes made white by the blood of the lamb cannot be assumed to have never been baptized nor to have never repented of sins nor to have never offered prayer simply because such details are not mentioned in a verse that was never meant to be a comprehensive checklist of man's duties in following Christ. John 3:5 should come to mind to those tempted to dismiss baptism as essential: “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” It was the sinless Christ that set the example and was baptized. (By the way, it is the baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost that purges sins, not baptism by water, as the Book of Mormon consistently explains.⁸⁰)

There is also some irony in Beshears's citation of Revelation 22:14 in suggesting that keeping commandments such as baptism is not really needed. What is left out of that verse is significant:

Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.

Again, nothing man can do can possibly overcome death or remove our sins. We cannot merit eternal life by our deeds, but we can meet the conditions attached to the infinite, unearnable gift of grace. Those who keep the commandments gain access to the miraculous gift of the tree of life and may enter the holy city or kingdom of God.

It is also somewhat ironic in quoting Revelation 7:14 about those

80. Noel B. Reynolds, “Understanding Christian Baptism through the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2012): 4–37, byustudies.byu.edu/article/understanding-christian-baptism-through-the-book-of-mormon.

wearing white robes, often a temple symbol, for the next verse tells us what they are doing during the great Millennium:

Therefore are they before the throne of God, and *serve him day and night in his temple*: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. (Revelation 7:15)

The temple, which was an essential part of the revealed ancient Jewish faith, was the sacred house of God revered by Christ where he taught often and where he cast out those who made it a place of profit. It is the place where early Christians gathered often while they could ("And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple . . .," Acts 2:46), the place where Christ will return swiftly at the beginning of the Millennium (Malachi 3:1), and that place that will also be the focal point for those serving God in the Millennium. And yet, somehow, we are to believe that a temple is no longer needed and that temple ordinances such as baptism for the dead and the endowment are unneeded and reflect a lack of faith in Christ.

Mainstream Christianity, having been without a temple for nearly 2,000 years, has out of necessity created many reasons to justify its absence. For Latter-day Saints, it is a testimony to the reality of the Restoration that the temple has been restored. Here Beshears might have considered having dialogues to let Latter-day Saints share their experiences and the joy and blessings they find in the temple. He might have been surprised to dialogue with Latter-day Saints familiar with ancient temple themes and their abundance in our scriptures, in the Ancient Near East, and their beauty as restored in the temple. He might have been fascinated to learn, for example, how an ancient formulation for covenants, the "covenant formulary" as discovered by Bible scholars and others in the twentieth century, is one of many factors supporting the ancient nature of the restored temple.⁸¹ While I appreciate his willingness to talk to Latter-day Saints, I hope he will keep asking and listening.

Chapter 37: Concerns of Latter-day Saints

Chapter 37, "What Are the Concerns Latter-day Saints Have About Traditional Christianity?" (pp 309–14), could have been a long chapter

81. See Klaus Baltzer, *The Covenant Formulary: in Old Testament, Jewish, and Early Christian Writings*, trans. David E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), online at archive.org/details/covenantformular0000balt/page/n5/mode/2up. Also see Ricks, "The Treaty/Covenant Pattern."

given the many issues that various Latter-day Saints might express over the doctrines or even sometimes the behaviors of other Christians. But in general, our attitude is one of gratitude for the good they do and respect for the work that has been done to preserve scriptures and share the gospel. We do have some genuine concerns over the different definitions of key terms like *faith*, *grace*, and *Christian*.

One legitimate concern is with the behaviors of some groups that won't recognize that Latter-day Saints worship Jesus Christ and are Christians. Telling their flocks that we aren't even Christian seems like a disservice, though I can understand the practical motivations for that. However, it's interesting that in Christian history, the heretical losers of debates behind the creeds such as the Arians, who had some views close to ours on the relationship of the Son to the Father, were not said to be non-Christian for having the "wrong" understanding. Apparently, we're much worse than the ancient heretics.

Discussing such concerns might have made a more fascinating chapter, along with many other topics I could list, but instead only two concerns are raised: 1) traditional Christianity was Hellenized, and 2) traditional Christianity is fractured. The answer to #1 reflects, in my opinion, a lack of understanding about how serious the problem is (Beshears argues that it may actually be Hellenism that was Christianized), and the answer to #2, a "concern" that is not high on my list, is the truly unconvincing claim that "the church is united not by polity or creeds but by the lordship of the resurrected Son of God, who transcends confessional and institutional boundaries" (p. 313). That majestic transcendence of policy, creeds, and boundaries of doctrine or organization, allowing a huge variety of conflicting theologies to share the common umbrella of Christianity, apparently does not apply to the Latter-day Saints, of course. We stand far outside that umbrella due to our differences in metaphysics or in the interpretation of certain Bible verses, and especially our taking of some Bible passages too seriously, such as the Son of God actually being the literal Son of God.

This chapter particularly did not have the feel of being the fruit of genuine or serious dialogues with believing and reasonably well-educated members of the Church. It could have been much more interesting.

Other Brief Notes

Chapter 7, "What Is the First Vision" (pp. 63–69), is a generally accurate and respectful discussion of the First Vision, the challenges with

multiple accounts, and the significance of that vision in the commissioning of Joseph Smith as a prophet. His objections to what Joseph claimed to see (two Beings) are given elsewhere.

Chapter 11, “Is Mormonism Just an American Religion?” (pp. 89–94), is a generally factual treatment of the international Church. However, Beshears is not willing to call us a “global church” even though most of our members are now outside the United States:

A truly global religion does not necessarily have a large quantitative presence but a strong qualitative presence, one that adapts to local norms of ritual and values without sacrificing social and religious distinctives that make it unique. (p. 93)

I’ve never seen that definition, which might have been better placed in the chapter on the apostasy. Beshears suggests that, to reach true globalization, the Church should decentralize control so that various peoples can develop their own unique versions of Mormonism (p. 93). With a touch of irony, this is right after chapter 10, “Are There Other Traditions That Claim to Be Mormon?” (pp. 83–88), where he criticizes the Church for having “splintered” into so many other “schisms” (expressions of the Restoration movement) (pp. 84–85). He argues that if authority from God “were restored in the latter days and manifested in a central prophetic figure, then presumably the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints would be less susceptible to the discord that partitioned other churches” (p. 83). We do have a lot of related expressions of our faith, as did early and later Christianity. I’m not sure his critique is valid, but the rise of multiple expressions is a fascinating and complex story,⁸² and his observations in both chapters 10 and 11 are made in good faith.

Chapter 12, “How Do Latter-day Saints View the Bible” (pp. 97–103), repeats the claim that the Bible is entirely sufficient and final. If any more scripture were needed, this would be dangerous, Beshears explains, because it would undermine the doctrine of *sola scriptura* (not found in the Bible, ironically) and this in turn would jeopardize the authority of scripture by disregarding its inerrancy (p. 102). Here it would

82. See R. Jean Addams, “Aftermath of the Martyrdom: Aspirants to the Mantle of the Prophet Joseph Smith,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 62 (2024): 335–402, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/aftermath-of-the-martyrdom-aspirants-to-the-mantle-of-the-prophet-joseph-smith.

have been wise to note that Latter-day Saints sometimes worry that Evangelical views may elevate a book to almost divine status, a book that has been written, copied, translated, and printed by one fallible mortal after another, giving us numerous variants among the surviving ancient manuscripts, none of which is original, and with many variations over the centuries even in what books to include, some obvious gaps such as missing words or even missing books, and many shades of meaning among the numerous versions of the standard Bible that exist today. Which of these variants for every verse are the sufficient ones? Which Bible is the most inerrant one? And who is authorized to answer that question once and for all?

Chapter 17, “What Is the Book of Abraham?” (pp. 135–42), offers the well-known objections to the Book of Abraham and its apparent lack of connection to the surviving fragments of the Joseph Smith Papyri, but it fails to note that Latter-day Saint scholars such as Stephen Smoot, John Gee, Kerry Muhlestein, and others have offered not only reasonable explanations for many of the alleged problems, but many indications of ancient roots in the Book of Abraham translation. There are reasonable intellectual arguments, in the view of many Latter-day Saints who have examined the evidence, to recognize that the Book of Abraham was not simply made up by Joseph Smith.

Chapter 25 on our view of the Creation makes a number of statements that need to be viewed with caution, such as stating that we believe that “whatever now exists always has existed” (p. 208). That’s certainly not true of my neighborhood, nor of most neighborhoods across the galaxies. Caution is needed to avoid making too much of statements on the eternal nature of matter. Such doctrines also do not mean that God did not select and orchestrate the marvelous properties of matter that make life and suns possible, nor is he a mere “carpenter-God” (p. 211). New scientific perspectives, even just $E=mc^2$, could have strengthened the discussion. Some peer review from a scientifically oriented Latter-day Saint could have made this chapter more meaningful.

Similar problems occur in chapter 26 on our view of the nature of humanity. Brief statements are sometimes taken to extreme applications. There the issue of the image of God is discussed, insisting that this cannot refer to the physical appearance (as the Bible seems to imply) but to human identity. Again, reasonable arguments often made for the Latter-day Saint position are not given much, if any, attention.

Chapter 30 on our views on the sacrament or Lord’s supper was

nicely done. It is one of my favorite chapters in *40 Questions*. I especially appreciate Beshears’s recognition of the links between the sacrament and baptism—many don’t notice that—and the profound connection of the sacrament prayers to the Book of Mormon.

Conclusion

Beshears has done some good work in exploring a wide range of questions about Latter-day Saints. His chapters are readable, tend to focus on important areas—at least from the perspective of Evangelicals—and may be a useful tool for those wanting to share Evangelical perspectives with Latter-day Saints or for Latter-day Saints wanting to better understand the discomfort some Evangelicals may have with our doctrines. He naturally explains differences with respect to his “traditional Christianity” (recent Protestantism) and often gets critical of the Latter-day Saint position, but without showing awareness of potential rebuttals or potential strengths of many of the positions he disagrees with. Yet some of his chapters are even-handed, accurate, and deserve credit for good observations.

To me it was helpful to see just how problematic our metaphysics are to him—deep, mysterious issues involving the nature of matter and origins of the universe that we really know almost nothing about. Those principles can be inspiring, in my opinion, but clash with some basic precepts of Beshears’s perspective. I think there is a need for further dialogue in light of breakthroughs coming from modern physics and other scientific fields that may help alleviate concerns about alleged limitations of matter and a physical body, and perhaps will help resolve other concerns. But some of the differences may be irreconcilable, especially if some of the assumptions of the creeds remain firmly in place. Reading *40 Questions* may help Latter-day Saints understand what is likely irreconcilable and where potential lies for more common ground and cooperation in the future, through the kind of dialogues Beshears has already been pursuing.

I disagree with many things Beshears writes, but I also appreciate what an impressive and good-faith effort went into this book. I congratulate him for it. I thank him for his interest in our faith and hope he will continue having dialogues with us in the future.



Jeffrey D. Lindsay has been providing online materials defending the Church for more than twenty years, primarily at JeffLindsay.com and at ArisefromtheDust.com (formerly Mormanity). He is currently on the Board of Directors for The Interpreter Foundation. Jeff has a PhD in chemical engineering from BYU and is a US patent agent. He is currently president of Planet Lindsay, LLC, assisting a variety of clients with intellectual property and innovation. From 2011 to 2019 he was the head of Intellectual Property for Asia Pulp and Paper in Shanghai, China, one of the world's largest forest product companies. Formerly, he was associate professor at the Institute of Paper Science and Technology (now the Renewable Bioproducts Institute) at Georgia Tech, then went into R&D at Kimberly-Clark Corporation, eventually becoming corporate patent strategist and senior research fellow. Jeff served a mission in the German-speaking Switzerland Zurich Mission. He and his wife, Kendra, are the parents of four boys and have fifteen grandchildren. They are both serving as ministering specialists for African immigrants in their community. Jeff also serves as a board member for Hope and Help Together, a community organization in Appleton, Wisconsin, which works to assist refugees and immigrants in the Fox Cities region.

God's First Recorded Speech in the Book of Mormon: A Covenant that Unifies Nephi's Record and Defines a Nephite Worldview

Steven L. Olsen

Abstract: *A variety of literary conventions that are characteristic of the Hebrew Bible also appear in the initial books of the Book of Mormon. This study features one of these conventions, which may be called the "general principle of firsts." According to this convention, the first actions and first speeches of a character in a biblical story reveal his or her character and role in the narrative. God's first recorded speech in the Book of Mormon is a covenant that unifies Nephi's record and defines a Nephite worldview. This thesis is demonstrated through a detailed examination of the literary craftsmanship of the covenant text and its relation to dominant themes of Nephi's small-plates record, the parallel structuring of 1 and 2 Nephi, and the covenant-foundations of a comprehensive Nephite worldview.*

The highest form of consciousness in most cultures is known by scholars as a *worldview*. Worldviews encompass the perceived structure and functioning of the universe and provide society with three things: an ultimate explanation of life and existence, a pervasive justification for what happens in life, and that culture's privileged place and role in the world. In many societies, worldviews are expressed as sacred stories that carry ultimate authority, exist beyond analysis within that society, and are rehearsed at crucial junctures of community and individual life cycles. In short, worldviews underscore the

supreme truths of a culture and serve as the centerpiece of a people's identity.¹

The traditional Judeo-Christian worldview is grounded in the primordial story of Creation as found in the book of Genesis. In this microcosm of existence, God creates "the heavens and the earth" and all living things including the first humans, Adam and Eve, placing them in an ideal setting, the Garden of Eden. God's plan included not only provisions to preserve this ideal order in perpetuity, but also provisions that enable God's eternal purposes to be fulfilled in case the utopia is compromised.

The literary craftsmanship of the Creation story illustrates its role as a worldview. In his magisterial translation of and commentary on the Pentateuch, Robert Alter, a scholar of the literary craftsmanship of the Hebrew Bible, concludes, "It is a general principle of biblical narrative that a character's first recorded speech has particular defining force as characterization."² Meir Sternberg refines and expands Alter's

1. A sample of the extensive and diverse scholarly literature on worldviews in ancient and traditional cultures include Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City: A Study of the Religion, Laws and Institutions of Ancient Greece and Rome*, trans. Willard Small (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1901), archive.org/details/ancientcitystudy02fust/mode/2up; Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959), archive.org/details/The-Sacred-And-The-Profane/mode/2up; Edmund Leach, "Genesis as Myth" in *Genesis as Myth and Other Essays* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), 7–23, archive.org/details/genesisasmythoth0000leac/page/6/mode/2up; Paul Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters: A Preliminary Enquiry into the Origins and Character of the Ancient Chinese City* (Chicago: Aldine, 1971), archive.org/details/pivotoffourquart0000whea/mode/2up; Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), archive.org/details/cosmoshistorymyt00elia/mode/2up; Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, *Primitive Classification*, trans. Rodney Needham (London: Cohen & West, 1969), archive.org/details/isbn_0710068913/mode/2up; Joseph Rykwert, *The Idea of a Town: The Anthropology of Urban Form in Rome, Italy and the Ancient World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), archive.org/details/ideaoftownanthro0000rykw/mode/2up; Henri Frankfort et al., *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), archive.org/details/intellectual_adventure/mode/2up; Remi Brague, *The Wisdom of the World: The Human Experience of the Universe in Western Thought*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Alessandro Scafi, *Maps of Paradise* (London: The British Library, 2013), archive.org/details/mapsofparadise0000scaf/mode/2up.

2. Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 158n1; see also 77n2; 131nn30, 31; 207n6.

"general principle of firsts" with the observation that, while revealing, first speeches and first actions of biblical characters are not formulaic rules of ancient Hebrew narratology. The "drama of reading," as he calls it, must allow for challenges to and nuances of readers' first impressions of characters, settings, and events as they unfold in the story.³ Nevertheless, both scholars agree that paying careful attention to how and when characters enter the scene is an excellent way for readers to plumb the deeper meanings of the text.

The literary convention of first actions and first speeches is central to the Creation story. The first character, God, enters the scene without introduction, prelude, context, or fanfare. His first action consists of his first recorded command: "Let there be light." Thus, in a simple declarative statement, God defines himself as Creator and Controller of the most powerful, complex, universal, and evanescent force in nature and a crucial pre-requisite of all life.

The Creation story proceeds by featuring another core literary convention of biblical Hebrew: parallelism.⁴ The seven "days" of creation present a cultural logic of existence. Alter observes, "The biblical imagination . . . conceived creation as an orderly series of divisions imposed on primordial chaos."⁵ This divine order emerges as a series of successive binary contrasts that introduce the core categories of created things and that define their dynamic and complex interconnectedness. The narrative and structural logic of this worldview is shown in figure 1.⁶

3. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 322–28.

4. See Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985).

5. Alter, *Five Books of Moses*, 44n.

6. The traditional Judeo-Christian Creation story varies significantly among its multiple authoritative retellings. While the structural approach to sacred narratives of Claude Levi-Strauss and others may provide insight into its textual variations, assessing these differences is far beyond the purpose of this study. See Claude Levi-Strauss, *Mythologies*, trans. John Weightman, Doreen Weightman, 4 vols. (Quebec: Librairie Plon, 1964–1971; English trans., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983–1990). The focus of the present study is simply to use the Creation story to propose a comparable role of a paradigmatic passage in Nephi's opening narrative in the Book of Mormon. To do so, I use the text of Genesis 1 of the King James translation of the Hebrew Bible. On day 6 in figure 1, "Humans" is shown as a separate line because the Hebrew word traditionally translated as *Adam* means *human*, from the soil. See Alter, *Five Books of Moses*, 21n7.

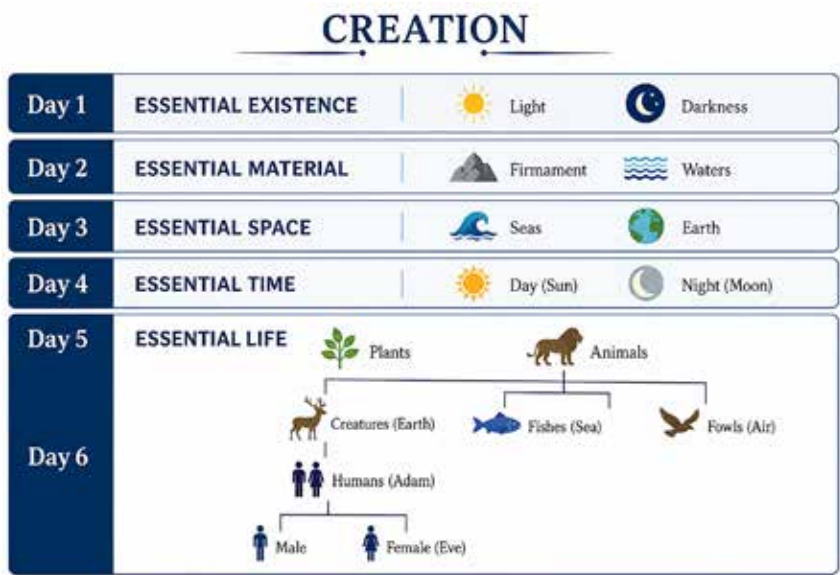


Figure 1. The Hebrew creation worldview.

In simple, profound, systematic, and comprehensive terms, the Judeo-Christian Creation story defines a traditional worldview that thought-leaders throughout the centuries have used to account for and give meaning to existence and experience. The Creation is arguably the single most meaningful, powerful, and widespread story in Western civilization. From this perspective, the account of Creation is meant to be a conceptual framework, that is, prescriptive of a meaningful order rather than descriptive of a natural, empirical process. It illustrates that worldviews are often expressed as a microcosm—a condensed but paradigmatic statement of the purpose of existence.

God’s Covenant with Nephi

The present study examines the conceptual foundations of a worldview for a “remnant” of the house of Israel. While the consciousness of the extended family of Lehi is grounded in the traditional Judeo-Christian story of Creation, their circumstance as members of the chosen seed of Abraham and refugees from their God-given homeland require renewal and refinement of the traditional Israelite worldview to justify their radically altered existence. Specifically, this study illustrates the extent to which God’s first recorded speech—reflecting Alter’s principle of firsts—frames and focuses the sacred record

of this remnant of Israel and lays the foundation for a worldview for Lehi's extended family.

Nephi uses one common literary convention, type scenes, to introduce and contextualize others. Type scenes consist of two or more stories or settings that are crafted in parallel fashion, even if they are widely separated in time and space.⁷ Use of this convention underscores the authors' intent for separate stories to be read as meaningful complements.

In Nephi's record, the first reported act of both Nephi and his father Lehi is a prayer. Lehi prays "in behalf of his people" (1 Nephi 1:5) at Jerusalem, whose imminent destruction has been foretold by "many prophets" (1 Nephi 1:4). On his part, Nephi prays that his rebellious brothers accept their father's command to vacate Jerusalem to avoid destruction (1 Nephi 2:16). The parallel structure of these two accounts is indicated in table 1.

Table 1. Lehi's and Nephi's first actions.

	Lehi's Prayer (1 Nephi 1:5–15)	Nephi's Prayer (1 Nephi 2:16)
A spiritual crisis motivates both prayers	Jerusalem's impending destruction (1:4)	Rebellion of his older brothers to evacuate Jerusalem (2:11–14)
Are words of the prayers included in the record?	No (1:5–6)	No (2:16)
Is God's response to the prayer recorded firsthand?	No, Nephi only summarizes Lehi's resulting vision (1:6–13)	No, Nephi only summarizes God's response: "he did visit me" (2:16)
Resulting change of heart	Lehi accepts God's warning of Jerusalem's destruction (1:14–15)	Nephi accepts Lehi's decision to leave Jerusalem (2:16)
Does their resulting mission succeed?	No, Lehi's prophetic warnings are rejected by residents who try to kill him (1:19–20)	No, Nephi's fails to convince his older brothers who try to kill him on later occasions (2:18)

7. See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 55–78; Meir Sternberg, "The Structure of Repetition: Strategies of Informational Redundancy," in *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 365–440; Steven L. Olsen, "Birth and Calling of the Prophet Samuel: A Literary Reading of the Biblical Text," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2017), 13n12, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol56/iss1/3/.

	Lehi's Prayer (1 Nephi 1:5–15)	Nephi's Prayer (1 Nephi 2:16)
Is God's consolation included in the record?	Yes, parallel to Nephi's: "Blessed art thou Lehi . . ." (2:1)	Yes, parallel to Lehi's: "Blessed art thou Nephi . . ." (2:19)
Are the words of God's subsequent instruction included in the record?	No, Nephi reports secondhand that God instructs Lehi to "take his family and depart into the wilderness" (2:2)	Yes, God's first reported speech in the Book of Mormon is a covenant (2:19–24)
How are Lehi's and Nephi's resulting actions reported in the record?	Nephi reports only secondhand that Lehi "was obedient unto the word of the Lord . . . he did as the Lord commanded" (2:3)	Nephi's first recorded words implement the covenant: "I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded . . ." (3:7)

The systematic parallels of the two accounts, reflected in the first six lines of table 1, indicate Nephi's intent for them to be read as type scenes.

- Both prayers attempt to avert a spiritual crisis.
- Nephi records neither the words of God nor God's specific response to either prayer.
- Nephi's account reflects a change of heart that inspires father and son on an ardent mission.
- Both missions fail to achieve their desired outcome.
- God's first recorded words to Lehi and Nephi are identical and provide consolation.

While the parallel craftsmanship of the two accounts defines the reported events as type scenes, their crucial differences, contained in the last two lines of table 1, introduce the literary principle of firsts and signal a core rhetorical purpose of Nephi's record. While Nephi records only a secondhand account of God's instructions to Lehi and Lehi's subsequent actions, Nephi records verbatim both God's first speech to him and his declaration to his father that follows. The first recorded speeches of God and Nephi define their respective roles in the narrative: God is the author and executor of an eternal covenant, and Nephi is God's earthly agent to administer and interpret the covenant. The terms of the covenant frame and focus Nephi's record and lay the foundation of a sacred Nephite worldview.

Literary Craftsmanship of the Covenant

The words and phrases that follow illustrate the role and meaning of the covenant in Nephi's record:

And inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper, and shall be led to a land of promise; yea, even a land which I have prepared for you, yea, a land which is choice above all other lands.

And inasmuch as thy brethren shall rebel against thee, they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord. And inasmuch as thou shalt keep my commandments, thou shalt be made a ruler and a teacher over thy brethren.

For behold, in that day that they shall rebel against me, I will curse them even with a sore curse, and they shall have no power over thy seed except they shall rebel against me also. And if it so be that they rebel against me, they shall be a scourge unto thy seed, to stir them up in the ways of remembrance. (1 Nephi 2:20–24)

Keep my commandments

Commandments define the stipulations of the covenant, a standard feature of treaty-type covenants that differentiate those who are blessed for their obedience from those who are cursed for their disobedience.⁸ While the text of God's covenant does not detail its stipulations, Nephi's record clearly indicates that they are contained in the law of Moses, the gospel of Jesus Christ, and personal revelations to Lehi, Nephi, and other spiritual leaders of the extended family.⁹ The possessive pronoun *my*, repeated in both uses of the verb phrase, indicates that God is the author and executor of the covenant.

In addition to appearing twice in the text of the covenant, the

8. Delbert R. Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1969), 32–35; Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Promises* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 49–50.

9. In its noun and verb forms, *commandments* appears 114 times in 1 and 2 Nephi, nearly all in the context of a divine imperative. Nearly half of these uses (54) are in the plural noun, *commandments*, as in the covenant with Nephi, and nearly two of every three times that *commandments* appears in Nephi's record, as in the phrase, "keep my commandments." See R. Gary Shapiro, *An Exhaustive Concordance of the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price* (Salt Lake City: Hawkes, 1977), s.vv. "command," "commanded," "commandeth," "commanding," "commandment," "commandments."

“keep my commandments” verb phrase appears several dozen other times in Nephi’s writings. While other imperatives also appear with *commandment(s)*, their relative infrequency indicates that *keep* is clearly Nephi’s preferred verb when referring to formal stipulations of the covenant.¹⁰ This preference may be explained by the verb’s many related connotations, including *attend, care for, celebrate, defend, follow, maintain, obey, observe, preserve, protect, remember, retain, save, support, and watch over*.¹¹ These connotations fit the covenant’s verb phrase and expand the breadth and depth of its meaning for Nephi’s sacred record, covenant community, and worldview.

Nephi’s first recorded speech — “I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they shall accomplish the thing which he commandeth them” (1 Nephi 3:7) — is the most concentrated use of *commandment* and its variations in the entire Book of Mormon.¹² Nephi’s first recorded speech immediately follows inauguration of the covenant and implements it in the story. The subsequent narratives — retrieving the brass plates and recruiting a second family for the journey — illustrate the manifold ways that God miraculously blesses those who keep his commandments (1 Nephi 3–5, 7).

Prosper

The verb *prosper* first occurs in God’s covenant with Nephi and is repeated in crucial contexts throughout his record.¹³ The text of the covenant initially defines the verb: “be led to a land of promise” (1 Nephi 2:20). Later, an angel adds that the covenant people will become a “nation” if they obtain and live by the scriptural record contained on the brass plates that Nephi is entrusted to retrieve (1 Nephi 4:13–14). Lehi’s final blessing to his extended family enlarges the nation-building connotation of the verb by broadly aligning *prosper* with a concept of *sovereignty*:

And if it so be that they shall keep his commandments they

10. By contrast, the most frequent alternate verbs used in the phrase in Nephi’s record are *fulfill* (4 times), *obey* (2), and *give* (2). Shapiro, *Concordance*, 192–94.

11. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (1971), s.v. “keep;” *Concise Oxford American Thesaurus* (2006), s.v. “keep.”

12. Shapiro, *Concordance*, s.vv. “commandment,” “commandeth,” “commandments.”

13. Shapiro, *Concordance*, s.vv. “prosper,” “prospered,” “prospereth,” “prosperity,” “prosperous.”

shall be blessed upon the face of this land, and there shall be none to molest them, nor to take away the land of their inheritance, and they shall dwell safely forever. (2 Nephi 1:9)

The most explicit and comprehensive exposition of the Nephite concept of *prosper* occurs after Nephi separates his followers from those of his older brothers who seek to kill him following the death of their father (2 Nephi 5:5–7). Once separated, the followers take upon themselves a distinctive name ("Nephi") and give the same name to the land they settle (vv. 8–9). Nephi identifies nine key characteristics of their new covenant-based society. Twice in their enumeration, Nephi repeats the verb in vv. 10–18, reminding readers that *prosper* unifies and integrates these qualities which include:

- **Keeping God's Commandments.** "And we did 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).
- **Providing for their Sustenance.** "And the Lord was with us; and we did prosper exceedingly; for we did sow seed, and we did reap again in abundance. And we began to raise flocks, and herds, and animals of every kind" (v. 11).
- **Preserving Sacred Records.** "And I, Nephi, had also brought the records which were engraven upon the plates of brass; and also the ball, or compass, which was prepared . . . by the hand of the Lord" (v. 12).
- **Raising Stable Families.** "And it came to pass that we began to prosper exceedingly, and to multiply in the land" (v. 13).
- **Securing Adequate Defense.** "And I, Nephi, did take the sword of Laban, and after the manner of it did make many swords, lest by any means the people who were now called Lamanites should come upon us and destroy us" (v. 14).
- **Constructing Buildings with Natural Materials.** "And I did teach my people to build buildings, and to work in all manner of wood, and of iron, and of copper, and of brass, and of steel, and of gold, and of silver, and of precious ores, which were in great abundance" (v. 15).
- **Worshipping at Temples.** "And I, Nephi, did build a temple . . . after the manner of the temple of Solomon" (v. 16).
- **Working Industriosly.** "And it came to pass that I, Nephi,

did cause my people to be industrious, and to labor with their hands” (v. 17).

- **Providing Righteous Leadership.** “And it came to pass that they would that I should be their king. But I, Nephi, was desirous that they should have no king; nevertheless, I did for them according to that which was in my power” (v. 18).¹⁴

Virtually every social detail of the millennium-long Nephite history alludes positively or negatively to one or more of these covenant-based characteristics of *prospering*, meaning that in Nephi’s record *prospering* is the pervasive socio-cultural interpretive concept for this civilization.

Land

Land(s) is one of the most frequently repeated nouns in Nephi’s writings. Few uses of the noun connote merely earth’s territorial environment. Rather, virtually all refer to the material sign of a covenant with God — specifically, the Israelites’ “land of Jerusalem” and the Nephites’ “land choice above all other lands.” Thus, for Nephi, the counterpart to *land* is not *water* but *wilderness*, a term that implies not *wasteland* but that portion of the earth’s surface that has not yet been designated for extended occupation by covenant peoples.¹⁵ In short, *land* connotes a covenant community’s spiritual home and locus of chosen identity.

Nephi’s record acknowledges two named divisions of the Nephite

14. Steven L. Olsen, “Prospering in the Land of Promise,” *The FARMS Review* 22, no. 1 (2010), 229–45, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1812&context=msr. Nephi’s complex, covenant-based definition is not recognized by the Oxford English Dictionary.

15. Steven L. Olsen, “Cosmic Urban Symbolism in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 23, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 79–92. In 1 and 2 Nephi, *land(s)* appears 164 times and *wilderness* a little more than half as many times. See Shapiro, *Concordance*, s.v. “earth,” “land,” “lands,” and “wilderness.” In the Hebrew Bible, *wilderness* appears more than 250 times. Its connotations related to its use in the Book of Mormon include uninhabited land and a place of wandering. See James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1894), s.v. “wilderness”; Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2014), #4057; David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans’ Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), s.v. “wilderness.” On the comparable concept of *land* in the Hebrew Bible, see Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), archive.org/details/landplaceasgift0000brue/mode/2up.

land of promise: "land of our first inheritance" and "land of Nephi," the latter replacing the former once Nephi and his followers separate themselves from his older brothers. This distinction implies that in Nephi's worldview, *lands of promise* are not immutable places with fixed boundaries. Rather, they are designated and ordered homelands for a covenant community, susceptible to modification or relocation as directed by the spiritual leader of the group acting under the inspiration of God.

Presence of the Lord

The structure of God's covenant with Nephi creates the following logical syllogism: $c > pr :: -c > -p/l$, where "c" = keep God's commandments; "pr" = prosper in the land of promise; "p/l" = presence of the Lord; "-" = negation of the term; ">" = an 'if-then' relation between the two clauses in each phrase; and "::" = a direct relationship between the syllogism's two phrases, called, respectively, its antecedent and consequent.

Expressed in this manner, the covenant implies that prospering in the *land of promise* is spiritually analogous to living in the *presence of the Lord*. Thus, the Book of Mormon implies that covenant people who keep God's commandments can imagine themselves approximating on earth an ideal heavenly state.

Thy brethren and thy seed

God's covenant with Nephi formalizes the perpetual divisions of Lehi's extended family, who become known, collectively, as *Nephites* and *Lamanites*—traditional markers of ethnic identity that distinguish those who keep the covenant from those who do not, regardless of their genetic make-up or literal descent lines.

Ethnic identity in Nephi's record consists of four complementary dimensions:

- **Nations.** Groups loyal to a political leader or who persistently occupy a designated area of the earth's territorial environment
- **Kindreds.** Groups united by common descent
- **Tongues.** Groups united by a common language
- **Peoples.** Groups united by a common culture

People is one of the most frequent nouns in Nephi's record and

the Book of Mormon generally, distinguishing named groups that are bound together by a covenant with God.¹⁶

Binary contrasts, a key feature of the widespread convention of parallelism in biblical Hebrew, differentiate the following named ethnic groups in Nephi's record, descending from the most comprehensive to the most specific.

- **Humanity.** All humans are consistently divided between *Jews* and *Gentiles* who are respectively the “house of Israel,” or God’s covenant people, and the residue of humanity who are not bound to one another or distinguished from others by a covenant with God. While the Book of Mormon regularly refers to *Jews* as a *people* in the covenant sense and occasionally to *Gentiles* as *nation(s)*, it never recognizes *Gentiles* as a *people*. Given this pattern, Book of Mormon authors neither recognize nor name non-covenant social groups living in their midst.¹⁷
- **Covenant Community (1).** The principal divisions of the house of Israel living in the Holy Land are *Israel* and *Judah* (or *the Jews*). While *Israel*, in this usage, is a socio-political alliance of several Israelite tribes, both groups are considered *people(s)* because they are included in God’s covenant with Abraham.¹⁸
- **Covenant Community (2).** The house of Israel is further differentiated by the main body living in the Holy Land from Israel’s *remnant(s)*, or portions of the covenant community who are “scattered” upon “the isles of the sea.” Lehi’s extended family are one of Israel’s remnants, removed by

16. As complementary characteristics of ethnic identity, the four features appear together—once in Nephi’s writings and multiple times in Mormon’s abridgment. See Shapiro, *Concordance*, s.vv. “kindred,” “nation,” “people,” “tongue.” Some uses of *people* in the Book of Mormon connote “groups of individuals;” however, its nearly universal pattern of usage carries the covenant connotation.

17. In 1 and 2 Nephi, *Gentile(s)* and *Jew(s)* appear ninety and sixty-eight times, respectively, nearly all in prophetic contexts. See Shapiro, *Concordance*, s.vv. “Gentile,” “Gentiles,” “Jew,” “Jews.”

18. In 1 and 2 Nephi, *Israel* appears 125 times, most frequently in prophetic contexts, and *Judah* appears only nineteen times, most with specific reference to the tribe of Judah. See Shapiro, *Concordance*, s.vv. “Israel,” “Jew,” “Jews,” “Judah.”

God from the main body to preserve a righteous branch of the covenant community.¹⁹

- **Israel's Remnant in the Land of Promise.** The major divisions of Lehi's *remnant* are *Nephites* and *Lamanites*.²⁰ Even though Lamanites receive the curse specified for not following the covenant, they still qualify as a *people* because in Nephi's record their lives and histories, in the short- and long-run, are governed and given meaning by the covenant.

Rebel against me / thee

In Nephi's record, four of nine total uses of this verb phrase occur in the text of God's covenant with Nephi. *Rebel* complements other verbs that connote breaking the covenant, such as *cut off*, *curse*, and *scourge*.²¹ The different objects of the preposition *against*, namely *me* and *thee*, illustrate that God and Nephi are, respectively, the heavenly and earthly agents of the covenant.

Cut off

The verb phrase *cut off* appears first in the text of the covenant and more than a dozen other times in Nephi's record, exclusively as the curse realized for not keeping a covenant. In the Hebrew Bible, *cut* and *cut off* variously connote circumcision as a symbolic oath of God's covenant with Abraham, the dividing of an animal sacrifice often in the ritual renewal of a covenant, exile from the covenant community of a rebellious individual, or (as in this case) separation from God of a group who break the covenant.²²

Ruler and teacher

Ruler and *teacher* privilege, respectively, the dominant political and

19. In Nephi's record, *remnant(s)* and *branch(es)* appear twenty-four and twenty-five times, respectively, nearly all connoting a recognized portion of the covenant people who have been formally separated from the main body. The phrase *isles of the sea* refers to any land mass, regardless of its size, that serves as a homeland for remnants of Israel removed from the Holy Land. In this usage, the Western hemisphere could be considered one of the isles of the sea. See Shapiro, *Concordance*, s.v. "branch," "branches," "remnant," "remnants," "sea," "seas."

20. The ethnic terms *Lamanite(s)* and *Nephite(s)* appear only after the formal division of Lehi's family (2 Nephi 5). Shapiro, *Concordance*, 519–23; 664–66.

21. See Shapiro, *Concordance*, s.v. "rebel."

22. Shapiro, *Concordance*, s.v. "cut off"; Strong, *Concordance*, s.v. "cut"; Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 32, 44–48, 51–52, 115–16, 334.

spiritual status of those who keep the covenant.²³ Lehi and Nephi perform both roles relative to their extended family prior to the split, and Nephi does so for his own followers afterwards (2 Nephi 5:6–8, 19). To assist his religious responsibilities, Nephi “did consecrate Jacob and Joseph [his two younger brothers], that they should be priests and teachers over the land of my people” (2 Nephi 5:26).

Curse

The curse for not keeping God’s covenant with Nephi applies to Nephites and Lamanites in two complementary ways. Because of their rebellion, Lamanites remain largely in a state of perpetual spiritual oblivion, meaning they are *cut off* from the presence of the Lord. Thus, they generally have *no power* over the Nephites and are viewed by the Nephites as being savage, idle, full of mischief and subtlety, hardened, loathsome, iniquitous, and aggressive — in short, the antitheses of the Nephites.²⁴ By comparison, Nephites who rebel against God are *scourged* by the Lamanites to *stir them up in the ways of remembrance* (see below).

Subsequent prophecies of Lehi and Nephi nuance this covenant cursing. In a final blessing to his posterity, Lehi places the results of not keeping the covenant squarely on Laman and Lemuel themselves, not on their descendants, especially those who “repent of their iniquities” (2 Nephi 4:4–9; 5:22). In his vision of the plan of salvation, Nephi learns that eventually the Nephites will be destroyed as a people when they categorically reject the covenant, and the Lamanites will be blessed by the covenant that is restored to them in the latter days by Gentiles who accept the gospel of Jesus Christ and who are thereby “numbered among the house of Israel.”²⁵

23. In 1 and 2 Nephi, the first use of *ruler* and *teacher*, singular or plural, occurs in the covenant with Nephi. The second use of *ruler* is by the angel who reinforces Nephi’s dominant role relative to his older brothers (1 Nephi 3:29). Other early uses reflect Laman’s and Lemuel’s resentment of Nephi’s expanding leadership in the extended family. The first use of *priests* (plural) occurs in the formal separation of Nephites from Lamanites. Most uses of these terms in Nephi’s record occur in combination with other positions of legitimate leadership within the covenant community. Shapiro, *Concordance*, 763–64; 821–22; 947–48.

24. In 1 and 2 Nephi, the noun and verb forms of *curse* occur first in the covenant with Nephi. Variants occur eight other times, all in a covenant context. See Shapiro, *Concordance*, s.vv. “curse,” “cursed,” “curses,” “cursing.” Specific curses for the rebellious Lamanites are enumerated in 2 Nephi 5:20–25.

25. 1 Nephi 12:14–23; 13:35–42; 14:2, 14–17; 2 Nephi 10:18. Nephi repeats the

Scourge

Scourge has two connotations in Nephi's record: a generic term referring to a curse for breaking the covenant and a specific synonym of physical abuse, such as the scourging of Christ prior to his crucifixion. Nephi's initial and principal uses of the verb emphasize its covenant connotation.²⁶

No power

While the use of *no power* in the text of the covenant implies military or political prowess, the noun appears more than eighty other times in Nephi's record, most connoting the capacity of God to accomplish his divine purposes.²⁷ Instances of Lamanite-Nephite warfare nuance but do not alter this covenant principle. Rather than reflecting a secular focus in the Book of Mormon, armed conflict illustrates a key feature of the covenant.

Ways of remembrance

Nephi's only uses of the noun phrase *ways of remembrance* occur in a covenant context (1 Nephi 2:24; 2 Nephi 5:25). More generally, *remember* (with variations) is one of the most frequently used verbs in the Book of Mormon, connoting not only the familiar cognitive recall, but also *commemorate*, *mention in prayer*, *reflect upon*, and *put together again* (as in *re-member*). This last connotation is synonymous with the common Book of Mormon term *gathering*, as in *gathering of Israel*, a covenant-based theme woven throughout Nephi's record and mentioned especially in prophecies of the latter days. Book of Mormon connotations of *remember* that are not recognized by the Oxford English Dictionary include *renew*, *re-animate*, and *re-focus*, as when God promises, "I will remember my covenant."²⁸

prophecy of the Nephites' ultimate destruction at the end of the historical portion of his record, when he summarizes the initial fulfillment of the covenant in the lives of his extended family (2 Nephi 5:25–27).

26. In 1 and 2 Nephi, the verb *scourge* occurs first in the covenant with Nephi and five other times, three connoting the curse of the covenant. Shapiro, *Concordance*, 851.

27. Shapiro, *Concordance*, 747–51.

28. See Shapiro, *Concordance*, s.vv. "gather," "gathered," "gathereth," "gathering," "remember," "remembered," "rememberest," "remembering," "remembrance."

Principal Themes of Nephi’s Record

Table 2 illustrates the close correspondence between the dominant language of the covenant text and pervasive themes of Nephi’s record.

Table 2. Language and themes.

Principal Language of the Covenant	Main Covenant Themes ²⁹
“Land choice above all other lands” “Prosper”	Promised Land
“Thy Brethren”/“Thy Seed” “Ruler and Teacher” “No Power”	Chosen People
“Keep my Commandments” “Ways of Remembrance”	Mission and Gospel of Jesus Christ

The present section of this study illustrates the extent to which these three covenant-based themes unify the contents of Nephi’s record and define the essence of a Nephite worldview.

While books of the Hebrew Bible tend to have a primary content focus — such as law, history, poetry, or prophecy — the books of 1 and 2 Nephi contain a strong mix of both historical narrative and prophetic discourse.³⁰ Nephi not only combines historical and prophetic contents in his record but also blurs their traditional distinctions. For example, Isaiah and the other Israelite prophets craft their prophecies using contemporary and familiar events, personalities, and circumstances as figures of speech. By contrast, Nephi glories “in plainness” (2 Nephi 31:3, 32:7, 33:6). Thus, his prophecies are surprisingly descriptive, expressed largely as history before it happens.

The following analysis illustrates the extent to which the principal themes of God’s covenant with Nephi integrate the contents of his record and lay the foundation of a Nephite worldview.

Historical narrative

Nephi’s story, like that of Abraham in the Hebrew Bible (Genesis 12), begins not at his birth or during his childhood, but rather with a life

29. The most frequent nouns from Nephi’s record are *Lord*, *God*, *people*, and *land(s)*, used 532, 382, 186, and 164 times respectively. Shapiro, *Concordance*, 386–401; 561–76; 524–34; 719–30.

30. In the current edition of the Book of Mormon, principal contents of 1 and 2 Nephi are distributed as follows: history (1 Nephi 2–5, 7, 16–18; 2 Nephi 5, or a total of nine chapters) and prophecy (1 Nephi 1, 8, 10–15, 19–22; 2 Nephi 1–4; 6–10, 12–33, or a total of forty-two chapters).

crisis—the impending destruction of Jerusalem and its inhabitants. For centuries Jerusalem, with its land and temple, had been the center of the world for ancient Israelites, the material sign of an eternal covenant with JHWH.³¹ Its destruction meant not only the disruption of their traditional way of life but, more importantly, a serious challenge to their identity as God's chosen people. Responding to a divine calling, Nephi's father joins the chorus of local prophets who warn residents of this pending spiritual, material, social, political, and economic catastrophe. Unfortunately, Nephi's older brothers align with Jerusalem's residents and disbelieve their father's dire predictions. Nephi himself needs specific divine confirmation that Lehi's warnings come from God (1 Nephi 2:16). Thus, like those whom God had spared from earlier disasters—the Tower of Babel, the flood, and Passover—Lehi's family needs not only a way out of harm but also a renewed covenant that provides them a new homeland, divine protection, and continued identity as God's chosen.

God's first recorded words to Nephi do just that. Thus, the central themes of the covenant—obtaining a land of promise, preserving an identity as God's chosen people, and receiving the gospel of Jesus Christ—form the basis of Nephi's historical narrative. From this perspective, Nephi's record is not merely a personal, family, or dynastic history. More importantly, it is the record of a community from the perspective of a defining covenant. Salient features of this epic are:

- **Promised Land.** God directs and preserves Lehi's extended family as they allow its conditions (*commandments*) to govern their lives. Miracles, angelic interventions, divine directions, and other "tender mercies of the Lord" (1 Nephi 1:20) punctuate their experience in fleeing Jerusalem, traversing the wilderness, crossing "Irreantum" (1 Nephi 17:5), and arriving at the promised land. As a result, they know and can bear witness that "it is by [God] that [they] are led" (1 Nephi 17:13).
- **Leader.** Throughout his record, Nephi's role transitions from a subordinate younger son in the extended family to

31. "The Land of Israel is situated in the center of the world, and Jerusalem in the center of the land of Israel, and the Holy Temple in the center of Jerusalem," Midrash Tanchuma, Kedoshim 10, quoted in Sharon Liberman Mintz and Elka Deitsch, *Towards the Eternal Center: Israel, Jerusalem, and the Temple* (New York: Exhibition, 5 March 5–27 June 1996, Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America), [web.archive.org/web/20080512075630/http://www.jtsa.edu/prebuilt/exhib/etercen/index.shtml](http://www.jtsa.edu/prebuilt/exhib/etercen/index.shtml).

ruler and teacher of the covenant community. As mentioned earlier, his first recorded action in the story is a prayer that allows him to accept “all the words which had been spoken by my father” (1 Nephi 2:16), and his first recorded words (1 Nephi 3:7) identify him as the dutiful son who keeps God’s commandments as revealed directly from God or indirectly through his father. While Nephi defers to his father’s patriarchal authority throughout his life, he also fulfills a key promise of the covenant by increasingly exercising leadership. Examples include independently receiving divine revelation (for example, to understand Lehi’s dream of the tree of life), instructing his brothers (for example, on the meaning of their father’s dream), addressing his father’s faith crisis (regarding the broken bow incident), taking crucial initiatives (for example, building the ship and guiding the ocean crossing), assuring himself of being qualified to assume leadership of the group despite his imperfections, and creating a new covenant community as directed by the Lord.

- **Chosen People.** Becoming and sustaining an identity as a “chosen people” complement the quest for the land of promise in Nephi’s record. Doing so is the focus of the angel’s promise to Nephi for obtaining the brass plates (1 Nephi 4:13) and the objective of the second mission to Jerusalem (1 Nephi 7). The rebelliousness of Laman and Lemuel is one of Nephi’s first extended commentaries in the narrative (1 Nephi 2:8–14), the focus of Nephi’s first independent initiative resulting in God’s covenant (1 Nephi 2:18), and repeated portions of the historical narrative (1 Nephi 3:18–21; 7:6–19; 17:17–55; 18:9–20; 2 Nephi 5:1–3). In short, documenting the family’s perpetual rift³² is a crucial subtext of the book of 1 Nephi and of the account of their formal separation following Lehi’s death (2 Nephi 5).
- **Inspired Record.** Nephi begins his record with a declaration of its authenticity and interpretive focus:

. . . having had a great knowledge of the goodness
and the mysteries of God, therefore I make a record

32. 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): 217–64, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/josiah-to-zoram-to-sherem-to-jarom-and-the-big-little-book-of-omni.

of my proceedings in my days. Yea, I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians. And I know that the record which I make is true; and I make it with mine own hand; and I make it according to my knowledge.

But behold, I, Nephi, will show unto you that the tender mercies of the Lord are over all those whom he hath chosen, because of their faith, to make them mighty even unto the power of deliverance. (1 Nephi 1:1–3, 20)

Nephi declares that his record is accurate and true and that it focuses on temporal and eternal salvation.³³ Consistent with this interpretive focus, Nephi's major editorial asides are covenant-based: reflecting on the spiritual significance of his record (1 Nephi 6, 9) and the legitimacy of his leadership, whose major responsibility is to keep a record (2 Nephi 4:15–35). Upon arriving in the land of promise, which constitutes initial fulfillment of the first covenant promise, Nephi's record details an account of his making plates on which he engraves his first record (1 Nephi 19). Fulfillment of the second covenant promise — being distinguished as a covenant people — completes the historical portion of his record, which includes an account of his making the set of plates on which he engraves his second record (2 Nephi 5).

Prophetic discourse

Nephi's record includes prophecies of Lehi, Nephi, Jacob, and Isaiah. While 80% of Nephi's record is devoted to prophetic discourse, Nephi repeatedly indicates that he is highly selective in the prophecies he chooses to include.³⁴ The thesis of this study is that this editorial emphasis reflects Nephi's intent to frame and focus his second record on the covenant which constitutes God's first recorded speech in the Book of Mormon. Table 3 illustrates the extent to which the prophecies of Nephi's record feature the three principal themes of God's covenant with Nephi: promised land, chosen people, and Christ's gospel.

33. *Deliverance*. The noun *deliverance* and its variations appear several dozen times in Nephi's record, almost exclusively in the contexts of temporal and eternal salvation. See Shapiro, *Concordance*, s.vv. "deliver," "deliverance," "delivered," "deliveredst," "delivereth," "delivering."

34. For example, 1 Nephi 1:16–17; 6:1–3; 9:1; 10:15; 14:28–30; 19:22–24; 2 Nephi 4:14–15; 5:33; 11:1–2; 31:2.

Table 3. Recorded prophecies in Nephi's record.

Prophecy	Lehi	Nephi	Jacob	Isaiah	Covenant Theme
Destruction of Jerusalem	1 Nephi 1:13, 18; 10:3		2 Nephi 6:8		Promised Land
Scattering and Gathering of Israel (ancient)	1 Nephi 10:3, 12–14; 2 Nephi 3	1 Nephi 22:3–6;		1 Nephi 20:12–22; 2 Nephi 7:1–11; 12:6–22; 13; 15:1–30; 16:10–12; 19:13–21	Chosen People
Nephite-Lamanite Warfare		1 Nephi 12:2–3; 2 Nephi 26:2			Chosen People, Promised Land
Ministry of Jesus Christ to the Holy Land and Promised Land	1 Nephi 1:19; 10:4–11; 2 Nephi 2:6–18	1 Nephi 11:26–34; 12:6–10; 19:8–13; 2 Nephi 25:10–19; 26:1–9; 31:5–8	2 Nephi 6:9; 10:2–3	2 Nephi 7; 17:14–16; 19:1–7;	Gospel of Jesus Christ
Widespread Righteousness in Promised Land		1 Nephi 12:11–12; 2 Nephi 26:9			Chosen People, Promised Land
Destruction of Nephites as a People		1 Nephi 12:14–20; 2 Nephi 26:10–11			Chosen People
Gentiles occupy the Promised Land		1 Nephi 13:10–19; 22:7–9; 2 Nephi 26:19			Promised Land
Widespread Wickedness in the World (latter days)		1 Nephi 12:21–23; 13:1–9; 14:14–16; 2 Nephi 26:20–22; 27:1–5; 28			Gospel of Jesus Christ

Prophecy	Lehi	Nephi	Jacob	Isaiah	Covenant Theme
Role of Scriptures (latter day)	2 Nephi 3:11–21	1 Nephi 13:20–42; 14:18–30; 2 Nephi 25:21–27; 26:15–17; 27:6–35; 29			Gospel of Jesus Christ
Restoration of Israel, Establishment of Zion, and Conversion of Gentiles (latter day)	1 Nephi 10:12–14; 2 Nephi 4:7–9	1 Nephi 14:1–14; 15:12–20; 19:15–17; 22:9–14; 2 Nephi 25:17–22; 26:12–16; 27:6–25; 30	2 Nephi 6:10–12	1 Nephi 21: 7–22; 2 Nephi 8; 10:18–22; 12; 14; 15:26–30; 21; 22; 24:1–7, 26–32	All three themes
Fulfilling the covenant: judgment, millenium, resurrection (latter day)	1 Nephi 8; 10; 2 Nephi 2:27–29;	1 Nephi 11:35–36; 13:37–42; 14:1–17; 15:29–36; 22:15–28; 2 Nephi 30:1–10;	2 Nephi 6:13–18; 9:7–26;	1 Nephi 20; 21:23–26; 2 Nephi 8; 20; 21; 23; 24	All three themes

As can be seen, virtually all the prophecies in the books of 1 and 2 Nephi feature the three dominant themes of God's covenant with Nephi. This focus reinforces Nephi's intent to center his record on his covenant with God. Supporting this thesis is the fact that in their respective commentaries Nephi and Jacob identify covenants as a principal purpose for including selected prophecies of Isaiah in Nephi's record.

... for the Lord God will fulfill his covenants which he has made unto his children; and for this cause the prophet [Isaiah] has written these things. (2 Nephi 6:12)

And now, my beloved brethren, I have read these things [the prophecies of Isaiah] that ye might know concerning the covenants of the Lord that he has covenanted with all the house of Israel—That he has spoken unto the Jews, by the mouth of his holy prophets, even from the beginning down, from generation to generation, until the time comes that they shall be restored to the true church and fold of

God [Christ's gospel]; when they shall be gathered home to the lands of their inheritance [chosen people], and shall be established in all their lands of promise [promised land]. (2 Nephi 9:1–2)

And also my soul delighteth in the covenants of the Lord which he hath made to our fathers. (2 Nephi 11:5)

The historical and prophetic contents of Nephi's record contribute to the thesis of this study in the following ways.

- **Editorial focus.** Nephi curates the content of his record to be consistent with a widespread practice of biblical writers, whose principal purpose was to preserve and reinforce the “pious tradition” of their society.³⁵ The editorial focus and literary craftsmanship of Nephi's record reinforce the spiritual significance of its contents, and all three features (promised land, chosen people, and Christ's gospel) align with and support the authoritative foundations of the Nephite worldview. All other details of Nephi's life and times are marginal to this perspective and are therefore omitted from the record.
- **Antecedents and complements.** Nephi's second record acknowledges the authoritative writings of his father Lehi and Hebrew prophets from the brass plates, especially Isaiah. He also builds upon his first record, includes the witness of his brother Jacob, and defers to the Apostle John to complete his account of the plan of salvation. These authoritative witnesses reinforce and complement one another to strengthen Nephi's own compelling witness of the truth.
- **Origins and foundations.** Nephi's worldview is initially formed in the education he received from his “goodly parents” and from his formal training in “the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians,” supplemented by his intensive study of the brass plates (1 Nephi 1:1–2; 2 Nephi 4:15). This training becomes *his* through two direct and explicit encounters with the divine. God's covenant with Nephi (1 Nephi 2:20–24) frames and focuses his worldview and his vision of the redemption of mankind (1 Nephi 11–14). It illustrates how the covenant, with its core dynamics and

35. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 14, archive.org/details/mimesisrepresent00auer/page/14/mode/2up.

central themes, informs the salvific history of the earth and its inhabitants.

- **Covenant focus.** Nephi's record consists of two quite different sets of contents—historical narrative that documents the past and prophetic discourse that anticipates the future. Nephi intentionally combines the two and integrates them in his record using the three principal themes of God's covenant—promised land, chosen people, and Christ's gospel. Nephi honors this covenant by having it be God's first recorded speech in his sacred record and the foundation of his worldview.
- **Worldview.** The temporal dimension of Nephi's worldview is reflected in the similar craftsmanship of its historical and prophetic contents. For Nephi, the past and the future are part of the same reality, and spiritual gifts, including revelation, are crucial to integrate both into a single comprehensive perspective. The spatial dimension of Nephi's worldview is made meaningful by the divine designation of lands of promise—actual physical places that are distinguished from the rest of the earth's territorial environment—as material signs of a covenant with God. Lands of promise provide a model for the proper ordering of the earth according to a heavenly pattern, to emphasize the harmony of heavenly and earthly habitations. The social dimension of Nephi's worldview privileges a covenant community that occasionally models a lifestyle worthy of the blessings of eternity and the presence of God. The basis for this moral order is the commandments of God expressed in the law of Moses, gospel of Jesus Christ, and personal revelations to the spiritual leaders of the extended family.

In short, Nephi's worldview is grounded in authoritative sources, animated by an eternal covenant, explicated by divine revelations and visions, and realized by human experience. His record is a witness to the truthfulness of this worldview and to its significance for all mankind.

Covenant-based Structures of Nephi's Record

Besides informing the language and themes of Nephi's record, God's covenant with Nephi gives meaning to the structure of the written text

in two complementary ways: Nephi's prevalent use of binary contrasts and the division of his record into two books, 1 and 2 Nephi.

Binary contrasts

Binary contrasts are one of the most common examples of the widespread literary convention of parallelism in the Hebrew Bible and Book of Mormon.³⁶ As seen above, binary contrasts order the text of God's covenant with Nephi. They also define social relationships in Nephi's record along two complementary axes.

- **Vertical Axis.** The covenant binds God as *father* to his *people* as *sons and daughters or children*. As *Father*, God defines the terms of the covenant, and as *son*, Nephi may only accept or reject the terms. He and his followers cannot alter them.³⁷
- **Horizontal Axis.** The covenant binds *people* together and distinguishes them from all other human groups. As in the Hebrew Bible, in the Book of Mormon "the covenant is the underlying principle of family solidarity," and "through the covenant, the family becomes the source of religious unity and social cohesion."³⁸ Common markers of covenant-based group identity and solidarity include distinctive names, customs, living arrangements, languages, cultural values, and societal norms and institutions. The covenant privileges those whose lives and lifestyles align with the covenant but not those who violate its stipulations. It also recognizes binary moral contrasts that distinguish earthly populations by the contrasting verbs, "keep" and "rebel," as mentioned above.

Parallel structure of 1 and 2 Nephi

Nephi's choice to divide his record into 1 and 2 Nephi where he does

36. Berlin, *Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, 11–13, 140–41. The convention of parallelism in the Book of Mormon is ably treated by Donald W. Parry in *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Maxwell Institute, 2007) and Steven L. Olsen, "'An Opposition in All Things': Binary Contrasts in the Book of Mormon," (presentation, Book of Mormon Symposium, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, 11 October 1987).

37. "The father-son relationship is a constant and critical part of suzerain-vassal treaty relationships." Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 60.

38. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 38–39, 41.

makes little narrative sense. As reflected in its first sentence, the book of 2 Nephi simply continues the extended public devotional that ends Nephi's first book.³⁹ Thus, Nephi must have had a more crucial rhetorical purpose than chronological integrity to divide his record at this point. As reflected in table 4, the parallel ordering of 1 and 2 Nephi reveals a possible justification for the division. God's covenant with Nephi is central to this structural logic.

Table 4. Parallel structure of 1 and 2 Nephi.

Element	1 Nephi	2 Nephi
1	Lehi's initial spiritual experiences and prophecies culminate in God's covenant with Nephi (chaps. 1–2)	Lehi's final prophetic blessings are expressed in covenantal terms (chaps. 1–4)
2	Israel's righteous "remnant" separates from the wicked residents of Jerusalem. The covenant's purposes are initially fulfilled. Nephi begins his first record. (chaps. 3–19)	The righteous portion of Israel's "remnant" separates from its wicked portion. The covenant's purposes are further fulfilled. Nephi begins his second record. (chap. 5)
3	Nephi and Jacob quote from and comment on Isaiah's prophecies. The record focuses on the covenant's purposes "according to the flesh." (chaps. 20–22)	Nephi and Jacob quote from and comment on Isaiah's prophecies. The record focuses on the eternal purposes of the covenant (chaps. 6–33)

Each element in table 4 deserves additional consideration. Element 1 highlights that Lehi's initial and final spiritual experiences are set in a covenant context.

- 1 Nephi opens with Lehi's vision of God in which he receives a sure knowledge of Jerusalem's impending destruction, the coming of the Messiah, and the eventual redemption of the

39. In addition to developing the thesis of the present study, this point contributes to an ongoing academic discussion on whether and why Nephi divided his record as in published editions of the Book of Mormon. For an eloquent summary of this debate from one perspective, see Noel B. Reynolds, "On Doubting Nephi's Break Between 1 and 2 Nephi: A Critique of Joseph Spencer's *Another Testament: On Typology*," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 25 (2017): 85–102, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/on-doubting-nephis-break-between-1-and-2-nephi-a-critique-of-joseph-spencers-an-other-testament-on-typology. The present analysis offers another perspective in support of Reynolds's position of privileging the division of Nephi's record as contained in the published editions of the Book of Mormon.

world (1 Nephi 1:4–19). Thereafter, Lehi and Nephi receive additional spiritual experiences that culminate in a covenant that anticipates the major contours of their thousand-year extended family history (1 Nephi 1–2).

- 2 Nephi opens with Lehi’s final blessings to his posterity, expressed in the form of prophetic discourses that emphasize the three dominant covenant-based themes: promised land, Christ’s gospel, and chosen people. These anchor an understanding of the plan of salvation (2 Nephi 1–4).

In element 2, covenant peoples are differentiated and separated by their contrasting faithfulness to the covenant.

- The bulk of 1 Nephi details the separation of Lehi’s “remnant” from the main body of the house of Israel in the Holy Land. Lehi’s extended family is led to a land choice above all other lands, and Jerusalem is destroyed, with most of her residents killed or led captive into Babylon (1 Nephi 3–19).
- The corresponding segment of 2 Nephi occupies a single, crucial chapter in which Nephi leads his followers to a separate land of promise where they prosper according to the covenant. By contrast, the Lamanites are cut off from the presence of the Lord and are cursed according to the covenant. These salient covenant-based events conclude Nephi’s historical narrative (2 Nephi 5).

Element 3 notes that prophecies about the plan of salvation conclude the respective books of 1 and 2 Nephi. The covenant with Nephi is central to these prophecies.

- The book of 1 Nephi ends with several citations from Isaiah’s prophecies. Jacob’s and Nephi’s extended commentaries emphasize central covenant-based themes—the coming of the Messiah, the scattering and gathering of Israel, converting Gentiles, and establishing Zion. In 1 Nephi 22:8–9 Nephi explicitly mentions that this “marvelous work . . . which shall be of great worth” is in fulfillment of the “covenants of the Father of heaven unto Abraham.” Thus, “In thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed” (1 Nephi 20–22).
- The bulk of 2 Nephi consists of extended citations from Isaiah’s prophecies accompanied by commentaries by Jacob and Nephi. Together, they explicate a concept of eternal life that integrates mortality and eternity into a powerful

and profound worldview whose centerpiece is God's covenant with Nephi (2 Nephi 6–33).

The foregoing illustrates that a key structuring device for Nephi's record is parallelism, centered on covenant themes. From this perspective, 1 and 2 Nephi are parallel accounts of Nephi's ministry that are structured around a covenant whose words constitute God's first recorded speech in the Book of Mormon.

Summary and Conclusion

While biblical (and Book of Mormon) poetics employ a variety of literary conventions for mnemonic and aesthetic purposes, Sternberg uses the phrase "ideological literature" to propose a deeper rhetorical purpose.⁴⁰ The stories and books of the Hebrew Bible are crafted to preserve the "pious tradition"⁴¹ of the house of Israel, which identifies their acceptance by God as a covenant people. The present study claims that a similar purpose motivates Book of Mormon authors. Nephi focuses his official record on God's first recorded speech—a covenant that gives ultimate meaning to their marginal residence, fractured ethnic identity, collective experience, and legacy, including their eventual destruction, and lays the conceptual foundations of a sacred worldview.

In sum, this study suggests that God's covenant with Nephi is one of the most, if not *the* most comprehensive and unifying statements in Nephi's record if not the entire Book of Mormon.



[Author's Note: *An earlier version of this study was presented at the Association for Mormon Letters conference at Snow College, Ephraim, UT, 28–30 May 2025.*]

Steven L. Olsen (BA, Brigham Young University, 1975; AM, Ph.D., University of Chicago, 1978, 1985) is Master Curator of the Church History Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, where he has worked his entire career (four plus decades) creating

40. The quoted words are from the subtitle of Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*. (See note 3.)

41. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 14.

museum exhibits, restoring historic sites, and leading organizational change. He has also been president or board member of a variety of state, regional, and national professional service organizations. He publishes widely in the fields of Latter-day Saint studies and museums studies and frequently presents at scholarly and professional conferences.

Estranged No More: Covenant and a Reclaimed Identity of the Lamanites

John E. Cochran II

Abstract: *This article reexamines Lamanite identity in the Book of Mormon, arguing that in addition to referencing a specific branch of Lehi's posterity, even more importantly, the term Lamanite can also function as a covenantal designation describing those estranged from God yet remembered through divine mercy. Drawing on Jacob 1:13–14 and related passages that define Nephite and Lamanite identity by covenant allegiance, this study situates the term within a redemptive pattern of estrangement and return. Read in hindsight, this framework can be applied to reframe the 1830 mission to the Lamanites with an interpretive lens that reveals the limits of merely lineage-based expectations of covenant belonging. Integrating scripture with early Restoration history and theological reflection, the article shows how covenant identity transcends ancestry while preserving cultural particularity. The result is a vision of Lamanite identity that is both ancient and expansive, bearing witness to a God who gathers those who respond to covenantal grace.*

This study adopts a covenantal reading of Book of Mormon identity categories, treating *Nephite* and *Lamanite* not only as genealogical markers but also as covenantal designations. They are narrative and theological labels applied within the record to indicate a people's relationship to God's covenant over time. Such designations are descriptive rather than prescriptive. They do not erase lineage or mandate social reclassification but function editorially to assess covenant fidelity, estrangement, and readiness for restoration.

This approach does not deny the historical reality of lineage or the

covenant promises made to Lehi concerning his posterity. Rather, it proceeds from the observation that the text itself repeatedly complicates any attempt to treat ancestry as the final arbiter of covenant standing. Throughout the record, narrators and prophetic figures employ inherited names relationally, sometimes reaffirming ancestral identity, sometimes overriding it, and, often, holding the two in tension. In moments of covenant rupture, repentance, and restoration, identity is portrayed as unfolding over time through response to revelation rather than being fixed solely by pedigree. Read in this way, instances of naming, renaming, and identity compression function as theological signals rather than narrative inconsistencies.

The term *Lamanite* in the Book of Mormon has long been read as an ethnic designation, referring to the descendants of Laman and Lemuel and later associated with Indigenous peoples of the Americas. This lineage-based reading is grounded both in the text itself and in the covenant promises made to Lehi concerning his posterity. At the same time, the record repeatedly complicates any attempt to treat Lamanite identity as purely genealogical.

Jarom explains that the plates were preserved “for the intent and benefit of our brethren, the Lamanites” (Jarom 1:2), framing the purpose of the record as an act of covenant remembrance oriented toward restoration and return. This statement presupposes more than generalized reconciliation; it also reflects specific covenant promises made to Lehi concerning his seed. From the beginning, Lehi was assured that although his posterity might experience seasons of estrangement, the Lord would remember them and would not suffer them to be “utterly destroyed” (2 Nephi 4:9). The preservation of the plates functions not only as theological abstraction but as fidelity to a concrete ancestral promise. The record is kept because God has pledged himself to remember a particular people.

Enos makes this covenant orientation unmistakable. After receiving assurance of his own redemption, his concern immediately turns outward toward “my brethren, the Lamanites” (Enos 1:11). His prayer is not abstractly universal but directed toward a specific people who, right then “swore in their wrath” to destroy both the Nephites and their records (v. 14). Recognizing the fragility of his own society, Enos anticipates a future in which the Nephites may fall and the Lamanites endure. His petition, therefore, centers on preservation: “that the Lord God would preserve a record of my people . . . that it might be brought

forth at some future day unto the Lamanites, that, perhaps, they might be brought unto salvation" (v. 13).

The Lord responds not merely with reassurance but with covenantal commitment: "I will grant unto thee according to thy desires" (v. 12). Thus, Enos knew that "he would bring them forth unto the Lamanites in his own due time" (v. 16). He explicitly interprets this promise as covenantal fulfillment: "I, Enos, knew it would be according to the covenant which he had made; wherefore my soul did rest" (v. 17). The preservation of the record is thus anchored in divine fidelity to promises made concerning Lehi's seed. The future return of the Lamanites is not speculative hope but covenant expectation.

The sons of Mosiah intensify this covenant orientation in lived form. Their desire to preach among the Lamanites is framed explicitly in terms of kinship: they seek permission "that they might impart the word of God to their brethren, the Lamanites" (Mosiah 28:1). Their aim is not conquest but reconciliation: "that perhaps they might bring them to the knowledge of the Lord their God, and . . . cure them of their hatred . . . that there should be no more contentions in all the land" (v. 2). The language is familial and covenantal. The Lamanites are not treated as outsiders to be absorbed but as estranged brethren to be restored.

Yet Mormon's narration immediately widens the frame. The sons of Mosiah are described as "desirous that salvation should be declared to every creature" (v. 3). Their covenant longing for their brethren becomes the seedbed of universal compassion. Significantly, this expansion does not displace the promises made to Lehi's posterity; rather, it grows organically from them. Their grief for the Lamanites coexists with an unwillingness to see any soul perish. Covenant fidelity and universal invitation are not competing impulses but mutually reinforcing ones.

Their own history further illuminates the pattern. Once described as "the very vilest of sinners" who feared being "cast off forever" (v. 4), they had themselves stood at the brink of covenant exclusion. Their missionary resolve emerges from having experienced mercy within estrangement. In this way, their mission embodies the very logic that undergirds the preservation of the record: those who have been reclaimed seek the reclamation of others. Promise to posterity and repentance through response remain inseparable.

If Jarom, Enos, and the sons of Mosiah demonstrate prophetic longing for the return of Lehi's seed, Jacob's editorial clarification shows how covenant standing is evaluated within that very promise.

Jacob's explanation of Nephite and Lamanite identity makes this covenant logic explicit. He writes the following:

Now the people which were not Lamanites were Nephites; nevertheless, they were called Nephites, Jacobites, Josephites, Zoramites, Lamanites, Lemuelites, and Ishmaelites. But I, Jacob, shall not hereafter distinguish them by these names, but I shall call them Lamanites that seek to destroy the people of Nephi, and those who are friendly to Nephi I shall call Nephites, or the people of Nephi, according to the reigns of the kings. (Jacob 1:13–14)

At a minimum, this passage reflects the simplification of social categories during a time of conflict, distinguishing those aligned with Nephi's people from those opposed to them. Further, it also opens a broader interpretive horizon in which ancestral labels give way to relational ones. Names once tied primarily to lineage are applied according to covenant allegiance. Read in this way, Jacob reframes identity so that covenant loyalty becomes the primary determinant, even as ancestry remains part of the narrative background. This reading does not deny that *Lamanite* also functions historically as a lineage designation; instead, it argues that the Book of Mormon persistently refuses to let lineage serve as the final arbiter of covenantal standing.

This pattern recurs throughout the record. At times, individuals and communities designated as Lamanites are depicted as living in covenant fidelity (Helaman 6:1–3), while Nephite societies descend into pride and estrangement. In some cases, conversion results in renaming, such as the Anti-Nephi-Lehies (Alma 23:17), but, in other instances, the inherited designation persists even as covenant standing shifts. Mormon continues to speak of Lamanites whose righteousness exceeds that of the Nephites (Moroni 9:20; cf. Jacob 3:5–7). These episodes demonstrate that inherited names and covenant acceptance do not always coincide. Identity unfolds through covenant response rather than through the mere persistence or abandonment of ancestral labels.

The Book of Mormon at times employs *Lamanite* not only as a genealogical designation but also as a covenantal marker within a recurring pattern of estrangement and return. Those who bear the name may stand at a distance from covenant fidelity while remaining within the reach of divine remembrance. At the same time, the record demonstrates that the designation does not disappear immediately

upon repentance. Samuel the Lamanite prophesies with full covenant authority while retaining his inherited title, and the converted people of Ammon continue to be identified by their Lamanite ancestry even as their covenantal standing is transformed. These examples indicate that lineage and covenant condition are related but not mechanically identical. Identity unfolds through response over time.¹

Nephi articulates the governing principle succinctly: "as many of the Gentiles as will repent are the covenant people of the Lord; and as many of the Jews as will not repent shall be cast off" (2 Nephi 30:2). Ancestry alone does not secure covenant belonging, nor does estrangement permanently foreclose it. The Lord "covenanteth with none save it be with them that repent and believe in his Son" (2 Nephi 30:2). Read in this light, the 1830 mission to the Lamanites may be understood not merely as outreach to presumed descendants but as a moment in which early Saints encountered the same covenant logic embedded in the Book of Mormon itself. Promises to posterity remain binding and meaningful yet covenant identity is ultimately realized through repentance and faith in Christ.

Tracing this movement from lineage to covenant places early missionary history and modern questions of belonging within a single redemptive pattern grounded in God's ongoing work of gathering His children. In this light, the Book of Mormon functions as a theology of

1. For complementary scholarly treatments of the Book of Mormon's address to the Lamanites and the relationship between covenant restoration and cultural context, see Gary P. Gillum, "Written to the Lamanites: Understanding the Book of Mormon through Native Culture and Religion," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 6 (2013): 31–48, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/written-to-the-lamanites-understanding-the-book-of-mormon-through-native-culture-and-religion; and Matthew L. Bowen, "That They May Once Again Be a Delightful People: The Concept of Again Becoming the Seed of Joseph (Words of Mormon 1:8 and Mormon 7:4–5)," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 61 (2024): 165–90, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/that-they-may-once-again-be-a-delightful-people-the-concept-of-again-becoming-the-seed-of-joseph-words-of-mormon-18-and-mormon-74-5. Gillum explores how the Book of Mormon can be read across multiple cultural frameworks without reducing Lamanite identity to a single geographic or ethnic referent, while Bowen demonstrates that Mormon's language of restoration ("once again") draws on covenantal and literary patterns rooted in the Joseph narrative rather than biological descent alone. Together, these studies support a reading of Lamanite identity in which covenantal orientation and redemptive purpose are primary interpretive lenses, even as genealogical descent remains part of the Book of Mormon's narrative framework.

reconciliation whose claims can extend beyond ancient divisions and into the present.

The 1830 Mission to the Lamanites

A possible early Restoration context for covenant identity appears in the 1830 mission to the Lamanites, one of the first organized missionary efforts of the newly established Church of Christ. Oliver Cowdery, Parley P. Pratt, Peter Whitmer Jr., and Ziba Peterson were called to “go unto the Lamanites” (Doctrine and Covenants 28:8, 30:5–8, 32:2), carrying with them the Book of Mormon as a witness that the Lord had “remembered his covenant” (Psalm 105:8) with the house of Israel. The charge given in Doctrine and Covenants 28 situates the mission within a covenantal framework in which response to revealed scripture marks the way God gathers His people. From the outset, the mission reflected an expectation of covenant renewal expressed through inherited language of ancestry.

Early Saints understood this calling in literal, genealogical terms. Joseph Smith later described the Book of Mormon as “a record of the forefathers of our western tribes of Indians,” identifying them as descendants of Joseph in Egypt and viewing America as their covenant land.² The missionaries, therefore, saw themselves as participants in prophecy, engaged in the anticipated gathering of Israel and specifically the descendants of Lehi.

They departed from Fayette, New York, in October 1830, walking more than 1,500 miles through the onset of winter. Their route passed through Mentor and Kirtland, Ohio, before continuing toward the western border of Missouri. The revelation directing the mission provided no map or itinerary. Instead, it promised divine presence and protection: “I myself will go with them and be in their midst; and I am their advocate with the Father, and nothing shall prevail against them” (Doctrine and Covenants 32:3).

The mission unfolded amid a period of significant national upheaval. In 1830 (the same year the elders departed), the United States Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, authorizing the forced relocation of eastern Native nations west of the Mississippi River. At the same time, federal regulations administered through the Office of

2. “Letter from Joseph Smith to N. C. Saxton, 4 January 1833,” in *Personal Writing of Joseph Smith*, ed. and comp. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 297.

Indian Affairs required formal licenses for missionary activity among Native peoples, requirements largely unknown to the newly organized Church. The elders' journey thus collided with the defining paradox of their age: a government that sought to remove the very peoples a new scripture had promised to restore.

The missionaries were denied official permission after encountering resistance from Richard Cummins, the Indian agent at Fort Leavenworth, who reported their activities to William Clark, Superintendent of Indian Affairs. Cummins wrote the following:

A few days agoe three Men all Strangers to me went among the Indians Shawanees & Delawares, they say for the purpose of preaching to and Instructing them in Religious Matters, they say they are sent by God and must proceed, they have a new Revelation with them, as there Guide in teaching the Indians, which they say was shown to one of their Sects in a Miraculous way, and that an Angela from Heaven appeared to one of their Men and tow others of their Sect, and shewed them that the work was from God, and much more & c.

I have refused to let them stay or, go among the Indians unless they first obtain permission from you or, some of the officers of the Genl. Government who I am bound to obey.³

Cowdery petitioned Clark for authorization to preach and establish schools, but no reply came, and the elders were ordered to withdraw from the territory.⁴ Before reaching the border, they shared their message with several nations, including the Seneca, Shawnee, and Wyandot. Parley P. Pratt's memoir offers little detail about these encounters, suggesting that their impact was limited and uneven.⁵

Among the Delaware nation, led by Chief William Anderson, they found a moment of hearing. Anderson received them courteously as

3. "Richard Cummins to William Clark, February 1831," quoted in Kaleb C. Miner, "O Stop and Tell Me, Red Man': Indian Removal and the Lamanite Mission of 1830–31" (master's thesis, Missouri State University, 2018), 24, bearworks.missouristate.edu/theses/3295.

4. "Letter from Oliver Cowdery to William Clark, 14 February 1831," quoted in Leland H. Gentry, "Light on the 'Mission to the Lamanites,'" *BYU Studies* 36, no. 2 (1996–97): 233, byustudies.byu.edu/article/light-on-the-mission-to-the-lamanites.

5. Parley P. Pratt, *The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Chicago: Law, King & Law, 1888), 49–55, archive.org/details/autobiographyofp00prat/page/48/mode/2up.

Cowdery presented the Book of Mormon as a record of their ancestors and a testimony that they were a covenant people remembered by God.⁶ Though no conversions followed, the exchange stood in quiet contrast to the prevailing Christian sentiment that viewed native peoples as lost or cursed.⁷ It was a brief encounter of listening and dignity. God's remembrance became visible in hindsight in ways the missionaries did not yet fully grasp.

As Leland H. Gentry's archival study demonstrates, the missionaries' subsequent removal from Indian Territory reflected federal enforcement of the 1802 Trade and Intercourse Act and the expanding authority of Indian agents, rather than rejection by native communities. Government regulations required special licenses for missionary activity among Indian nations, and the elders, unaware of these requirements, were expelled by Indian agents acting under federal authority.⁸ The mission's abrupt end thus resulted from political exclusion, not theological refusal or lack of receptivity. Read in this light, the 1830 mission does not signify covenant failure but covenant interruption. It was an initial encounter whose fulfillment would be deferred rather than denied.

The Perceived Failure

By early 1831, the missionaries had returned East, and the mission was widely regarded as unfinished. No formal branch had been established among native nations, and federal agents had restricted their access to Indian Territory. Parley P. Pratt's own account of the journey east captured the venture's modest results. In Cincinnati, he recalled, the elders "preached to many of the people, but without much success."⁹

6. For a detailed historical analysis of the 1830–1831 Lamanite Mission, including the impact of Indian Removal on the Seneca, Wyandot, Shawnee, and Delaware, and additional primary sources beyond Pratt's account, see Miner, "O Stop and Tell Me, Red Man: Indian Removal and the Lamanite Mission of 1830–31." Miner's work provides nuanced context for Native American responses, particularly the Delaware's receptivity, though it focuses on socio-political rather than theological dimensions.

7. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 60.

8. Gentry, "Light on the 'Mission to the Lamanites,'" which documents the missionaries' expulsion from Indian Territory under federal regulation and explains the historical context of the 1830–31 mission.

9. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 54.

Judged by immediate and visible outcomes, the mission appeared inconclusive.¹⁰

For many years, the 1830 mission has been read in straightforward terms: the elders reached the Delaware and Shawnee, presented the Book of Mormon to tribal leaders, and were then turned back by law and suspicion. Measured by institutional outcomes, the effort appeared unsuccessful. Still, a closer reading situates the mission within a revelatory moment that clarified how covenant identity operates in the Book of Mormon. Rather than functioning as a failed outreach, the journey exposed the limits of lineage-based expectations that shaped early Restoration thought. The elders went west anticipating the visible fulfillment of promises to Lehi's descendants. However, the Book of Mormon often teaches that covenant belonging is not secured by lineage alone but is realized through repentance and belief in Christ. In this light, the mission reveals the tension between promise to posterity and the necessity of covenant response. Rather than seeing failure, we can understand that this episode thus revealed an unresolved tension in early Restoration theology concerning how sacred identity is recognized and enacted.

Jacob's rebuke locates moral evaluation and prophetic indictment in lived fidelity rather than inherited status. He does not claim that the Lamanites have already entered Nephite covenant life. Instead, he uses their obedience in a specific commandment to expose Nephite covenant failure and to warn that privilege does not protect a people from judgment. Jacob's language is explicit:

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 have not forgotten the commandment of the Lord, which was given unto our father—that they should have save it were one wife, and concubines they should have none, and there should not be whoredoms committed among them.

10. See Byron R. Merrill, "Joseph Smith and the Lamanites," in *Joseph Smith: The Prophet, the Man*, ed. Susan Easton Black (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1993), 201–202, rsc.byu.edu/joseph-smith-prophet-man/joseph-smith-lamanites, where Merrill notes that "from the very beginning, the concept of conversion of the Lamanites was closely connected to the establishment of the city Zion," citing Oliver Cowdery's affidavit describing his mission both "to preach the fulness of the gospel to the Lamanites" and "to rear up a pillar as a witness where the temple of God shall be built, in the glorious new Jerusalem."

And now, this commandment they observe to keep; wherefore, 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? (Jacob 3:5–7)

As Matthew Bowen has argued, Jacob’s question “how much better are you than they” carries rhetorical force precisely because the name *Nephi* is associated with the idea of goodness or fairness. In this light, Jacob’s rebuke does not imply that the Lamanites have become Nephites by covenant status. Rather, it suggests that the Nephites have ceased to be Nephite in any morally meaningful sense. Bowen’s onomastic insight sharpens the force of the indictment: Jacob’s “how much better” can be heard as “how much good,” puncturing Nephite self-congratulation and destabilizing any assumption that inherited identity guarantees covenant superiority.¹¹ The prophetic logic therefore preserves lineage while denying it final authority, and it frames mercy as a future-oriented covenant trajectory rather than an immediate reclassification.

King Benjamin’s covenant sermon provides the theological foundation for this reconfiguration of identity. In Mosiah 5, the people enter an individual covenant to “take upon” themselves the name of Christ, becoming “children of Christ” and heirs of His kingdom. This covenant operates at a level deeper than tribal designation. It is extended not only to the descendants of Lehi but also to the people of Zarahemla who did not participate lineally in Lehi’s covenant. Covenant belonging is thus articulated in personal and relational terms rather than in inherited ones.

Against this backdrop, Alma 23 reflects the lived consequences

11. Matthew L. Bowen, “‘Inspired by a Better Cause’: The Function of Alma 43:44–45 in Mormon’s Account of the Monarchic Wars against the Nephites,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 68 (2026): 17–18, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/inspired-by-a-better-cause-the-function-of-alma-4344-45-in-mormons-account-of-the-monarchic-wars-against-the-nephites.

of that covenant logic. Having laid down their weapons, the Lamanite converts were transformed first at the level of action: "For they became a righteous people; they did lay down the weapons of their rebellion, that they did not fight against God any more, neither against any of their brethren" (Alma 23:7). This transformation did not remain private, but it evolved into renewed social relations. As the text goes on to record, "they began to be a very industrious people; yea, and they were friendly with the Nephites; therefore, they did open a correspondence with them, and the curse of God did no more follow them" (Alma 23:18).

The transformation described here is framed in covenantal rather than genealogical language. The curse is presented as divine disfavor withdrawn in response to repentance and not as a permanent ethnic marker. Yet the narrative does not erase ancestry; the converted remain identified by their Lamanite heritage even as their covenant standing is transformed. Instead, the text emphasizes a decisive covenantal reorientation, dramatized through the deliberate adoption of the name Anti-Nephi-Lehi. This renaming signals that covenant realignment in the Book of Mormon is frequently marked through naming-practices, a narrative pattern Mormon employs elsewhere to indicate theological transformation. Identity, thus, emerges through enacted faithfulness, and belonging is sustained through repentance and covenant loyalty rather than bloodline alone.¹²

As Richard Cowan has shown, the Book of Mormon repeatedly depicts Nephites and Lamanites as exchanging moral and covenantal roles, culminating in moments in which these identities are defined explicitly by either acceptance or rejection of the gospel rather than by pedigree alone.¹³ Samuel the Lamanite warns that the Nephites (not the Lamanites) stand in imminent danger of destruction because

12. Nathan J. Arp, "Nameless to New Name: Namelessness in the Narrative of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 66 (2025): 197–218, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/nameless-to-new-name-namelessness-in-the-narrative-of-the-anti-nephi-lehies-or-the-people-of-ammon.

13. Richard O. Cowan, "The Lamanites—A More Accurate Image," in *The Book of Mormon: Fourth Nephi Through Moroni, From Zion to Destruction*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1995), archive.bookofmormoncentral.org/sites/default/files/archive-files/pdf/cowan/2015-12-09/16_richard_o._cowan_the_lamanites_1992.pdf, esp. discussion of Helaman 6 and 4 Nephi 1:20–38, where "Nephites" and "Lamanites" are distinguished by covenantal allegiance rather than genealogy.

of their rejection of prophetic counsel (Helaman 15:5–10). In Fourth Nephi, following Christ’s ministry, the people are unified with no “manner of -ites” among them (4 Nephi 1:17). Sadly, division reemerges later along lines determined by acceptance or rejection of the gospel (4 Nephi 1:36–38). In these climactic movements, lineage remains acknowledged, but covenant allegiance, rather than ancestry, defines who stands within or outside the community of the faithful.

This covenantal vision extends across the canon in a dynamic and sometimes unstable form. The Book of Mormon consistently holds two realities together. Named peoples persist as historical and social identities, while covenant standing remains spiritually contingent and evaluative. Thus 2 Nephi 26:33 proclaims the universal reach of God’s invitation:

For none of these iniquities come of the Lord; for he doeth that which is good among the children of men; and he doeth nothing save it be plain unto the children of men; and he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile.

This universal summons coexists with persistent historical lineage distinctions. Mormon can still speak of “both of the Nephites and of the Lamanites” whose hearts were hardened together (Mormon 4:11) or distinguish them as separate peoples even when neither is faithful (Mormon 8:2). Likewise, Moroni can declare that Nephite “wickedness doth exceed that of the Lamanites” (Moroni 9:20), preserving the labels while reversing their moral valuation. Such passages do not undermine Jacob’s framework; rather, they illustrate how social identity endures even as covenant standing collapses or is reassessed.

It is precisely this instability that makes figures like Samuel the Lamanite so disruptive. Samuel bears the inherited name of *Lamanite*, yet he speaks with covenantal authority to a Nephite society that has forfeited its moral claim to that identity. The text thus refuses to let inherited identity secure covenant standing. Labels endure, but their meaning is continually tested by response to Christ.

Within this framework, justice and law serve a redemptive end. Alma insists that justice is upheld “that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also” (Alma 42:15) while Lehi grounds the entire

narrative arc in Christ-centered purpose: "Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy" (2 Nephi 2:25). Estrangement functions as a covenant threshold rather than a terminal state, a space in which repentance becomes possible and joy is offered. Yet that joy is not automatic. The Book of Mormon consistently defines the "good news" as the way by which individuals come unto Christ: faith in him, repentance of sins, baptism in his name, reception of the Holy Ghost, and enduring to the end (2 Nephi 31; 3 Nephi 11; 27). As Noel Reynolds has shown, this pattern constitutes the Nephite understanding of the gospel from the earliest prophets to the final editors.¹⁴ Joy is realized not merely through lineage or hopeful inclusion but through choosing Christ, entering his covenant, and remaining faithful within it. This is the form of good news the Book of Mormon proclaims to the world.

What the early missionaries could not yet articulate, scripture had already taught: covenant identity is established through allegiance. The mission's perceived failure, therefore, reflects a deeper disclosure already embedded in the Book of Mormon's theology. God's work of gathering Israel unfolds wherever hearts awaken to covenant; it is not secured by lineage alone.

Reframing the Curse: Covenant Identity and Sacred Invitation

The Book of Mormon employs *Lamanite* and *Nephite* both as genealogical identifiers and as covenantal descriptors, preserving lineage while repeatedly refusing to let ancestry determine righteousness or belonging. The record acknowledges descent from Lehi and Sariah, and individuals frequently assert Nephite or Lamanite identity through lineage. At the same time, the narrative evaluates belonging through repentance, faith, and fidelity to God, placing moral and spiritual identity within an ongoing covenant relationship rather than ancestry alone.

Within the Book of Mormon, *Lamanite* can be seen as functioning not only as a genealogical designation but as a theological position within a recurring covenant drama, marking those who stand at a distance from God and yet who remain persistently addressed by promise. To bear the name is to inhabit the tension between estrangement and belonging, judgment and remembrance. The designation does

14. Noel B. Reynolds, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets," *BYU Studies* 31, no. 3 (1991): 31–50, byustudies.byu.edu/article/the-gospel-of-jesus-christ-as-taught-by-the-nephite-prophets.

not erase descent, but, within the narrative, it often signals a people whose covenant relationship is in jeopardy but not beyond restoration.

When the Lord speaks of the Lamanites, the emphasis often falls on covenant address rather than external alteration. Lehi, in blessing the children of Laman, does not describe an irreversible transformation of nature but promises that the Lord will remember them and that they will not be destroyed (2 Nephi 4:9). Jarom preserves the plates “for the intent of the benefit of our brethren the Lamanites,” anticipating their future restoration (Jarom 1:2). Enos secures a covenant promise that the record will one day be brought forth unto them: “that, perhaps, they might be brought unto salvation” (Enos 1:13–17). Across these early witnesses, the Lamanites are addressed as a people under promise and not as a people beyond reach.

Within this covenant framework, the term *curse* functions not as an irreversible biological inheritance but as a condition of divine disfavor tied to rebellion and capable of withdrawal through repentance.¹⁵ Alma’s account of the converted Lamanites states that “the curse of God did no more follow them” (Alma 23:18), language that portrays the curse as relational rather than essential. Similarly, Jacob affirms that the Lord “will not destroy them” and that “one day they shall become a blessed people” (Jacob 3:6), framing estrangement as temporary and future-oriented. In these and other passages, the curse marks distance from covenant fidelity, not exclusion from covenant possibility.

Lehi articulates that pattern in his final discourse. His words are unmistakably a warning—a warning spoken inside a blessing. His charge to awake, arise from the dust, and to “shake of the chains with which ye are bound” (2 Nephi 1:23) does not soften judgment; it announces urgency. But Lehi then places a promise at the center of that urgency: “If ye are cursed,” he tells his grandchildren, “behold, I leave my blessing upon you” (2 Nephi 4:6). That *if* marks the hinge of covenant theology: distance is frequently paired with promise conditioned upon faithfulness. “The Lord God will not suffer that ye shall perish . . . he will be merciful unto you and unto your seed forever” (2 Nephi 4:7).

This covenant pattern extends beyond the Book of Mormon. Simeon prophesied that Christ would be “set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel” (Luke 2:34), indicating that encounter with

15. T. J. Uriona, “Life and Death, Blessing and Cursing: Covenant Context for the ‘Skin of Blackness’ in 2 Nephi 5,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (2023): 122–27, byustudies.byu.edu/article/life-and-death-blessing-and-cursing.

the Messiah would expose allegiance and produce division according to response. Paul likewise rejects the idea that Israel's stumbling was final: "Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid" (Romans 11:11). Though branches are "broken off" because of unbelief (v. 20), Paul anticipates a future "fulness" and even "life from the dead" in those broken-off branches receiving, again, full inclusion (vv. 12, 15). In both passages, separation is real and consequential, yet it remains within a covenant structure in which faith restores what unbelief disrupts. The Book of Mormon participates in this same logic, portraying being "cut off" as distance tied to rebellion while consistently holding open the possibility of renewed belonging through repentance and allegiance to Christ.

In this light, the so-called curse operates within a covenant economy in which repentance and responsiveness open the way to restoration. When the Book of Mormon portrays Lamanites standing in moral or spiritual clarity, their transformation emerges through humility before God rather than external alteration. The Lamanite queen's faith prompts Ammon's astonishment: "there has not been such great faith among all the people of the Nephites" (Alma 19:10). In a moment of dramatic reversal, one marked by perceived estrangement becomes the exemplar of trust and receptivity.

A similar inversion appears in the Gospels. Samaritans, long regarded as religiously estranged descendants of Israel, are repeatedly depicted as models of covenant responsiveness. A Samaritan returns in gratitude when others do not (Luke 17:15–18), and a Samaritan proves neighborly compassion when covenant insiders fail (Luke 10:33–37). In each case, those viewed as distant from covenant privilege stand closest in humility, gratitude, and faith.

Those once associated with curse language or marginal status stand where Christ's beatitudes shine most brightly: among the meek and the poor in spirit (cf. 3 Nephi 12:3–5). The contrast is not between race or lineage but between response to divine invitation. Blessing follows allegiance.

As Margaret Hemming and Fatimah Salleh observe, "The Beatitudes are an abridged version of how God sees and loves those who are overlooked."¹⁶ The Book of Mormon never presents this posture as automatic or coerced; it arises only when agency is exercised

16. Margaret Olsen Hemming and Fatimah Salleh, *The Book of Mormon for the Least of These*, Helaman–Moroni (Salt Lake City: By Common Consent Press, 2023), 87.

in repentance and covenant fidelity. In that sense, the Lamanite condition — when marked by turning toward God — can mirror the pattern of discipleship itself, a posture freely chosen in response to divine invitation. In such lowliness, God reveals his highest law.

That vision reshapes the text's moral geography. When the converted Lamanites embraced the gospel, Mormon describes the change in relational and covenantal terms (Alma 23:7, 18). Transformation is framed as covenantal reorientation, marked by peace, restraint, and restored relationship, without reference to lineage or outward alteration. The name persists, but its covenant valence shifts.

This expansive logic is articulated most explicitly in Nephi's declaration that the Lord "inviteth them all to come unto him... and he denieth none that come unto him... and all are alike unto God" (2 Nephi 26:33). Within this covenant framework, the passage affirms that no boundary of birth or history lies beyond the reach of covenant belonging.

The restoration of the Lamanites thus reveals a universal principle embedded in the record: covenant belonging is realized through turning to Christ and being gathered into His people. In Nephi's early prophecy, the scattered are "gathered together again" as they "come to the knowledge of the true Messiah" (1 Nephi 10:14). Jacob develops the same doctrine in the allegory of the olive tree, where branches are grafted and nourished so that fruit may endure (Jacob 5). Those who bear a covenant name may yet break covenant while those long estranged may truly be gathered in.

Indigenous Latter-day Saint voices have articulated this covenantal vision in lived form. Their discipleship testifies that the Book of Mormon's promises engage real histories and real peoples, binding them to God while sustaining cultural integrity. Zion thus takes shape as gathered holiness, where distinct peoples are drawn into covenant without the loss of their God-given particularity. Unity in Christ consecrates difference rather than dissolving it, and covenant faithfulness sanctifies diverse ways of life through shared allegiance to Christ. In this way, the Book of Mormon enacts what President Russell M. Nelson has described: "The Lord uses the unlikely to accomplish the impossible."¹⁷ Those once regarded as outsiders become heirs, and

17. Russell M. Nelson, "The Lord Uses the Unlikely to Accomplish the Impossible" (devotional, Brigham Young University–Idaho, Rexburg, ID, 27 January 2015), byui.edu/speeches/russell-m-nelson/the-lord-uses-the-unlikely-to-accomplish-the-impossible.

divided peoples are gathered through faith in Christ and renewed covenant allegiance.

From Curse to Covenant

If the curse is understood within the Book of Mormon's covenant framework, it names a condition of separation that remains oriented toward return. Scriptural warnings of distance are frequently accompanied by promises that restoration is possible, though never automatic. Justice and mercy operate together, preserving accountability while keeping open a path of return through repentance and covenant faithfulness.

Lehi's promise reflects this balance. "If ye are cursed," he declares, "behold, I leave my blessing upon you" (2 Nephi 4:6). The blessing coexists with the warning, affirming that covenant access endures even in estrangement. Return remains contingent upon choice, but the covenant itself is not withdrawn from those willing to turn back to God.

This covenantal rhythm has increasingly been expressed with careful precision in Church materials. The introduction added to the Book of Mormon in 1981 stated that the Lamanites "are the principal ancestors of the American Indians"; the 2006 revision changed this to "among the ancestors," a wording that avoids overclaiming what the text itself does not specify.¹⁸ A 2014 Church essay on Book of Mormon and DNA studies reinforces this understanding, noting that the Book of Mormon does not claim its peoples were the predominant or exclusive inhabitants of the lands they occupied.¹⁹ These clarifications do not make the Book of Mormon's invitation to come to Christ more true; that invitation has always been central. Rather, they help prevent the covenant message from being reduced to a merely ethnographic census. The Book of Mormon can affirm God's covenant faithfulness to promised posterity while still insisting that covenant belonging is ultimately realized through faithful response to Christ's invitation.

Read through this covenantal lens, the Book of Mormon invites more than historical identification; it summons readers to locate

18. "Introduction," in *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), v; compare the revised 2006 edition.

19. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Book of Mormon and DNA Studies," *Gospel Topic Essays*, 2014, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/book-of-mormon-and-dna-studies.

themselves within its covenant drama. *Come, Follow Me* provides a natural setting for this expansion, placing historical questions about Nephites and Lamanites alongside the lived question of what it means to be restored through covenant.

Passages such as 3 Nephi 21:22–26 envision Lamanites, Gentiles, and Jews gathered in and through the work of Zion, a future unity that remains aspirational rather than achieved. Within this frame, historical divisions become diagnostic rather than determinative, revealing spiritual condition without fixing the boundaries of belonging. In classrooms and congregations, teachers can therefore invite learners to engage the text as participants in an ongoing work of reconciliation and covenant renewal that extends to all who are willing to come unto Christ.

Missionary work likewise comes into sharper focus. It reflects God's work of gathering rather than a project of categorization. D. Todd Christofferson reminds us that "we do not strive for conversion to the Church but to Christ and His gospel."²⁰ Through that lens, missionary labor mirrors the Shepherd's search in Luke 15: the ninety-and-nine remain safe while the estranged one is sought as kin rather than as an outsider.

Seeing Lamanite identity through covenant also clarifies the nature of discipleship. Helaman 5 portrays Nephi's and Lehi's ministering among the Lamanites through shared vulnerability and covenant presence. Their imprisonment, deliverance, and the encircling fire of divine protection dramatize how covenant relationship overcomes social and spiritual boundaries. Discipleship in this frame unfolds through proximity, humility, and trust in God's power to redeem from within. The Restoration's call similarly invites participation and persistence, offering covenant belonging to all those willing to enter and remain.

This covenant reframing does more than reinterpret the text; it clarifies how covenant identity is meant to be lived. The Restoration affirms covenant order and continuity across generations, while locating moral standing within faithfulness in addition to descent.

20. D. Todd Christofferson, "Why the Church," *Ensign*, November 2015, 108, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2015/11/sunday-afternoon-session/why-the-church.

Read this way, the Book of Mormon calls disciples to exercise covenant responsibility (especially toward those named as outsiders) recognizing that covenant privilege always carries moral obligation.

Mormon himself models this posture. Writing of "my brethren," the descendants of Lehi, he prays "that they may once again come to the knowledge of God, yea, the redemption of Christ; that they may once again be a delightsome people" (Words of Mormon 1:8). His concern centers on covenantal restoration rooted in faith and redemption. That prayer, while grounded in literal posterity, opens outward to all who receive the Book of Mormon's witness of Christ, inviting reconciliation with God through covenant response. Read this way, the record serves as a guide to belonging within God's ordered covenant family, shaping identity through repentance, discipleship, and enduring relationship rather than through inherited distinction.

A Failed Mission or a Found Legacy

As noted earlier, the 1830 mission to the Lamanites was widely regarded as unsuccessful. The elders were expelled from Indian Territory, and no lasting institutional presence followed. Read through the covenantal lens developed here, judgment reflects the limits of measuring covenant work by immediacy or institutional permanence. Covenant history often discloses meaning over time rather than at the moment of action.

The missionaries carried with them both zeal and a historically inherited expectation that the remnant would be located primarily through lineage. Their journey west became, in retrospect, a moment of unexpected reconfiguration. Though they reached the Delaware and Shawnee and presented the Book of Mormon to tribal leaders, federal agents viewed them with suspicion and forced them back. The interruption redirected the mission rather than terminating its purpose.

On their route west, the missionaries paused briefly in Kirtland, Ohio, preaching among Campbellite congregations. There, more than a hundred converts entered the waters of baptism, including Sidney Rigdon, Isaac Morley, and Newel K. Whitney, along with women such as Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner who embraced the gospel and

helped shape the early community.²¹ Although the elders had set out seeking the literal descendants of Lehi, they instead encountered a different fulfillment of covenant promise: Gentile hearers whose hearts were already prepared to receive the gospel. Those who gathered recognized the gospel's call and entered covenant through faith and baptism.

In that unexpected gathering, the breadth of the Lord's covenantal reach became visible. Those who formed the early nucleus of the Church were gathered into Israel through response rather than descent, embodying the principle that Nephi would articulate with clarity: "as many of the Gentiles as will repent are the covenant people of the Lord" (2 Nephi 30:2). God's remembrance operates through covenant invitation received, not through ancestry alone.

That encounter marked a quiet but significant clarification in early Restoration experience. While lineage and promised posterity remain integral to the record, covenant belonging is consistently portrayed as something enacted through readiness, repentance, and response to divine invitation. The Kirtland conversions embody this logic in lived form, anticipating themes the Book of Mormon itself develops narratively and doctrinally.

The Restoration would later articulate this principle with increasing clarity, as scripture and teaching placed covenant faithfulness and adoption into Israel alongside lineage promises rather than beneath them. In that sense, the Book of Mormon's declaration that "all are alike unto God" (2 Nephi 26:33) operates not as an abstract ideal but as a prophetic compression of how covenant identity functions. Across the text and within Restoration history, it comprises what has elsewhere been called the *covenant threshold*.²² It is the point at which a people become capable of receiving and sustaining divine relationship. Anciently, that threshold required not only faith but the social and

21. Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner was baptized into the Church in Kirtland, Ohio, in October 1830 at approximately age twelve, shortly after the missionaries' visit and before a branch was formally organized there. Her early conversion and testimony are documented in *Church History Biographical Database*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, history.churchofjesuschrist.org/chd/individual/mary-elizabeth-rollins-1818.

22. John E. Cochran II and Joseph D. Cochran, "From Wilderness to Covenant Threshold: Land, Literacy, and Religious Readiness in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 67 (2025): 401–24, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/from-wilderness-to-covenant-threshold-land-literacy-and-religious-readiness-in-the-book-of-mormon.

spiritual readiness to preserve covenant life: literacy, shared memory, surplus, and unity. The 1830 mission likewise demonstrates that covenant readiness, not genealogy, determines who fulfills the promise. The missionaries' search for a fixed lineage nearly obscured the very fulfillment unfolding before them in Kirtland. The gospel could take root only where covenant soil had been prepared.

For modern Saints, this legacy endures. It teaches that estrangement is never final and that covenant belonging is not secured by culture or ancestry as a moral entitlement. Covenant does not erase identity; it reorders it. As Melissa Inouye reminds us, "The Church that is true is a Church that is real... It embodies contradictions and contrasts."²³ The Restoration's reality is precisely this. It is imperfect people, bound by covenant, striving toward Zion.

As Farina King has shown, Indigenous Latter-day Saint experience gives concrete form to this covenant logic. Native Saints testify that covenant faithfulness does not require the abandonment of cultural memory or peoplehood but situates those identities within a redeemed order in which no heritage confers superiority and no history places a people beyond God's remembrance. Their discipleship extends the same pattern that began on that winter road west, where what appeared to be failure became, over time, a quiet witness of covenant fulfillment.

Conclusion: Grafted and Remembered

The Book of Mormon's closing witness is not one of division but one of divine pursuit. Jacob 5 reveals a Lord of the vineyard who labors patiently, nourishing and grafting with care, never abandoning what he has planted. "Go to, and labor in the vineyard, with your might," he commands, "for behold, this is the last time that I shall nourish my vineyard" (Jacob 5:71). His work persists because his remembrance does. No branch lies beyond his reach. Covenant belonging is ultimately secured not by ancestry but by grace, grounded not in worthiness proven but in a God who refuses to forget.

Elder Patrick Kearon captured that divine pursuit with remarkable clarity:

My friends, my fellow disciples on the road of mortal life,
our Father's beautiful plan — even His 'fabulous' plan — is

23. Melissa Inouye, "A Church That Is Real: Walking the Path of Most Resistance," *Wayfare*, 7 January 2025, www.wayfaremagazine.org/p/a-church-that-is-real.

designed to bring you home, not to keep you out. No one has built a roadblock and stationed someone there to turn you around and send you away. In fact, it is the exact opposite. God is in relentless pursuit of you. He wants all of His children to choose to return to Him, and He employs every possible measure to bring you back.

He did not refuse the penitent—no matter their sin. And He will not refuse you or those you love when you bring to Him your broken hearts and contrite spirits. That is *not* His intent or His design, nor His plan, purpose, wish, or hope.²⁴

Elder Kearon's words describe not only divine intent but lived experience. Historian Farina King, a Navajo scholar, observes that native readers of the Book of Mormon have "appropriated and adapted the very terms once imposed upon them." They interpret its promises as affirmations of covenant dignity rather than instruments of cultural erasure.²⁵ Such readings situate Indigenous identity within the covenant without requiring the abandonment of memory, land, or peoplehood. In this light, Zion is best understood as a form of holiness that gathers distinct lives into communion, not by erasure, but through grace.

For those once called Lamanite by lineage, this promise carries particular significance. What was named as distance becomes the site of divine pursuit, and what was marked as "cut off" becomes a sign of mercy. God's covenant faithfulness turns ancestral designation into an invitation to return, revealing that no history or heritage places a people beyond his reach.

Melissa Inouye expresses this covenant tenderness in unforgettable terms: "He who called Himself the Good Shepherd also knew what it was like to be a Lost Sheep."²⁶ In that recognition lies the heart of covenant compassion. The Redeemer gathers not from a distance but from within, descending into the wilderness to carry his people home.

To see through covenant eyes, then, is to recognize that *Lamanite*

24. Patrick Kearon, "God's Intent Is to Bring You Home," *Liahona*, May 2024, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2024/04/45kearon.

25. Farina King, "Aloha in Diné Bikéyah: Mormon Hawaiians and Navajos," in *Essays on American Indian and Mormon History*, ed. P. Jane Hafen and Brenden W. Rensink (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2019), 161–82, doi.org/10.2307/jj.33676728.

26. Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye, "A Lost Sheep," *Wayfare*, 8 November 2023, www.wayfaremagazine.org/p/a-lost-sheep.

names more than an ancient people; it can also function as a scriptural category for those who stand at a distance from God yet remain the object of His pursuit. Throughout the Book of Mormon, this pattern appears concretely both among the converted Lamanites of Alma 23, in Samuel's prophetic authority over a covenant-failing Nephite society, and in the Lord's persistent labor in Jacob 5 to reclaim branches long thought lost. In each case, estrangement is not the end of the story but the condition in which remembrance becomes visible. The covenant narrative moves not toward separation but toward gathering as God continues his work until reconciliation is possible and fruit is restored.

This reading also dignifies the global Church. As the Restoration continues to unfold among Pacific Islanders, Indigenous peoples, Latin Americans, Africans, and others long situated at the margins of Euro-American religious narratives, covenant belonging reframes participation itself. These communities are not peripheral recipients of a completed story; they enter the covenant through the same pattern the Book of Mormon repeatedly narrates: remembrance following estrangement, gathering following distance. The text's repeated insistence that God works through those once overlooked reorients the meaning of *restoration* from cultural transmission to covenant response. In this sense, the Book of Mormon does not merely accommodate global discipleship. Instead, it anticipates it, bearing witness that divine remembrance extends to every people and every tongue who respond in faith.



John E. Cochran II was born in Las Vegas, Nevada, and raised in Fort Collins, Colorado, and Roosevelt, Utah. He earned a BS in biochemistry from Utah State University and an MD from Ross University School of Medicine, completing his family medicine residency at Mercy Medical Center in Des Moines, Iowa. He currently practices family medicine in southern Arizona. He enjoys gardening, homesteading, board games, and swimming in the backyard pool—a requirement from his wife when they moved to the Arizona heat. Together, they are raising and homeschooling their four children. John served his mission in Houston, Texas, and is currently serving in his local bishopric.

Dynastic Dynamics II: Lamanite Governance and Politics

Noel Hudson

Abstract: *The Book of Mormon preserves only fragmentary evidence concerning Lamanite internal politics. Most references to the Lamanites come through Nephite narrators, whose focus usually centers on the many wars, missionary activity, and Nephite affairs, rather than on Lamanite institutions. Even so, the narratives in the books of Mosiah, Alma, Helaman, and 3 Nephi contain enough incidental detail to permit a cautious reconstruction of important developments in Lamanite political history. This study proposes that from the time of Zeniff to the rise of the Gadianton order, Lamanite society underwent substantial military, administrative, and dynastic change. More significantly, many major developments in Lamanite political and military life seem to have been shaped by successive waves of Nephite dissenters, including the Amulonites, Amalekites, and Zoramites. In that sense, many of the conflicts commonly described as Nephite–Lamanite wars may be more precisely understood as struggles in which Lamanite populations were repeatedly drawn into contests rooted in Nephite factionalism. Although some parts of this reconstruction remain speculative, the cumulative evidence suggests a more dynamic and internally differentiated picture of Lamanite history than is often assumed.*

The Lamanites first appear as a distinct people in the aftermath of the schism between Nephi and his brothers following the death of Lehi as recorded in 2 Nephi 5. Conflict erupted almost immediately. The separation of the family into two communities and the Nephites' preparations for defense are narrated together. Not long thereafter, the record reports bloodshed between them (2 Nephi 5:14, 34). From

this beginning, the Lamanites enter the Nephite record chiefly as rivals in a recurring state of hostility.

For the next several centuries, however, the Book of Mormon says little about Lamanite internal societal life. The surviving references are sparse, often polemical, and usually incidental to specifically Nephite concerns. Even so, the narratives in the middle of the Book of Mormon preserve enough detail to permit a cautious reconstruction of important developments in Lamanite political history.

This study is an extension of an earlier paper.¹ That paper provided evidence that the political turmoil and wars in the book of Alma are best understood not only as religious or moral conflicts, but also as struggles over dynastic legitimacy among competing Nephite, Mulekite, and possibly Jaredite bloodlines. It suggested that the merger of Nephites and Mulekites created a fragile political order that had been stabilized under kings with mixed lineage, but that the abolition of monarchy and the rise of the judges exposed deep tensions over who had the right to rule. With that understanding, Alma's abdication of his role as chief judge, the limited power of Nephihah and Pahoran, and the elevation of Captain Moroni were all deliberate efforts to manage a legitimacy crisis by redistributing authority and balancing rival constituencies. The earlier paper also used naming patterns and cultural affiliations to argue that bloodline and inherited political claims shaped dissent, rebellion, and military leadership throughout Nephite history, revealing the Book of Mormon as a sophisticated account of how faith, lineage, and political authority intertwine.

The present article focuses on the other side of the Nephite–Lamanite saga. It proposes that, from the time of Zeniff (Mosiah 9) to the rise of the Gadianton order (3 Nephi 2), Lamanite society appears to have undergone its own substantial military, administrative, and dynastic changes. Many of the major political and military developments that are visible in the record seem to have been shaped not only from Lamanite opportunism, but also by successive waves of Nephite dissenters. Amulonites, Amalekites, Zoramites, and later dissident leaders did not merely break away from Nephite society to join the Lamanites as members; they repeatedly rose to leadership roles

1. Noel Hudson, "Dynastic Dynamics: Competing Bloodlines and Political Legitimacy in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 69 (2026): 23–48, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/dynastic-dynamics-competing-bloodlines-and-political-legitimacy-in-the-book-of-mormon.

as organizers, advisers, military commanders, and rulers. In this sense, many conflicts commonly described as Nephite–Lamanite wars may be more precisely understood as struggles in which Lamanite populations were repeatedly drawn into highly costly contests. These contests began as domestic disputes within the Nephite polity and then expanded beyond their borders. The most surprising conclusion from this study is that, for generations, the native Lamanites lost control of their own political destiny as they were repeatedly manipulated by foreign outsiders, leading them into one costly war after another. These domestic uprisings occurred despite repeated attempts by Nephite leaders to limit the spread of dissident movements, as well as grass-roots movements by the Lamanites on multiple occasions to resist the most disastrous policies and regain some level of control of their own government.

Because the evidence is fragmentary, the discussion must proceed carefully. Some conclusions are explicit in the text, others are inferences; still others remain speculative reconstructions offered because they make coherent sense of otherwise disconnected details. The aim is not to press the evidence beyond what it can bear, but to show that the text supports a more dynamic view of Lamanite history than is often assumed.

Early Glimpses of Lamanite Society

The earliest Book of Mormon references to Lamanite politics provide only narrow windows into Lamanite life. Jacob suggests that—in at least one respect—the Lamanites surpassed the Nephites morally, namely in their treatment of their wives and children (Jacob 3:5–7). Enos offers a harsher portrayal of the Lamanites, describing them as living in tents and wandering the wilderness hunting beasts of prey (Enos 1:20); with an additional description by Zeniff of their being wild, ferocious, bloodthirsty, and following false traditions (Mosiah 10:12). These descriptions in Enos and Mosiah note characteristics that were typical of many hunting and gathering groups worldwide. As far as one can tell from the already-cited record of Nephi—who mostly focused on the events of his own people—Laman and his followers quickly abandoned not only their religion, but also their way of life. Some Book of Mormon scholars have suggested that this change in culture was

due to the early integration of Lamanite society into already-present indigenous groups that lived a hunter-gatherer lifestyle.²

Not long after the great separation of Laman and Nephi, and immediately following the death of their father Lehi, Nephi writes that:

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. . . . And because of their cursing [spiritual separation] 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 5:20, 24)

The speed with which this happened also supports the idea that they may have melded with local indigenous people, even becoming their leaders. John Sorenson theorizes as much when he writes that “the immigrant Lamanites incorporated under their rule native peoples already living in the region.”³ Sorenson goes on to add that “The Book of Mormon is a record by an elite group who dominated a folk population of undisclosed characteristics whom they found resident on the land.”⁴ The Lamanites would have already known how to hunt and forage opportunistically for food, because that is what they did for several years as they traveled down the Arabian peninsula from Jerusalem, but the knowledge of local flora and fauna in the promised land possessed by native inhabitants would have been invaluable as they sought to exploit local resources in the early years of colonization.

While the views of Enos of the Lamanites wandering the wilderness and subsisting primarily on a meat-based diet may have been accurate in the early years of the colony, such a lifestyle would likely not have been sustainable in the long term for the population density numbers achieved by the Lamanite polity. Researchers have shown that hunter-gatherer societies with a large fraction of their diet based on meat sources maintain population densities an equal order of magnitude or lower than those which exploit primarily plant sources.⁵

2. Michael R. Ash, “Who Are the Lamanites,” Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR), fairlatterdaysaints.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/ash-Who_Are_the_Lamanites.pdf.

3. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 86.

4. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 89.

5. Dan Zhu et al., “Global Hunter-Gatherer Population Densities Constrained by

This difficulty is noted particularly hundreds of years later in the case of the Gadianton Robbers who could not maintain their numbers by hunting (3 Nephi 4:2–3). Perhaps the most warlike of the Lamanites were members of a hunter-warrior caste that frequently engaged in the hunting of prestige prey. Enos specifically mentions their focus on beasts of prey, a food source anathema to the Nephites, who followed the law of Moses (Leviticus 11). However, in hunter-gatherer societies, the younger men most likely to pride themselves on their skills as warriors were also most likely to spend their time seeking prestige kills by hunting dangerous animals such as large predators.⁶

It seems to follow that the most dangerous of the Lamanites would have been the ones most likely to interact with the Nephites and drive their perceptions. However, the majority of the Lamanites seem more likely to have been primarily sedentary hunter-gatherers, relying on the abundance of plant resources for the bulk of their calories, as their high population density would indicate. The fact that groups such as king Laman and his people seem to have primarily remained in a single location, adjacent to Zeniff's settlement, reinforces this view. King Noah's tower mentioned in Mosiah 11:12 apparently allowed the Nephites to monitor any significant movement among the Lamanites that might presage an attack (Mosiah 19:6, 20:8). While the classic view of hunter-gatherer societies might lead one to expect that mobility and seasonal migration were a key aspect of their lifestyle, this view has been tainted by the fact that hunter and gatherer societies in the modern world, such as the Inuit, have been pushed to marginal habitats.⁷ Foraging societies with access to fertile lands frequently limited their movement and remained as sedentary hunter-gatherer societies, especially if they had access to coastal or lakeside fisheries.⁸

If the Lamanites had settled fertile lowland coastal regions while

Influence of Seasonality on Diet Composition," *Nature Ecology & Evolution* 5, no. 11 (2021): 1536–45, doi.org/10.1038/s41559-021-01548-3.

6. Karen D. Lupo and Dave N. Schmitt, "Reframing Prehistoric Human-Probo-scidean Interactions: On the use and Implications of Ethnohistoric Records for Understanding the Productivity of Hunting Megaherbivores," *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 31, no. 2 (2024): 390–98, doi.org/10.1007/s10816-023-09607-8.

7. J Colette Berbesque et al., "Hunter-gatherers have less famine than agriculturalists," *Biology Letters* 10, no. 1 (January 2014): 9, doi.org/10.1098/rsbl.2013.0853.

8. Amber L. Johnson, "Exploring Adaptive Variation among Hunter-Gatherers with Binford's Frames of Reference," *Journal of Archaeological Research* 22, no. 1 (2014): 20–23, doi.org/10.1007/s10814-013-9068-y.

the Nephites were driven into the highlands into narrow, fertile mountain valleys, as Sorenson suggests,⁹ the Lamanites were likely to have remained as sedentary hunter-gatherers, especially if they were able to exploit the bounty from the adjacent seas. Historically, such communities could achieve comparable population densities as agrarian societies.¹⁰ In the land of their first inheritance, the people of Lehi experienced great success in the planting and harvesting of their crop seeds transported from the Mediterranean world: “yea, we did put all our seeds into the earth, which we had brought from the land of Jerusalem. And it came to pass that they did grow exceedingly; wherefore, we were blessed in abundance” (1 Nephi 18:24). It is reasonable to suppose that the Lamanites who remained in that land continued to benefit from the abundance of the area, whether or not they continued to actively cultivate the agricultural crops from the Mediterranean. If native peoples in the area joined the more culturally sophisticated Lamanites and taught them established methods for subsistence on the land, they would have benefited from multiple resources that would have allowed for a surge in population.

Given Laman’s insistent ambition toward control, it seems likely that he would have seized the leadership role over any groups that integrated with the Lamanites, calling himself a king. Within a few generations, the scriptural text points out that the Lamanites “were scattered upon much of the face of the land” (Jarom 1:6). In addition to dispersal, Nephite authors consistently point out the Lamanites’ larger population; whether this was due to extraordinary fertility or having combined with indigenous peoples, they became “exceedingly more numerous than were they of the Nephites” (v. 6).

Those who favor a Mesoamerican setting for the Book of Mormon, such as Sorenson, tend to believe that the Nephites inhabited the fertile mountain valleys of the highlands. Brant Gardner writes that “the location of their city, [was] presumed to have been in the Guatemalan highlands.”¹¹ Nephi’s account of that first location records the process

9. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 25–26.

10. Patrick H. Kavanagh et al., “Hindcasting Global Population Densities Reveals Forces Enabling the Origin of Agriculture,” *Nature Human Behaviour* 2, no. 7 (2018): 478–84, doi.org/10.1038/s41562-018-0358-8.

11. Brant Gardner, “A Social History of the Early Nephites” (presentation, FAIR Conference, Provo Women’s Center, Provo, UT, August 2001), fairlatterday saints.org/conference_home/2004-1999-fair-conferences/august-2001-fair-conference/a-social-history-of-the-early-nephites.

of centralization with a focus on the temple as the center of their agrarian society:

And the Lord was with us; and we did prosper exceedingly; for we did sow seed, and we did reap again in abundance. And we began to raise flocks, and herds, and animals of every kind. . . . And I did teach my people to build buildings, and to work in all manner of wood, and of iron. . . . And I, Nephi, did build a temple . . . and the manner of the construction was like unto the temple of Solomon; and the workmanship thereof was exceedingly fine. (2 Nephi 5:11, 16)

The continuation of their theocratic and agricultural society is recorded by Enos about 160 years after their initial landing, which was about 589 BC:

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 horses. And there were exceedingly many prophets among us. (Enos 1:21)

Had the Lamanites restricted themselves to merely hunting and gathering, times may have been peaceful. However, Jarom, the son of Enos, reports that the Nephites "multiplied exceedingly, and spread upon the face of the land, and became exceedingly rich in gold, and in silver, and in precious things, and in fine workmanship of wood" (Jarom 1:8). It appears that the opportunistic Lamanites could not resist seeking this bounty:

It came to pass that they came many times against us, the Nephites, to battle. But our kings and our leaders were mighty men in the faith of the Lord; and they taught the people the ways of the Lord; wherefore, we withstood the Lamanites and swept them away out of our lands, and began to fortify our cities, or whatsoever place of our inheritance. (Jarom 1:7)

None of this should have been a surprise to the Nephites. The Lord had told Nephi at the very beginning, back in Old World Jerusalem, that "if it so be that they [Laman, Lemuel, and their descendants] rebel against me, they shall be a scourge unto thy seed, to stir them up in the ways of remembrance" (1 Nephi 2:24).

It should be noted that these descriptions of Lamanite culture and practices were filtered through Nephite narrators and could potentially

contain cultural bias.¹² Additionally, the descriptions may have been designed for domestic consumption. For these reasons, the descriptions should be treated with caution. Still, they suggest a broad and highly significant contrast between Nephite sedentary, agricultural-based society and way of life, compared to the portion of the Lamanite populace that most frequently interacted with the Nephites.¹³

Zeniff and the Expansion of Lamanite Power

The early chapters of the Book of Mormon offer little to no explicit evidence of Lamanite life, nor of centralized Lamanite political institutions or religiosity.¹⁴ Rather, the early record emphasizes conflict. If kings, confederations, or dynastic structures existed, they remain largely invisible in the small plates of Nephi (1 Nephi through Omni). The first substantial narrative evidence for Lamanite political development appears in the account of Zeniff in the book of Mosiah, about 400 years after the landing of Lehi's party in the promised land.

Zeniff was a Nephite obsessed with returning to the land of Nephi after King Mosiah and his followers fled to the land of Zarahemla. The initial Nephite expedition to return to the land was of a military nature (Mosiah 9:1), but Zeniff became convinced that a peaceful approach would be preferable. Zeniff obtained permission from the king of the Lamanites to settle Lehi-Nephi and Shilom (Mosiah 9:6–8). Zeniff later interpreted this apparent concession as a calculated strategy, wherein the Lamanite king intended eventually to bring Zeniff's people into bondage (Mosiah 9:10).

The arrangement itself is revealing, telling us that there was a Lamanite ruler—a king. Moreover, the king was willing to tolerate a dependent Nephite enclave within his sphere of control, perhaps

12. Richard O. Cowan, "The Lamanites—A More Accurate Image," in *The Book of Mormon: Helaman Through 3 Nephi 8, According to Thy Word*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1992), 251–64, rsc.byu.edu/book-mormon-helaman-through-3-nephi-8-according-thy-word/lamanites-more-accurate-image.

13. Gordon C. Thomasson, "Lamanites," in *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 804, scripturecentral.org/archive/articles/encyclopedia-entry/lamanites.

14. John L. Cochran II and Joseph M. Cochran, "From Wilderness to Covenant Threshold: Land, Literacy, and Religious Readiness in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 67 (2025): 409–10, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/from-wilderness-to-covenant-threshold-land-literacy-and-religious-readiness-in-the-book-of-mormon.

because the cities were underused (Mosiah 9:8), or maybe because tribute and later subjugation were anticipated from the outset, or perhaps for both reasons. In any case, the episode points to strategic calculation and long-term political intent.

Additionally, this situation indicates that the Lamanites encountered by Zeniff were apparently city-dwellers, a situation substantially different from the one Enos reported centuries earlier (Enos 1:20). However, the text suggests that while the Lamanites may have inhabited the cities they took from the Nephites after the flight of Mosiah, they did little, if anything, to maintain those cities (Mosiah 9:8). Zeniff isn't explicit regarding the city or place where he met the king of the Lamanites (Mosiah 9:5). Was it Lehi-Nephi or Shilom, the cities the Lamanites captured from the Nephites? No Lamanite cities, except those captured from the Nephites, are mentioned in the record up to this point. The Lamanites possess the land of Shemlon, adjacent to the city of Nephi (Mosiah 11:12), but there is no mention of a city there. The alacrity with which King Laman abandons the cities and cedes them to the Nephites may suggest that the Lamanites did not have a penchant for urban life. The decrepit state of the cities (Mosiah 9:8) may indicate that while the Lamanites lived there, they did not have an urban culture, preferring instead to maintain their forager lifestyle while still possibly taking advantage of the bounty of the neglected Nephite fields.

At first, relative to the Lamanites, Zeniff's colony appears militarily formidable, twice having decisively defeated Lamanite attacks (Mosiah 9:14–19; 10:10–20). In the first battle the Lamanites suffered more than ten times the number of men killed in comparison to the people of Zeniff. It was nothing short of a disastrous defeat. The narrative attributes these victories to divine aid, but from a historical standpoint, it also implies some practical Nephite advantage, including superior fortification, better discipline, more effective close combat, or some combination; the text does not specify. What it does suggest is that in Zeniff's early years, the Lamanites were not yet able to overwhelm even a relatively small but well-organized Nephite settlement. However, in the world of military rivalries, decisive advantages are rarely held by one side for long.¹⁵

By the time of Limhi, about fifty-five years after Zeniff first settled in the land, the balance of power had shifted dramatically. The Lamanites

15. Benjamin A. Taylor, "Military Innovation in the Rise and Fall of Great Powers: Lessons for America" (PhD dissertation, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, 2011), 6, apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA547844.pdf.

imposed tribute and reduced Zeniff's descendants to subjection (Mosiah 19:15). Limhi's people could still resist occasionally, especially when driven by desperation or aided by tactical surprise, but they were no longer clearly superior in open conflict (Mosiah 20:8–11). Gideon's warning that continued war would likely end in destruction of this segment of the Nephites proved prescient (see Mosiah 20:17–26; 21:6–12).

Mosiah 20–21 also gives a theological explanation for this reversal for this segment of the Nephites, in terms of their wickedness, and that explanation should not be minimized. The narrative also strongly implies structural change among the Lamanites themselves, indicating that their forces had become more numerous, more coordinated, and better able to sustain pressure against settled opponents. Achieving a decisive shift in power implies the integration of military technologies, tactics, and strategies. In turn, that implies changes in economic, cultural, and other elements of society in a way that allows for social innovations to be reflected in military outcomes.¹⁶ Thus, the improvements in Lamanite capabilities suggest a shift in broader underlying social factors.

The Nephite centralized governmental system in the land of Nephi included the king and his counsel of literate priests, who served as the head of the legal system (Mosiah 12:17) and likely as administrators. King Laman had the opportunity to observe and learn from this system, and his son Laman appears to have copied it a generation later after he incorporated the people of Amulon into his empire (Mosiah 23:35).

Tribute, Proximity, and the Growth of State Capacity

The nearly eight decades of close contact between the Lamanites and the Zeniff colony likely contributed to the transformation of the Lamanite polity. As cited earlier, Nephite descriptions had emphasized Lamanite mobility and relative distance from Nephite agricultural life. After Zeniff, by contrast, the Lamanites and Nephites lived in sustained proximity. Through tribute and dominance, the Lamanites gained regular access to grain, flocks, wine, metal goods, and other products of Nephite labor (see Mosiah 7:22; 19:26; 21:3). The need to monitor the Zeniff colony and ensure the continual flow of tribute resulted in the stationing of guards living in constant contact with Limhi's people (Mosiah 19:28).

16. Taylor, "Military Innovation," ix.

The issue of tribute is a key point because tribute supports institutions. A ruling elite able to extract agricultural surplus can maintain retainers, reward subordinates, support military mobilization, and govern more effectively over time.¹⁷ Thus the subjugation of Zeniff's people may have marked not only a military success, but also a turning point in Lamanite political economy. At first, the extra goods extracted as tribute would have been an unexpected windfall, but in all likelihood, after some time the Lamanites would have become at least somewhat dependent on these agricultural benefits (see Mosiah 7:22; 19:26; 21:3).

A further stage in this development appears with Amulon, who was a former priest under King Noah. After Amulon and his followers entered Lamanite service, he was granted authority and exercised clear influence within the kingdom (see Mosiah 23:39, 24:1–4). The record explicitly states that Amulon caused Lamanites to be taught in his native Nephite language (Mosiah 24:4–7). Whatever one makes of the broader implications, this passage strongly suggests cultural and administrative assimilation from literate Nephite dissenters into Lamanite society.

It is interesting to note the Nephite author's disapproval of Amulon teaching the Nephite language to the Lamanites without including any theological content (Mosiah 24:5). This suggests that perhaps the Hebrew belief that speaking or writing words can actually perform creative acts may have also been held by the Nephites. Jeremie Matchie states that in Hebrew: "Words are not merely abstract sounds; they are seen as having substance and the power to shape events and define things. This is particularly evident in the concept of God's Word as the force behind creation."¹⁸ Thus, the idea of separating the written word from its religious context may have been seen as sacrilegious.

Whatever the Nephite view of their written language being transmitted to the Lamanites for purely secular purposes, John L. and Joseph M. Cochran have demonstrated that the Amulonite presence may have contributed to increased literacy, more structured agriculture, and more centralized administration among the Lamanites.¹⁹ Some parts of that reconstruction remain inferential, but the larger point is

17. Gerald West, "Mode of Production: An Ancient Near Eastern Economic System: The Tributary Mode of Production and the Temple-State," *Old Testament Essays* 24, no. 2 (2011): 516–17, scielo.org.za/pdf/ote/v24n2/11.pdf.

18. Jeremie Matchie, "Davar-Word," *Sermons by Logos*, sermons.logos.com/sermons/1557215-davar-word.

19. Cochran and Cochran, "From Wilderness to Covenant Threshold," 401–24.

persuasive: the Book of Mormon itself depicts Amulon and his associates as a group capable of transmitting skills and helping shape institutions.²⁰ The Lamanite polity later visible in Alma is more developed than the one glimpsed in the small plates, and the Amulonite episode may help explain part of that change as well as the early failure of Enos as a missionary, and the later success of Ammon and his party.

Dynastic Change: From “Laman” to Ishmaelite Rule?

One of the more intriguing questions raised by the text is whether a dynastic realignment occurred in the land of Nephi between the time of Zeniff (about 200 BC) and the mission of Ammon, Aaron, Omner, and Himni (about 91 BC). In Zeniff’s record, the Lamanite ruler is called Laman (Mosiah 10:6). This may simply be a personal name; but it is also possible, though not demonstrable, that “Laman” functioned as a dynastic or regnal name, much as “Nephi” did among the Nephites (Jacob 1:11). The fact that Laman’s son is also named Laman reinforces this possibility (Mosiah 24:3). If so, the recurrence of the name would suggest enduring prestige attached to the lineage of Laman.

However, by the time of the mission of the sons of Mosiah—recorded in Alma 17–22—the political structure appears different. Lamoni’s father is described as king “over all the land,” while Lamoni and others rule individual lands under him (see Alma 20:1–4, 8–9). Lamoni himself rules in the land of Ishmael, and the ruling house appears tied to that territory (Alma 17:21).

This does not prove that an older line of “Lamans” had been displaced, but it permits that possibility. At minimum, the text suggests that, by this point, Lamanite kingship had become more hierarchical, territorial, and centralized. A plausible reconstruction is that an older ruling tradition associated with the name *Laman* gave way to a new high-kingship, centered in Ishmaelite territory.

A possible crisis of legitimacy

If some form of Lamanite dynastic leadership shift did occur—from the line of Laman to the line of Ishmael—what may have caused it? The text does not describe a Lamanite coup nor a succession struggle explicitly, but it does describe several developments that could have destabilized an older ruling house. The essential issue is whether or not the ruling dynasty was perceived by the people as retaining a

20. Cochran and Cochran, “From Wilderness to Covenant Threshold,” 407.

legitimate claim to power. In the ancient world, it was quite common that whenever an internal coup toppled a dynasty, the new rulers justified their rise to power on the basis of their predecessor's loss of legitimacy.²¹ Nephi was sensitive to the way in which he portrayed his ascension to the leadership of Lehi's group. In his rise to power, he employed many of the apologetics that were also used by Ancient Near Eastern kings.²² There were a number of ways that a ruler could lose legitimacy in the eyes of the people, and at least three of these ways are relevant to the Lamanite situation.

The first way can result from military humiliation.²³ In the Nephites' conflict involving the Amlicites, the Lamanites allied themselves with these Nephite dissenters and twice suffered major defeats despite their numerical superiority (see Alma 2:24–35; 3:20–26). The king of the Lamanites fled the field, an act that may have severely damaged his royal prestige (Alma 2:32).²⁴

The second is the arrival of foreign dissenter groups.²⁵ The remnants of the Amlicites seem to have joined the Lamanites after their defeat (Alma 2:35–36). As the sons of Mosiah began their missionary labors, groups such as the Amalekites and Amulonites (both groups comprised mainly of former Nephites) occupied important positions in Lamanite lands (Alma 21:2–4). These groups do not appear to have simply absorbed into the population. Rather, they retained identity, established settlements, and introduced alternative religious institutions.

The third is the possibility of the adoption of foreign customs by the sitting ruler, and the resulting social resentment against foreigners that

21. A. T. Nuyen, "The Mandate of Heaven: Mencius and the Divine Command Theory of Political Legitimacy," *Philosophy East and West* 63, no. 2 (2013): 113–26, [jstor.org/stable/43285816](https://www.jstor.org/stable/43285816).

22. Noel Hudson, "Irregular Kings and Precious Things: Viewing Nephi and Joseph Smith through the Lens of Ancient Near Eastern Kingship," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 67 (2025): 229–66, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/irregular-kings-and-precious-things-viewing-nephi-and-joseph-smith-through-the-lens-of-ancient-near-eastern-kingship.

23. Andrew Knapp, "Royal Apologetic in the Ancient Near East," *Society of Biblical Literature* (2015) :51, doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt18z4h1f.

24. Knapp, "Royal Apologetic in the Ancient Near East," 53–54.

25. Jack Bennett, "Impending Collapse: Holy War and the Fall of Jerusalem in 1187," *Retrospect Journal* (2019): retrospectjournal.com/2019/11/03/impending-collapse-holy-war-and-the-fall-of-jerusalem-in-1187/.

such a situation may cause.²⁶ In the case of the Lamanites, this cannot be established with certainty, of course, but it is historically plausible. A ruling family associated with military failure and favoritism toward influential immigrant elites could easily face a legitimacy crisis, doubly so if the ruler was seen to be adopting foreign ways and distancing himself from his own people and culture.²⁷ If so, a rival line in the Book of Mormon — perhaps associated with Ishmael (whose family joined Lehi's family in 1 Nephi 7) — might have risen up by presenting itself as the defender of native interests and order. This reconstruction remains tentative, but it offers a potentially coherent explanation for the altered political structure visible in the book of Alma.

Lamoni's father and the politics of foreign influence

The narratives involving Ammon and Aaron (in Alma 17–23) reveal a Lamanite kingdom that is now politically layered and internally contested. Lamoni's father clearly exercises supremacy over subordinate, regional kings. As Ammon and King Lamoni were traveling to the land of Middoni to secure the release from prison of Ammon's brother and two others, they encounter Lamoni's father. It becomes clear that there were lesser, regional "kings" and an overall, possibly national, "king."

And he [Lamoni, apparently a regional "king"] said unto Ammon: Come, I will go with thee down to the land of Middoni, and there I will plead with the king [presumably another regional "king" of Middoni] that he will cast thy brethren out of prison. And it came to pass that as Ammon and Lamoni were journeying thither, they met the father of Lamoni, who was king over all the land [presumably the "national king" over the "regional kings"]. (Alma 20:7–8)

After a brief conflict wherein Ammon disarms Lamoni's father (the national king), Ammon requests of Lamoni's father that he will "grant that . . . Lamoni may retain his kingdom" (Alma 20:24), whereupon the national king grants Ammon's request that his "son Lamoni should retain his kingdom," adding, "behold, I will grant unto you that my son may retain his kingdom from this time and forever; and I will govern him

26. Shana Zaia, "My Brother's Keeper: Assurbanipal versus Šamaš-šuma-ukīn," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History* 6, no. 1 (2019): 46–47, doi.org/10.1515/janeh-2018-2001.

27. Shana Zaia, "Going Native: Šamaš-Šuma-Ukīn, Assyrian King of Babylon," *Iraq* 81 (2019): 264, jstor.org/stable/26888063.

no more" (v. 26). This wording makes it clear that there were levels of kingship among the Lamanites, but the behavior of Lamoni and his father also suggests tension over religion, loyalty, and perhaps foreign influence.

When Lamoni's father encountered Lamoni in the company of Ammon, his reaction was immediate and severe (Alma 20:10–16). On one level, this is a father enraged at a son's disobedience.²⁸ Yet the context may suggest more. Lamoni had allied himself with a Nephite prince-turned-missionary, accepted a new religion, and was evidently moving to support its spread. In a kingdom already shaped by the presence of foreign Nephite dissenter groups, this may have appeared not merely as defiance but also as a politically dangerous act.

The missionary experiences of Aaron and his brethren point in the same direction. They could preach in some places, especially in Jerusalem (albeit unsuccessfully), where Amalekite synagogues were prominent, but they were imprisoned in others (Alma 21:4, 12–14). This uneven pattern suggests that religious policy was not uniform or truly centralized across the Lamanite kingdom. Some lands may have tolerated or protected foreign religious institutions, while others may have restricted them.

In that light, Lamoni's later declaration that his people were "free" and could worship according to their desires appears to be a genuine political act, not merely a conventional pious statement (Alma 21:21–22). It may imply that previous restrictions had been in place and it confirms that Lamoni, after his conversion, had secured a degree of autonomy in his own territory, reflected in the words of his father, "I will govern him no more" (Alma 20:26).

The Anti-Nephi-Lehi Crisis as a Struggle for the Kingdom's Future

The conversion of Lamoni, Lamoni's father, and many other Lamanites appears to have destabilized the balance of power within the kingdom. The people later known as the Anti-Nephi-Lehies rejected violence and accepted the gospel preached by Nephite missionaries. Their opponents, however, included precisely those Nephite dissenter

28. Val Larsen, "In His Footsteps: Ammon₁ and Ammon₂," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 3 (2013): 106–7, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/in-his-footsteps-ammon-and-ammon.

groups that had long exercised influence inside Lamanite society and that bore particular animosity toward Nephite orthodoxy.²⁹

Mormon identifies the main agitators as the Amalekites and Amulonites (Alma 24:28). This is an important detail, as it shows that the most determined resistance to the converted Lamanites came not simply from the Lamanites as a whole, but from a coalition of Nephite-derived groups with entrenched interests.

The massacre of many of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, and the subsequent conversions that followed, weakened that coalition and accelerated wider political fracture (Alma 24:21–27). The issue was no longer merely religious—it was also political: would the future of the kingdom be shaped by a converted royal line and a pacified population or by dissenter elites committed to continued hostility and older structures of influence?

The destruction of the Amulonites and the persistence of Amalekite influence

The aftermath of the killing of converted Lamanites proved especially costly for the Amulonites. After later campaigns and retaliatory violence, the Lamanites turned against the Amulonites and destroyed them (Alma 25:4–9). Mormon interprets this as the fulfillment of Abinadi's prophecy (Mosiah 17:16–19). While that is correct, it also had political implications, for if the Amulonites had served among the Lamanites as an important scribal or administrative class, their destruction could have destabilized governance.

The fate of the Amalekites is less clear. They remain prominent after the fall of the Amulonites and soon reappear as major instigators of further conflict (Alma 43:44). Whether the Amalekites were identical with the earlier Amlicites remains debated,³⁰ and because the evidence is inconclusive, the safest course is to note the possibility without insisting on it. The similar roles and behavior of the Amulonites and the Amalekites make the identification attractive, but the text does not require it.

29. Scripture Central Staff, "Book of Mormon Evidence: Amalekites, Amlicites, and the Anti-Nephi-Lehies," Evidence 482, 19 February 2025, scripturecentral.org/evidence/book-of-mormon-evidence-amalekites-amlicites-and-the-anti-nephi-lehies.

30. Benjamin McMurtry, "The Amlicites and Amalekites: Are They the Same People?," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 25 (2017): 269–81, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/the-amlicites-and-amalekites-are-they-the-same-people.

What is clear is that Amalekite influence endured. In Alma 27:12, the Lord identifies the Amalekites among those who stirred up the Lamanites against the people of Ammon. After the destruction of the Amulonites, the Amalekites seem to have remained a major force in directing policy and mobilizing violence (Alma 43:6). Possibly their longer history of involvement with literacy among the Nephites made them the only choice for replacing the Amulonite bureaucratic class, after it was destroyed.

The turn to the Zoramites

The failed attempt to destroy the converted Lamanites did not end dissenter influence within the Lamanite kingdom. Instead, the center of gravity shifted as the kingdom fractured and the Amalekites, Zoramites, and other dissenters, together with the unconverted Lamanites, reorganized the government (Alma 24:1–2). The attack on Jershon ended in Nephite victory (Alma 28:1–3), but the dissenter project continued with the Amulonites and Amalekites taking a greater role in driving the affairs of the kingdom.

By the time of Alma's mission to reclaim the apostate Zoramites, the Zoramites had begun moving away from their loyalty to the Nephite government (Alma 31:2) and apparently toward an alliance with the Lamanites (Alma 31:4). Mormon does not explicitly say that the Amalekites brokered this shift, but given the established pattern, it is plausible that existing dissenter networks inside Lamanite society helped facilitate it. Alma recognized the danger immediately. His mission to Antionum was not only pastoral but political: "Now the Nephites greatly feared that the Zoramites would enter into a correspondence with the Lamanites, and that it would be the means of great loss on the part of the Nephites" (Alma 31:4). Alma hoped that the preaching of the word might prevent formal alignment between the Zoramites and the Lamanites.

Although Alma converted some of the poorer Zoramites, the mission did not prevent the final break (Alma 35:9–11). The result was a new phase in Lamanite politics in which dissenter influence was no longer centered only in Amalekite and Amulonite enclaves, but increasingly in a broader coalition that included the Zoramites.

Zoramite and Amalekite leadership over Lamanite armies

This development also becomes explicit in the war led by Zerahemnah against the Nephites only a few months later. Mormon states that the

chief captains of the Lamanites were “Zoramites and Amalekites” (Alma 43:6).

It came to pass that the Zoramites became Lamanites. . . . And now, as the Amalekites were of a more wicked and murderous disposition than the Lamanites were, in and of themselves, therefore, Zerahemnah appointed chief captains over the Lamanites, and they were *all* Amalekites and Zoramites. . . . Now in this case the Lamanites did fight exceedingly; yea, never had the Lamanites been known to fight with such exceedingly great strength and courage, no, not even from the beginning. And they were inspired by the Zoramites and the Amalekites, who were their chief captains and leaders, and by Zerahemnah, who was their chief captain. (Alma 43:4, 6, 43–44)

Few verses are more important for understanding the political dynamics of the period. The armies were Lamanite en masse, but their leadership was exclusively in the hands of Nephite-derived dissenters. Zerahemnah himself may also have been such an outsider. Because of his name, some have suggested Mulekite connections.³¹ Whatever his precise origin, the larger pattern is clear: military direction rested heavily with elites whose political identity was shaped by prior conflict with the Nephite state. This particular campaign ended in the Lamanites being defeated, but the main significance lies in the renewed dominance of the Lamanite polity by Nephite dissenters (Alma 43–44). By this point, the Lamanite kingdom had become a principal vehicle through which Nephite dissenters repeatedly attempted to conquer the Nephites.

Amalickiah and the Capture of the Lamanite State

Another clear expression of the pattern of dissenter exploitation by the Lamanites is found in the rise of Amalickiah. After failing to seize power among the Nephites in the wake of a Mulekite uprising,³² Amalickiah fled to the Lamanites, where he rapidly became the dominant political

31. McMurtry, “Amlicites and Amalekites,” 274.

32. Lyle H. Hamblin, “Proper Names and Political Claims: Semitic Echoes as Foundations for Claims to the Nephite Throne,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 60 (2024): 431, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/proper-names-and-political-claims-semitic-echoes-as-foundations-for-claims-to-the-nephite-throne.

figure, immediately influencing the Lamanite king to instigate another war:

Amalickiah and those who had fled with him into the wilderness . . . went up in the land of Nephi among the Lamanites, and did stir up the Lamanites to anger against the people of Nephi, insomuch that the king of the Lamanites sent a proclamation throughout all his land, among all his people, that they should gather themselves together again to go to battle against the Nephites. (Alma 47:1)

Mormon's account is especially significant because it preserves evidence of Lamanite resistance to another dissenter-led war (Alma 47:2). When Amalickiah persuaded the Lamanite king to prepare for invasion, many Lamanites refused and fled to the Mount Antipas under Lehonti, rather than submit: "And it came to pass that when the proclamation had gone forth among them they were exceedingly afraid; yea, they feared to displease the king, and they also feared to go to battle against the Nephites lest they should lose their lives" (Alma 47:2). This indicates that large portions of the Lamanite population were not eager participants in the ambitions being pressed upon them.

Amalickiah overcame that resistance through a form of leadership that involved propaganda and deception. He first gained control of Lehonti's forces, arranged for the death of the king, and then overcame the opposition through indoctrination: "yea, he did appoint men to speak unto the Lamanites from their towers, against the Nephites. And thus, he did inspire their hearts against the Nephites," (Alma 48:1–2).³³ With these steps, he did not merely influence policy; he also seized the kingship over the Lamanites. Whatever earlier dissenter groups had accomplished, Amalickiah completed the process by capturing the Lamanite state.

The regime he created was deeply dependent on dissenter leadership. Under Amalickiah and later Ammoron, the Lamanite kingdom became the base from which repeated major wars were launched against the Nephites, often at moments of Nephite internal weakness (Alma 51:9–20).

33. David L. Rockwood and J. Gordon Daines III, "Contrasting the Leadership Styles of Moroni and Amalickiah," *Religious Educator* 21, no. 2 (2020): 132–33, rsc.byu.edu/vol-21-no-2-2020/contrasting-leadership-styles-moroni-amalickiah.

The limits of dissenter rule

Yet, Amalickiahite rule also revealed its own limits. The campaigns against the Nephites were costly, and despite occasional gains, they repeatedly ended in severe losses. Amalickiah's chief captains, drawn from Zoramite circles, made rash oaths and suffered disastrous attrition (Alma 49:13, 23). As a result, Amalickiah ultimately had to take direct command and was killed by Teancum (Alma 51:34). His brother Ammoron succeeded him, but likewise was required to take personal control of the war effort. His presence on the battlefield rendered him susceptible to the same fate (Alma 62:36).

After the deaths of these rulers, the rapid deterioration of the war effort may suggest that the regime had depended on a narrow ruling circle. It is possible that Amalickiah had marginalized or eliminated rival power centers, though the text does not say so explicitly. It is interesting to note that the Amalekites disappear from the record after the ascension of Amalickiah. At a minimum, the narrative implies that military effectiveness under this regime was tied heavily to a few key leaders rather than to a broad and stable Lamanite command structure.

Tubaloth, Coriantumr, and the persistence of the pattern

The same approach employed by the dissenters in the book of Alma appears to continue into the book of Helaman. In chapter 1, Ammoron's son, Tubaloth, is the Lamanite king (presumably the high king). He employed Coriantumr, a leader identified as a descendant of Zarahemla, as his war leader:

And they came down again that they might pitch battle against the Nephites. And they were led by a man whose name was Coriantumr; and he was a descendant of Zarahemla; and he was a dissenter from among the Nephites; and he was a large and a mighty man. Therefore, the king of the Lamanites, whose name was Tubaloth, who was the son of Ammoron, supposing that Coriantumr, being a mighty man, could stand against the Nephites, with his strength and also with his great wisdom, insomuch that by sending him forth he should gain power over the Nephites— Therefore he did stir them up to anger, and he did gather together his armies, and he did appoint Coriantumr to be their leader. (Helaman 1:15–17)

Once again, Lamanite manpower was directed by an elite figure

whose roots lay outside traditional Lamanite lineage. Coriantumr's campaign achieved striking early success, but it ended in reversal: "And thus had Coriantumr plunged the Lamanites into the midst of the Nephites, insomuch that they were in the power of the Nephites, and he himself was slain, and the Lamanites did yield themselves into the hands of the Nephites" (Helaman 1:32).

The broader significance lies in the persistence of the model: major Lamanite offensives continued to arise in the aftermath of Nephite factional crises and under the influence of outsider elites. This may be seen in the campaigns described in Helaman 4, where renewed Nephite dissent again led to Lamanite military success:

And it came to pass in the fifty and fourth year there were many dissensions in the church, and there was also a contention among the people, insomuch that there was much bloodshed. And the rebellious part were slain and driven out of the land, and they did go unto the king of the Lamanites. . . . And thus those dissenters of the Nephites, with the help of a numerous army of the Lamanites, had obtained all the possession of the Nephites which was in the land southward. (Helaman 4:1–2, 8)

The text does not identify every ruler involved, but the recurring pattern remains visible: Nephite dissenters co-opted Lamanite manpower to prosecute and achieve their political aims.

Lamanite Resistance and the Power of Conversion

The record makes clear that the Lamanites were not merely passive instruments in these struggles. Their resistance appears at several points. For example, the flight to the Mount Antipas under Lehonti shows collective refusal to participate in another dissenter-driven war: "And it came to pass that they would not, or the more part of them would not, obey the commandments of the king" (Alma 47:2). Also, the destruction of the Amulonites reveals violent rejection of a dissenter faction by native Lamanite elements:

Now this martyrdom caused that many of their brethren should be stirred up to anger; and there began to be contention in the wilderness; and the Lamanites began to hunt the seed of Amulon and his brethren and began to slay them; and they fled into the east wilderness. (Alma 25:8)

Another significant matter is that conversion movements, involving martyrs who stood up for their beliefs at the cost of their lives, repeatedly weakened or overturned the structures of elite manipulation.³⁴ An example of this is seen in Helaman 5, wherein Nephi and Lehi first converted a combined group of Lamanites and Nephite dissenters (Helaman 5:35) and then many Lamanites. Their imprisonment and the miraculous conversion of their captors triggered a mass religious change:

And there were about three hundred souls who saw and heard these things; and they were bidden to go forth and marvel not, neither should they doubt. 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. (Helaman 5:49–50)

The result was extraordinary: the Lamanites yielded up their lands to the Nephites (Helaman 5:52). This episode marks a political watershed. For generations, Nephite dissenters had repeatedly directed Lamanite populations into war. Here, by contrast, religious conversion broke the cycle and produced voluntary de-escalation. Whether the surrender of lands was driven by the court, local populations, or both, the event demonstrates that the cycle of violence could indeed be ended by the power of the word, just as Alma had envisioned during his mission to the Zoramites many decades earlier (Alma 31:4–5).

Later Realignments and the Gadianton Era

The peace did not endure. Later chapters in Helaman and in 3 Nephi show renewed fragmentation, now involving the Gadianton Robbers. These developments are more difficult to reconstruct, due to the lack of details in the text, but they seem to preserve the same larger tendency: dissident elements crossing political boundaries and destabilizing both Nephite and Lamanite societies.

Helaman 11 notes that dissenters again joined with Lamanites in renewed conflict:

34. Derek Squire, "The Literary Structure of Alma 23–27," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 64 (2025): 13, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/the-literary-structure-of-alma-23-27.

And it came to pass that in the eightieth year of the reign of the judges over the people of Nephi, there were a certain number of the dissenters from the people of Nephi, who had some years before gone over unto the Lamanites, and taken upon themselves the name of Lamanites, and also a certain number who were real descendants of the Lamanites, being stirred up to anger by them, or by those dissenters, therefore they commenced a war with their brethren. (Helaman 11:24)

This time, however, there are multiple twists: first, the dissenters and Lamanites were confederate with the Gadianton Robbers. Second, the conversion of many of the Lamanites had resulted in a new era of peace and prosperity: "And behold, there was peace in all the land, insomuch that the Nephites did go into whatsoever part of the land they would, whether among the Nephites or the Lamanites" (Helaman 6:7). The Robbers stirred up wars and contentions during this period, but they failed to fracture the détente between the Lamanites and Nephites. Indeed, their continuing depredations led to the opposite outcome, which was the complete integration of the remaining Nephite and Lamanite polities:

All the Lamanites who had become converted unto the Lord did unite with their brethren, the Nephites, and were compelled, for the safety of their lives and their women and their children, to take up arms against those Gadianton robbers. (3 Nephi 2:12)

The demonstrated ability of the Robbers to penetrate political organizations likely led to their success in targeting and overthrowing polities across the land: "Yea, for they did visit many parts of the land, and did do great destruction unto them; yea, did kill many, and did carry away others captive into the wilderness, yea, and more especially their women and their children" (Helaman 11:33).

The ability to easily cross boundaries between lands and cities meant that the Robbers could more easily reconnoiter and target cities and towns. Perhaps it was the recognition of this situation that led Lachoneus to propose his radical solution:

The proclamation of Lachoneus had gone forth throughout all the face of the land, and they had taken their horses, 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, until they had

all gone forth to the place which had been appointed that they should gather themselves together, to defend themselves against their enemies. (3 Nephi 3:22)

With all of the righteous Nephites and converted Lamanites united against the Robbers in a single location, it would be much easier to deny all intelligence to the enemy by strictly controlling the entire border. Previously, Nephite dissenter-Lamanite allied factions had counted on the edge in intelligence as supplied by the dissenters who were familiar with the Nephite lands, cities, and defensive posture:

And thus he did appoint chief captains of the Zoramites, they being the most acquainted with the strength of the Nephites, and their places of resort, and the weakest parts of their cities; therefore he appointed them to be chief captains over his armies. (Alma 48:5)

Bringing all of the people into a single land — after the dissenters had left — thus rendered moot the intelligence from the dissenters due to a complete change in the political, military, and geographic factors the dissenters were familiar with. This also gave the combined Lamanite and Nephite force an immense advantage in being able to control access to their lands, thus making it much more difficult for any putative spies to come and go without risking capture.

The exact identity of the dissenters in 3 Nephi and their relation to previous groups of dissenters is unclear, although 3 Nephi 1:29 suggests that they were likely Zoramites:

And there was also a cause of much sorrow among the Lamanites; for behold, they had many children who did grow up and began to wax strong in years, that they became for themselves, and were led away by some who were Zoramites, by their lyings and their flattering words, to join those Gadianton robbers. (3 Nephi 1:29)

Although the exact identities of leaders such as Giddianhi (3 Nephi 3:9) and Zemnariyah (3 Nephi 4:17) remain uncertain, the broader narrative pattern remains recognizable. The chief destabilizing force again came not from a self-contained Lamanite kingdom acting independently, but from hybrid dissenter coalitions that drew strength from internal fracture.

Summary and Conclusions

The Book of Mormon does not provide a continuous narrative of Lamanite internal history, but the evidence it does preserve points to substantial political development. Early references suggest the Lamanites being a people distinct from the Nephites in subsistence, mobility, and social practice, with little explicit evidence of strong centralization. By the time of Zeniff and his descendants, however, the Lamanites had developed greater military effectiveness and the capacity to extract tribute from settled agricultural populations. The incorporation of groups such as the Amulonites likely accelerated changes in literacy, administration, and political organization.

The record also permits the possibility of dynastic realignment. The evidence does not prove that an older ruling order associated with the name Laman was displaced by a new Ishmaelite dynasty, but it does suggest that by the time of Lamoni's father, the Lamanite kingdom was more hierarchical, centralized, and internally differentiated than before.

Most importantly, the narrative repeatedly shows that Nephite dissenters were exercising disproportionate influence within Lamanite society. Amulonites, Amalekites, Zoramites, Amalickiah, Ammoron, and later outsider military leaders did not merely merge into the Lamanite population; they helped to shape policy, direct armies, and repeatedly draw Lamanite populations into wars rooted in Nephite factionalism. In that sense, many so-called Lamanite wars were not simply ethnic conflicts between two stable civilizations, but episodes in a prolonged contest over who would control the political future of both peoples.

A close reading of Mosiah through Helaman suggests that Lamanite history was shaped by more than inherited hostility toward the Nephites. The text instead reveals a dynamic society whose institutions evolved over time and whose ruling structures were repeatedly affected by tribute relations, migration, religious conflict, and elite capture of the organs of power. Although the evidence is often indirect, it consistently indicates that Nephite dissenters played a major role in Lamanite administration and war-making for several generations. The frequent identification of the various players as descendants of Nephi, Zarahemla, Ishmael, Zoram and others indicates that the authors of the Book of Mormon were sensitive to the impact of bloodlines on the political history of the people.

This perspective clarifies two important features of the Book of Mormon narrative. First, it helps explain why Lamanite political

organization and military behavior change so markedly across the record. Second, it reframes many inter-polity conflicts as consequences of internal Nephite division, rather than as simple ethnic warfare. The result is a more historically textured picture of the Lamanites—not merely a static foil to the Nephites, but a complex people whose dynastic and political development became deeply entangled with the ambitions of dissident Nephite elites. Such a reading makes better sense of the narrative details and reinforces one of Mormon’s recurring warnings: the gravest threats to a society often arise not only from external enemies, but from internal corruption, factionalism, and struggles for power.



[Author’s Note: *I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and editorial staff of Interpreter for their assistance in editing this article. I would like to specifically thank Allen Wyatt and Godfrey Ellis for their help in formatting, structuring, and improving the wording of this article.*]

Noel Hudson was born in Idaho Falls, Idaho, and raised in Provo, Utah. He earned a BS in Zoology from BYU, an MS in Engineering Technology from BYU, and an MBA in marketing from BYU. While working as an electrical engineer in Salt Lake City, he published eight books of historical and science fiction and has written articles on the Book of Mormon. He and his wife, Luciana, are the parents of three children.

Progressing through Gradations of Holiness in the Temple: 2 Nephi 4:32–35 as a Hymn Inspired by Ritual

Nelson Chung

Abstract: *Sidney Sperry identified 2 Nephi 4:15–35 as “Nephi’s Psalm.” Using form-critical analysis, Matthew Nickerson classified it as a personal lament psalm. In this article, I build on biblical turns of phrase, imagery, symbolism, and the archaeological record established by previous scholarship to demonstrate how verses 32–35 constitute Nephi’s movement through gradations of increasing holiness in the temple. Nephi’s movement also exemplifies the use of thematic and rhetorical intensification, a method used by biblical poets. The ordered presentation of temple elements through those four verses suggests intentional artistry rather than random borrowing and affirms the literary sophistication of the Book of Mormon. This article adds to the substantial body of work demonstrating that Book of Mormon authors possessed a sophisticated command of Hebrew literary conventions.*

Nephi’s Psalm, comprising 2 Nephi 4:15–35, occupies a prominent place in the Latter-day Saint tradition. Mission presidents often recommend it to missionaries in times of trial. The Book of Mormon Institute Student Manual describes it as an “inspired poem or hymn” that contains Nephi’s “heartfelt pleadings” and encourages the student to vocalize it.¹

John Hilton III proposed that although the biblical Psalms were

1. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Book of Mormon Student Manual: Religion 121–122* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009), 59, churchofjesuschrist.org/bc/content/shared/content/english/pdf/language-materials/32506_eng.pdf.

likely absent from the brass plates, Nephi would have been familiar with them through his experience with the Jerusalem temple.² If the temple provided Nephi's connection to the Psalms, one should not be surprised to find temple imagery when he penned his own psalm in 2 Nephi 4:15–35, shortly after his father's death.³ The psalm's final four verses reflect precisely this influence, tracing a progression through the temple's increasing degrees of holiness. The depiction of the escalation in holiness associated with the passage through the temple represents *intensification*, a rhetorical technique of biblical poets.

Sidney Sperry first coined the term *Psalm of Nephi* in 1947.⁴ Using form-critical analysis, Matthew Nickerson identified Nephi's Psalm as an individual lament because it includes the essential elements—invocation, complaint, confession of trust, petition, and vow of praise.⁵

In this article, I first consider the question of what a psalm is, then identify key markers of intensification, review previous works on the temple setting of Nephi's Psalm, and finally trace Nephi's poetic progression through the temple grounds.

2. John L. Hilton III, "Old Testament Psalms in the Book of Mormon," in *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament*, ed. David Rolph Seely, Jeffrey R. Chadwick, and Matthew J. Grey (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013), 219–311, rsc.byu.edu/ascending-mountain-lord/old-testament-psalms-book-mormon. Some (I suspect many) Latter-day Saints object to the notion that the practices of the Solomonic temple can be known, as "plain and precious things" were removed. Joseph Fielding Smith reasoned, likely from Alma 13, that the Melchizedek Priesthood was operative during the Nephite era. The author is sympathetic to these positions. Yet, if we hold temples of the dispensation of the fullness of times (that is, our era) for comparison, it becomes clear that some elements of the Tabernacle, Second Temple, and even Babylonian and ancient Israelite temples are present in latter-day temples. Some of what has been demonstrated through research on temples we know exists in the eternal temple. Research is useful in our understanding though not definitive. For Joseph Fielding Smith's explanation, see "The Priesthood of the Nephites," *Improvement Era*, March 1956, 142–43, catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/e2e1852a-55f0-4957-9c98-7a6cab3fa7cb/0/0.

3. No agreement exists on whether verse 15 should be inclusive.

4. Sidney B. Sperry, *Our Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Steven & Wallis, 1947), 110, archive.org/details/ourbookofmormon0000sidn/page/110/mode/2up.

5. Matthew Nickerson, "Nephi's Psalm: 2 Nephi 4:16–35 in the Light of Form-Critical Analysis," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6, no. 2 (July 1997): 26–42, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol6/iss2/3/.

What Is a Psalm?

Psalms were not merely beautiful expressions; they could also be sung. The Greek word *psalmos* denotes a song sung to a plucked instrument. In early Judaism, psalms were understood to be largely King David's responses to life events. By the early twentieth century, Hermann Gunkel had begun categorizing psalms into different genres. Gunkel, the founder of form criticism, was interested in identifying genres so he could understand the settings that produced the texts. Setting is also key to understanding Nephi's Psalm. Gunkel made a higher-level division by separating psalms into “liturgical poetry” (relating to public worship) and “non-liturgical” (spiritual songs).⁶ Gunkel went so far as to argue that “very many of the psalms which have come down to us do not belong to the poetry of the cult.”⁷

Sigmund Mowinckel, one of Gunkel's students, entered the conversation in the 1930s by focusing on what he believed were the festival and temple settings underlying all psalms. *Salme* also means “hymn” in his native Norwegian and, as he pointed out, the Hebrew word for the canonical book of Psalms, *tehillim*, means “cultic [ritualistic] songs of praise.”⁸ Mowinckel grounded his argument in the origin of religious poems in temple worship and even tried to reverse engineer festivals from the psalms. Mowinckel broke decisively with his mentor on this point.

Prayers also share a close relationship with psalms. Gunkel believed many later psalms did not contain the prayer form, but “consist entirely of pious reflections.”⁹ Some may infer that Gunkel meant nearly all *early* psalms served as cultic prayers. Mowinckel maintained that while prayer (normally “a petition to a powerful, willing and personally acting God”) predates formal worship, in this instance “the natural form of the cultic prayer is the *psalm*.”¹⁰

Almost one hundred years later, the literary scholar Robert Alter sided primarily with Gunkel: “Many but by no means all the psalms

6. Hermann Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction*, trans. Thomas M. Horner (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 10, 26, archive.org/details/psalmsformcritic0000gunk/page/10/mode/2up.

7. Gunkel, *Form-Critical Introduction*, 26.

8. Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977), 2, archive.org/details/psalmsinisraelsw0012unse_u6z5/page/n29/mode/2up.

9. Gunkel, *Form-Critical Introduction*, 38.

10. Mowinckel, *Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 22, emphasis in original.

were composed for use in the temple cult.”¹¹ For Alter, what unites all psalms is not their function as temple ritual but their character as poems derived from a “deep and often passionate faith.”¹² Alter likely had in mind the rhetorical studies of Walter Brueggemann, who acknowledged that this “faithful” speech encompasses the full range of faith, “from profound praise to the utterance of unspeakable anger and doubt.”¹³ More recently, the pendulum has swung again as biblical scholars have shifted from their near-exclusive focus on Israelite history to the study of worship in the Bible, once again renewing interest in the Psalms’ liturgical function.¹⁴

Nickerson’s identification of Nephi’s Psalm as an individual lament used Gunkel’s more detailed framework. However, I argue that relying on Gunkel’s classification scheme to understand 2 Nephi 4 as entirely non-liturgical undervalues the cultic imagery and experience evident in Nephi’s Psalm.

Intensification

The essence of biblical poetry is *parallelism*, in which the same idea is expressed in different ways. Alter asserted that within this genre, “Psalms is the one set of texts whose poetic status has been most strongly felt throughout the generations.”¹⁵ He illustrated how biblical writers deployed the poetic medium to give their messages greater weight.¹⁶ He further explained, while describing prophetic poetry, that since poetry is the most elevated form of human speech, it was often thought that divine speech should therefore be presented in such a format.¹⁷

Parallelism often includes a technique used by biblical poets known as *intensification*. Perhaps the best-known example of this

11. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), xvi.

12. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 142, archive.org/details/class-214-h-the-art-of-biblical-poetry/page/141/mode/2up.

13. Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 15, archive.org/details/messageofpsalmst0000brue/page/14/mode/2up.

14. See Richard J. Clifford, “Psalms of the Temple,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 327.

15. Alter, *Biblical Poetry*, 139.

16. Alter, *Biblical Poetry*, 256.

17. Alter, *Biblical Poetry*, 176.

method among Latter-day Saints is Isaiah's warning of the impending Assyrian invasion, quoted in 2 Nephi 20, as towns progressively closer to Jerusalem fall before the advancing foreign army. Alter analyzed the intensification in Psalm 13, which expresses a lament over escalating abandonment but abruptly turns to trust in Yahweh in the final verses.¹⁸ He also examined Amos 8:9–10, a prophecy of intensifying grief that moves from the periphery of human experience to its center: from light being turned into darkness (the world), to festivals being turned into mourning (human institutions), to sackcloth and a shaved head (outward manifestations of grief), to mourning for the loss of an only son (inward pain).¹⁹

Previous Research on the Temple Setting of Nephi's Psalm

That the temple aspect of Nephi's Psalm is easily overlooked is underscored by a statement from Hugh Nibley, who argued that because "a psalm is a ritual hymn connected with the rites of the Temple," Nephi's Psalm is no psalm at all.²⁰ Nibley's reflexive dismissal echoed Mowinckel, who, as noted above, originated the idea that all psalms were exclusively cultic hymns. Ironically, Nibley classified Nephi's Psalm as a "thanksgiving hymn," although according to Gunkel the roots of thanksgiving hymns "reach down into the cult."²¹ It seems you can take the psalm out of the temple, but it is harder to take the temple out of the psalm.

More recent scholarship has sought to uncover temple themes in Nephi's Psalm. Kenneth Alford and Bryce Baker observed parallels between 2 Nephi 4:16–35 and Psalms 25–31.²² Scripture Central—a website that popularizes scholarship on Latter-day Saint scriptures—linked those similarities to Peter Craigie's argument that, based on their central theme of trust, Psalms 25 and 28 have a covenant-making

18. Alter, *Biblical Poetry*, 77.

19. Alter, *Biblical Poetry*, 89–90.

20. Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah: The Book of Mormon in the Modern World* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1967), 158, archive.org/details/sincecumorah00hugh/page/157/mode/2up.

21. Gunkel, *Form-Critical Introduction*, 17.

22. Kenneth L. Alford and D. Bryce Baker, "Parallels between Psalms 25–31 and the Psalm of Nephi," in *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament*, ed. David Rolph Seely, Jeffrey R. Chadwick, and Matthew J. Grey (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University [BYU], 2013), 312–28, rsc.byu.edu/sites/default/files/pub_content/pdf/18%20Alford-Baker-corrected.pdf

context. The Scripture Central article concluded that Nephi's Psalm, with its declaration of allegiance to the Lord and reliance on his salvation, incorporates "themes of temple and covenant."²³ Additionally, David Bokovoy noted that 2 Nephi 4:32–35 described priestly screening activity at temple gates.²⁴

Building on these insights, I explore the temple's physical organization as depicted in the closing verses of Nephi's Psalm, deepening our appreciation of both the themes and Nephi's artistry. I demonstrate that 2 Nephi 4:32–35 embeds cultic elements within the personal lament and that these verses are best understood as explicitly reflecting Nephi's progression through the gradations of holiness symbolized in the temple setting. To that end, I build on biblical idioms, imagery, typology, and archaeological attestations uncovered by previous scholarship to trace Nephi's movement through the temple. The material I present does not establish whether these verses were composed for use in the temple. Rather, if one examines the song for its context, function, and purpose, one can infer a context of temple worship. Recognition of the temple themes allows the reader to more fully appreciate the rich meaning of Nephi's Psalm.

Nephi's Ritual-Themed Song

The closing verses of Nephi's Psalm trace a progression through increasingly sacred temple space. Beginning at the gates, Nephi moves inward through imagery associated with admission, covenant, and priestly clothing before his prayer culminates in an ascent toward God in the Holy of Holies. The following analysis traces this progression through the temple imagery of verses 32–35.

The gates of righteousness

Nephi turns to imagery of temple worship as he seeks the Lord's presence in his psalm. Second Nephi 4:32 invites us to consider Nephi's walk through the temple, beginning at the gate:

May the gates of hell be shut continually before me, because
that my heart is broken and my spirit is contrite! O Lord, wilt

23. Scripture Central Staff, "Is 'Nephi's Psalm' Really a Psalm?" *KnoWhy* 30, 20 August 2020, scripturecentral.org/knowhy/is-nephis-psalm-really-a-psalm.

24. David Bokovoy, "'Thou Knowest That I Believe': Invoking the Spirit of the Lord as Council Witness in 1 Nephi 11," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 1 (2012): 1–23, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/thou-knowest-that-i-believe.

thou not shut the gates of thy righteousness before me, that
I may walk in the path of the low valley, that I may be strict in
the plain road!

Here Nephi contrasts "gates of hell" (*sharei sheol*, Isaiah 38:10) with "gates of righteousness" (*sharei tzedek*, Psalm 118:19). Roman Catholic scholar Steven Smith emphasized that the layout of the temple symbolizes different realms: the Holy of Holies signifies heaven, the Holy Place corresponds to the Garden of Eden, and the outer court represents *sheol*.²⁵ When this typology is coupled with the widely accepted interpretation among Bible scholars that the "gates of righteousness" refer to the gates separating the outer court from the inner parts of the temple — and that these gates often serve as a synecdoche for the temple as a whole — a clearer picture emerges. In this light, Nephi's plea for the Lord to shut the gates of hell and open the gates of righteousness can be understood as his yearning to leave the outer court and enter the Holy Place, drawing nearer to God's presence.

Furthermore, Nephi is presenting himself as worthy of entry. Levite gatekeepers stood between the outer and inner courts of the temple to assess the righteousness of those seeking entry. The Hebrew Bible depicts this process in *gate liturgies*. The psalmist cries, "Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it" (Psalm 118:19–20 ESV). Additionally, "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart" (Psalm 24:3–4 ESV). Thus, when Nephi utters, "May the gates of hell be shut continually before me, because that my heart is broken and my spirit is contrite," he is stating his qualifications for entering the sanctuary — the inner court — from the outer court, substituting an inversion of Psalm 51:17 consistent with Seidel's law.²⁶ As David Bokovoy asserts, "Nephi declared that as a result of his 'broken heart' and 'contrite spirit,' the Lord could rightfully open the temple gates, encircle Nephi in the sacred robe of righteousness, and

25. Steven C. Smith, *The House of the Lord: A Catholic Biblical Theology of God's Temple Presence in the Old and New Testaments* (Steubenville, OH: Franciscan University Press, 2017), 52–53.

26. Moshe Seidel was the first to discover inverted quotations in the Bible. See Moshe Seidel, "Parallels between Isaiah and Psalms," *Sinai* 38 (1955–56): 149–72. David Bokovoy discovered them in the Book of Mormon. See David E. Bokovoy and John A. Tvedtnes, *Testaments: Links between the Book of Mormon and the Hebrew Bible* (Tooele, UT: Heritage Press, 2003), 56–60.

allow Nephi access to the heavenly realm.”²⁷ The reason for Nephi’s precise formulation is Christological, as explained shortly.

The robe of righteousness

Nephi continues: “O Lord, wilt thou encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness!” (2 Nephi 4:33). Bokovoy and John Tvedtnes perceived that in both the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon, clothing carries symbolic value. More specifically, the “robe of righteousness” (Isaiah 61:10) represents covenant-making.²⁸ Nephi’s inclusion of that phrase thus lends additional support to the claim made by Scripture Central that he wrote it in a covenant context. Importantly, the reader can also visualize Nephi donning a priestly robe as part of his progression within the temple. A chamber in the inner court adjacent to the Holy Place allowed priests to change into and out of their priestly garments, as attested by Ezekiel’s vision:

When the priests enter the Holy Place, they shall not go out of it into the outer court without laying there the garments in which they minister, for these are holy. They shall put on other garments before they go near to that which is for the people. (Ezekiel 42:14 ESV)

Nephi’s enrobing indicates he has reached the inner court.

The parallelism emphasizes not only the *place* of the temple, but also the *nature* of the temple covenants. One should note that in verses 32 and 33, Nephi inserts the word “thy,” transforming “gates of righteousness” into “gates of *thy* righteousness” and “robe of righteousness” into “robe of *thy* righteousness.” This move harmonizes these phrases with a recurring theme in 2 Nephi: humankind is redeemed by Christ’s righteousness. Representative passages include “thou art redeemed, because of the righteousness of thy Redeemer” (2 Nephi 2:3), “there is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah” (2 Nephi 2:8), and “relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save” (2 Nephi 31:19). Accordingly, Nephi reworks the expressions from Psalms and Isaiah about righteousness and requirements for entry and imbues them with Christological significance. He portrays the temple as a physical manifestation of Christ’s personal interactions with him, and Christ as the only way through which he can be considered righteous.

27. Bokovoy, “Spirit of the Lord,” 14.

28. Bokovoy and Tvedtnes, *Testaments*, 63.

Additionally, the phrase "that I may walk in the path of the low valley, that I may be strict in the plain road!" (2 Nephi 4:32) teaches, through intensified parallelism, the behavior that characterizes and produces a broken heart and contrite spirit. In terms of the progression through the geography of the temple, this parallelism moves the speaker from standing at the gates and answering the gatekeeper's requirements to walking forward on the Lord's way.

In verse 33, this motion continues along a path that only the Lord can provide. If the "robe of thy righteousness" represents covenant-making, the following plea outlines the nature of the covenant. As mentioned earlier, trust is a prerequisite for covenant-making:

O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever. I will not put my trust in the arm of flesh; for I know that cursed is he that putteth his trust in the arm of flesh. Yea, cursed is he that putteth his trust in man or maketh flesh his arm. (2 Nephi 4:34)

Nephi's trust intensifies from personal declaration to moral principle to universal warning. This progression is likewise characteristic of covenant-making.

The ascent of Nephi's voice

Finally, we proceed to verse 35:

- A Yea I know that God will give liberally to him that asketh.
- A' Yea, my God will give me, if I ask not amiss;
- B (a) therefore I will lift up my voice
- (b) unto thee;
- B' (a) yea, *I will cry*
- (b) unto thee,
- my God,
- the rock of my righteousness.
- B'' (a) Behold, my voice shall forever ascend up
- (b) unto thee,
- my rock and
- mine everlasting God. Amen.

Here Nephi deploys synonymous parallelism with the following formula in each B line: (a) voice rises; (b) to God/rock. This imagery immediately draws the reader even further into the physical reality of the temple. The (a) units of each line describe Nephi's voice first being lifted, then crying, and finally, more explicitly, "forever ascend[ing]." This progression strongly evokes the rise of incense burning in the temple.

Yahweh commanded Moses to construct an incense altar out of acacia wood and set it in the Holy Place near the veil in front of the Holy of Holies (Exodus 30:1, 6). John Walton, Victor Matthews, and Mark Chavalas explained the significance of rituals from this altar: “The smoke of the incense represented the prayers of the people going up to God.”²⁹ Echoing this symbolism, the psalmist proclaims, “Let my prayer be counted as incense before you” (Psalm 141:2 ESV). Thereby Nephi makes clear that he has entered the Holy Place, has approached the Holy of Holies, and is burning incense.

The spiritual intensity of the last line, as Nephi’s prayer crescendos from lifting his voice to crying out and finally to his voice reaching the heavens and forever ascending, represents a profound instance of intensification. Nephi moves forward and upward through the temple precincts into the holiest place of the temple, then sends his voice vertically, even higher, to resolve his estrangement from God due to sin.

The rock and the Holy of Holies

The (b) units of these lines show us, in a tripartite crescendo, that “thee” is “thee, my God, the rock of my righteousness,” and is even more explicitly “thee, my rock and mine everlasting God.” At least rhetorically, Nephi has brought us into God’s presence, represented by the imagery of the rock. In terms of the physical temple, the (b) units’ repeated invocation of Nephi’s rock may also indicate he has arrived in the Holy of Holies at last.³⁰ Granted, the Bible makes no mention of rocks in the inner sanctum. But archaeological discoveries raise two possibilities for understanding how “his rock” might symbolize the Most Holy Place.

Very late Jewish traditions about the Solomonic temple’s foundation stone protruding from the ground in the Holy of Holies would have been unknown to Nephi. However, evidence for the possible ancient origin of those traditions started to surface in 1992 when the architectural archaeologist Leen Ritmeyer toured the Dome of the Rock, a well-known Islamic shrine that sits on Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The edifice houses a rocky mass (henceforth the “Rock”). Researchers had previously rejected the Rock as the location of the Holy of Holies because it was smaller than the dimensions of the inner sanctuary

29. John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic), 123.

30. I thank Rebecca Lambert for suggesting that I explore this possibility.

would require. But if the Rock was an outcrop from underneath — as portrayed in Jewish tradition — rather than comprising the entire floor, one could not rule out the possibility that the tradition was accurate. Additionally, Ritmeyer noticed flat surfaces on the Rock that could serve as the foundation trench for part of the southern temple wall.³¹

Ritmeyer returned to the location in 1994 and measured the distance from the potential southern wall to the northern line of the flat areas along the western side of the Rock and found it to be twenty cubits, aligning with the inner dimensions of the Holy of Holies described in 1 Kings 6:20. After using the twenty-cubit measurement to establish the eastern edge and thus complete all four sides, he discovered at its center a rectangular sunken area of 1.5 by 2.5 cubits, matching the width and length of the Ark of the Covenant. He argued that, because the Bible makes no mention of the Ark of the Covenant in connection with the Second Temple, the apparent location of the Ark indicated that he had found Solomon's temple and had verified the proposition that "the Foundation Stone or *Even ha-Shetiyah*, would truly live up to its name."³² If myths about the protruding foundation stone were based on the First Temple's actual architecture, Nephi could very well have had the Holy of Holies in mind when he spoke of "my rock and my everlasting God." In light of Ritmeyer's findings, the contrast between the cypress floor of the palace area (1 Kings 6:15 ESV) and the rocky floor of the Holy of Holies allows the allusion to the "rock of righteousness" mark Nephi's transition into the inner sanctuary quite beautifully.

Ritmeyer was not without critics. Eric Cline of the Biblical Archaeological Society — while enthusiastically endorsing the book in which Ritmeyer presented his discovery — remarked that Ritmeyer's search for the original depository of the Ark of the Covenant was fraught with hyperbole and speculation.³³ Cline admitted he was not qualified to evaluate the architecture. But it is unclear why he did not similarly criticize Ritmeyer's proposed locations for the temple and its inner sanctuary and singled out the sunken rectangle for judgment. That Ritmeyer estimated the inner sanctuary's parameters by pacing them out because the Rock was fenced off from direct measurement

31. Leen Ritmeyer, *The Quest: Revealing the Temple Mount in Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2006), 243–44.

32. Ritmeyer, *Quest*, 244.

33. Eric H. Cline, "Review of *The Quest: Revealing the Temple Mount in Jerusalem* by Leen Ritmeyer," *Bible History Daily* (blog), *Biblical Archaeology Society*, 12 January 2012, biblicalarchaeology.org/reviews/the-quest/.

deserves more scrutiny. Furthermore, he derived his measurement of the sunken rectangle from a photograph. More modern methods such as lidar have not been applied due to religious sensitivities. These limitations make Ritmeyer's inferences suggestive rather than conclusive.

Additional evidence points to a possible "Holy of Holies" interpretation of Nephi's rock. In 1962, Yohanan Aharoni excavated a Judahite temple at Tel Arad with two standing stones (*mattzevoth*) in its Holy of Holies that represented Yahweh and his consort, Asherah.³⁴ The larger stone may be the rock of which Nephi speaks. Other discoveries pointing to this divine pairing have interested Latter-day Saints because they accord with teachings concerning a divine feminine.³⁵ The temple is located in the northwest corner of a fortress erected by the Southern Kingdom to protect against nomadic harassment and Egyptian incursions.³⁶ The temple, most recently dated to the ninth century BCE, was oriented on an east-west axis with a tripartite layout that resembled the Tabernacle. The entrance to its Holy of Holies was flanked by two carved limestone altars with burnt organic remains on top, suggesting they were incense altars. Inside the Holy of Holies stood two upright ritual limestones. The larger one stood forty inches tall and had a flat face, rounded back, and strips of red paint on one side.³⁷

Israeli archaeologist Uzi Avner explained how the two stones represent God and his wife: the stones fit the pattern of other Iron Age *mattzevoth* arrangements in which the stone on the left is larger than the one on the right.³⁸ From the deities' perspective, the larger one stands to the right of the smaller, reflecting the biblical pattern of placing male names before female names, as in "Adam and Eve." This pattern is also found elsewhere in scripture: "His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me" (Song of Solomon 2:6).³⁹

34. I have chosen to spell the plural *mattzevoth* as shown (singular is *mattzevah*), but it can also be spelled *mattzeboth* or *massebot*.

35. See Alyson S. Von Feldt, "Review of *Does God Have a Wife?: Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel*," *The FARMS Review* 19, no. 1 (2007): 81–118.

36. Leslie J. Hoppe, "Tel Arad," *The Bible Today* 53, no. 2 (March/April 2015): 107–13.

37. Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, "Massebot Standing for Yhwh: The Fall of a Yhwistic Cult Symbol," in *Worship, Women, and War: Essays in Honor of Susan Niditch*, ed. John J. Collins, T. M. Lemos, and Saul M. Olyan (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 2015), 101.

38. Uzi Avner, "Sacred Stones in the Desert," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 27, no. 3 (2001): 30–41.

39. See Avner, "Sacred Stones in the Desert," 35–36.

Many other artifacts that fit this larger-left/smaller-right pattern carry some form of the inscription "Yahweh and his Asherah." Leslie Hoppe claimed that if the stones represent Yahweh and Asherah, worship of those deities "would make the worship at the temple unorthodox."⁴⁰ Avner contested this notion, pointing to on-site pottery fragments that are inscribed with the names of two Israelite priestly families, evidence that places the stones within the official cult.⁴¹

Also revealing about the Tel Arad temple is Elizabeth Bloch-Smith's observation that *mattzevoth* in the Bible often mark the spot of theophanies. Her note is striking in light of Andrew Skinner's work establishing temple theophanies as a major theme in Israel's canonical psalms.⁴²

Regarding the Tel Arad temple's demise, Bloch-Smith concluded that the archaeological evidence pointed away from its destruction at the hands of Sennacherib. Israel Finkelstein and Neil Silberman postulated that Hezekiah decommissioned the temple as part of his religious reforms. Aharoni posited that the process started with Hezekiah's burial of the courtyard and altar and ended with Josiah's destruction of the entire edifice. However, Avner believed the temple and its *mattzevoth* survived the reforms of both Hezekiah and Josiah, leaving the cause of the temple's destruction to either an Edomite invasion or a Babylonian invasion in 586 BCE.⁴³ Bloch-Smith disputed these specific inferences on the grounds that they overestimated archaeology's precision. Instead, she proposed, more modestly,

textual references viewed in conjunction with archaeological attestations attest to Yhwistic stones as a focus of Israelite worship through the eighth century [BCE]. Biblical writers would have been familiar with the phenomenon into the seventh century; thereafter writers and editors likely drew on memories of earlier instances.⁴⁴

If she is correct, and if Nephi received scribal training comparable

40. Hoppe, "Tel Arad," 110.

41. Avner, "Sacred Stones in the Desert," 34.

42. Andrew C. Skinner, "Seeing God in His Temple: A Significant Theme in Israel's Psalms," in *Approaching Holiness: Exploring the History and Teachings of the Old Testament*, ed. Krystal V. L. Pierce and David Rolph Seely (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, BYU; Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2021), 255–76, rsc.byu.edu/approaching-holiness/seeing-god-his-temple.

43. Avner, "Sacred Stones in the Desert," 37.

44. Bloch-Smith, "Massebot Standing for Yhwh," 112.

to that of biblical writers, as is well-attested,⁴⁵ then it is at least possible that Nephi, writing in the sixth century BCE, drew upon the memory of the larger standing stone representing Yahweh in the Holy of Holies of the Tel Arad temple when he used the phrase “the rock of my righteousness.” Such an interpretation is consistent with the timeframe.

Although there is no explicit identification of the rock with a *mattze-vah*, it is also worth noting that Nephi depicts Lehi’s opening vision in the Book of Mormon using suggestively similar imagery, saying, “there came a pillar of fire and dwelt upon a rock before him; and he saw and heard much” (1 Nephi 1:6). Robb Smith argues in a forthcoming article that verse six is chiasmatically parallel to verses 11–12, a Christophany wherein the Twelve follow Jesus in his descent to Lehi and give him a book.⁴⁶ The structural evidence from 1 Nephi indicates that Nephi could have been aware of the temple-based connection between “the rock” and Christ/Yahweh.

Whether the phrase “rock of righteousness” alludes to either the foundation stone that protrudes from the ground in the Holy of Holies of Solomon’s temple or the Yahwistic standing stones found in the Holy of Holies of the pre-exilic Judahite temple at Arad — or perhaps to both — Nephi is signaling his arrival in the inner sanctuary. He gradually reveals to us that the rock is “mine everlasting God.” Thus, with increasing emotional impact, the last four verses of 2 Nephi 4 elegantly deploy the imagery of rising through gradations of holiness in the temple, allowing the reader to imagine Nephi’s movement toward God.

The ascending holiness evoked by Nephi’s ritual-themed hymn is an additional instance of intensification and offers a useful contrast to Psalm 13. Whereas the psalm’s author feels increasing alienation from God but precipitously turns to trust in God, Nephi’s progression also begins with alienation, but the heightening occurs as he resolves that alienation by walking through the temple grounds into the inner sanctum.⁴⁷

45. See Brant A. Gardner, “Nephi as Scribe,” *Mormon Studies Review* 23, no. 1 (2011): 45–55, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1831&context=msr. See also Noel B. Reynolds, “Nephi and Lehi as Trained Manassite Scribes,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 50 (2022): 161–216, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/lehi-and-nephi-as-trained-manassite-scribes.

46. C. Robb Smith, “Framing Judgment and Deliverance: Structure and Meaning in 1 Nephi 1,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 70 (2027), forthcoming.

47. The amplification of Nephi’s voice detailed earlier represents what Alter

Thy Righteousness, Thy Righteousness, My Righteousness

Distinct from the parallel phrases "gates of *thy* righteousness" and "robe of *thy* righteousness," 2 Nephi 4:35 declares God as "the rock of *my* righteousness." This last expression recognizes Jesus as the source of Nephi's righteousness. Christological debates have raged over *imputed* versus *infused* righteousness, and the semantic unit "thy righteousness" favors the former. Jesus, as the source of Nephi's uprightness, could support either understanding. Considering that "rock of my righteousness" is distinct from the two phrases that indicate imputation, and considering the context of the entire Book of Mormon—Amulek taught, "the Lord . . . should not come to redeem them in their sins, but to redeem them from their sins" (Helaman 5:10)—I prefer to read "rock of my righteousness" as infusion. More significantly, Nephi doesn't address those theological issues. Instead, he outlines his physical and spiritual approach to God's presence. Having covenanted with the Lord and entered the Lord's presence, Nephi's righteousness is wholly dependent on Christ and is portrayed as the result of a specific kind of journey.

As noted earlier, Nephi replaces "clean hands and a pure heart" with a Seidel inversion of a verse from a penitential psalm, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart" (Psalm 51:17 ESV). Gunkel regarded this psalm as reflecting the shift in religion from cultic acts to personal piety.⁴⁸ Thus, Nephi's qualifications for entering through the gates consist of a penitent reliance on Christ and faithful obedience within his covenantal relationship, rather than reliance on ritual purity or morality. This psalm is at once deeply personal and deeply tied to temple ritual.

Conclusion and Implications

This article demonstrates that explicit temple imagery in 2 Nephi 4:32–35 frames Nephi's movement from the outer court of the temple to the inner court, then to the Holy Place, and finally to the Holy of Holies. Nephi draws progressively closer to God's presence. The thematic and rhetorical crescendo of holiness that accompanies the psalmist's progression reflects the biblical poetic technique of

called a "stepping up of assertion" while his entire movement through the temple grounds exemplifies a "thematic intensification" that implies a temporal sequence. See Alter, *Biblical Poetry*, 76.

48. Gunkel, *Form-Critical Introduction*, 26, 36.

intensification and reduces the likelihood that the author haphazardly strung together biblical phrases. The sayings “gates of hell,” “gates of righteousness,” “contrite spirit and a broken heart,” and “robe of righteousness” were deployed and refined in an ordered, deliberate, and coherent manner. The rhetorical intensification focuses the reader on the personal covenantal relationship between Christ and Nephi, which is the source of Nephi’s trust and hope. Additionally, this article adds to the vast corpus demonstrating that Book of Mormon authors possessed a sophisticated command of Hebrew literary conventions. These conclusions affirm the Book of Mormon as truly a marvelous work and a wonder.



Nelson Chung graduated from Brigham Young University where he double-majored in economics and political science and minored in computing. He received his master’s degree in applied and computational mathematics at Johns Hopkins University and studied Hebrew under Dan McClellan. He works for the United States Census Bureau as a statistician. His article, “The Brigham Young University Football Program and the Analytics Revolution,” was among BYU Studies Quarterly’s more popular articles. His hobbies include working out (though he doesn’t consider himself a gym bro), biking, batting cages, and international travel.

Who is the Real Jacques Derrida?

James E. Faulconer

Abstract: *Jacques Derrida and deconstruction are frequently invoked, by both admirers and critics, as arguing for relativism, denying stable meaning, and dissolving the possibility of truth. This essay argues that such characterizations misunderstand Derrida's project. Beginning with Nietzsche's diagnosis of the collapse of the metaphysical foundations of Western thought and tracing its development through Heidegger, the essay explains Derridean deconstruction as an attempt to think truthfully and meaningfully without appealing to a metaphysical antecedent. For Derrida, the limits of language do not imply that truth is arbitrary or merely subjective. Rather, meaning is structured in coming to be through difference and deferral and—more important—by an anticipation of truth and justice always still “to come.” Deconstruction therefore functions less as the destruction of meaning than as an ethical practice of attending to what texts, practices, and systems necessarily overlook or exclude in order to think what those exclusions point to. Read in this way, Derrida's thought has unexpected affinities with negative theology, religious hope, and ethical responsibility and may offer Latter-day Saint thinkers useful resources for reflecting on scripture, interpretation, and the limits of human knowledge without either requiring them to become Derrideans or preventing them from doing so.*

My experience in hearing people talk about Jacques Derrida and deconstruction in the Anglophone world has been that the thinking of a friend is often mischaracterized by both sides. What they say about Derrida's views is often unrecognizable as Derridean. As a result, Anglophone proponents and critics of Jacques Derrida both misunderstand his thinking: they agree on a mistaken view of

what deconstruction is and then argue about what that mistaken view implies about meaning, truth, and understanding. This essay addresses that mistaken view, but I will not argue for or against deconstruction or any other theory of meaning. My goal is explanation rather than persuasion to one view or another.

I hope to offer a sketch of Derrida's thinking that explains how the standard Anglophone view goes awry. I want to explain Derrida's thinking so those who deal with it will perhaps do so more accurately, whether friend or foe. Beyond that, I want to explain deconstruction and related thinking in contemporary European philosophy so as to leave room for Latter-day Saints to perhaps use some of these ideas as bases for their theories of scriptural interpretation.¹ I believe that explaining Derrida's thinking about the limits of language and knowledge and, at the same time, the possibility of truth based on what is to come rather than on a pre-linguistic given² may show how that Latter-day Saint use might be possible.

However, since my own thinking about theories of meaning, interpretation, and, in particular, scripture, are more influenced by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, I'm not a Derridean. Though his appeal to the truth as the "to-come" carries significant weight for me, I remain committed to the importance of the pre-linguistic (discussed later). I find the writings of Gadamer and Ricoeur more cogent and applicable to my philosophical interests than Derrida's.³ So, I claim to understand, but I am not a disciple.

I will begin with my *bona fides*, for which I apologize. But I think my academic experience is important to give some weight to what I say here: I began studying European thinking in graduate school in the early 1970s. There I studied Hegel and hermeneutics with several German and French scholars of the time who came to Penn State as visiting professors. From the 1980s to the early 2000s, I took part in five or six multi-week philosophical seminars—the annual Collegium Phaenomenologicum—on European philosophy, directing one of them myself. The major presentations in those seminars were given by almost two dozen of the best-known figures in European philosophy, including Derrida and Hans-Georg Gadamer. With a group of mostly European philosophers, I helped found a different annual two-week study group for European professional faculty and PhD students, the International Phenomenology Symposium. Both of these seminars—the Collegium Phaenomenologicum and the International Phenomenology Symposium—continue to meet annually. In 1995–96

I was a visiting professor in the Institute for Philosophy at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium. In 2000–01 I did research at the library of the *École Normale Supérieure*. I have had collegial relations with Gadamer, Derrida, and Jean-Luc Marion,⁴ all of whom worked with me on scholarly projects. Mark Wrathall (Corpus Christi College, Oxford) is a former student, a friend, an active Latter-day Saint, and one of the foremost Heidegger scholars in the world. Together we organized several faculty paper discussions on the philosophy of religion at Oxford.

Everyone I have worked with knows that I am a practicing Latter-day Saint. Without exception, they have treated me and my faith with respect. Derrida helped me start a journal in the history of philosophy. Gadamer visited Brigham Young University (BYU), as did Simon Critchley more than once. Gadamer loved to tell of taking part in a family home evening while lecturing at BYU. Critchley (a non-believer) called out his smug New York students for mocking Latter-day Saint belief and assuming that Mitt Romney couldn't be taken seriously as a presidential candidate because he is a Latter-day Saint. Shortly afterward, he wrote an editorial for the *New York Times* criticizing those who thought like his students. In it, he referred to his friendship with several Latter-day Saint philosophers and his visits to BYU as grounds for what he said.

If that is too lengthy, I apologize. But it makes my point: I know about contemporary European philosophy in general, about Martin Heidegger and Derrida in particular, and I know about these matters firsthand rather than from secondary sources. Heidegger, Gadamer, Immanuel Levinas, Ricoeur, Derrida, Marion, etc. are not the lens through which I understand the gospel, but broadly speaking, their thinking *is* the lens through which I understand philosophy and the philosophy of religion, something quite different than religion itself. With that out of the way, I turn to deconstruction as Derrida understood it.

Some words become their own worst enemies. *Deconstruction* is among them. Like *existentialism*, *special*, *liberal*, *conservative*, *post-modern*, and many other words in common parlance, its meaning is most often so vague as to be useless. The word *deconstruction* began its most-recognized philosophical life in the late 1960s as a technical term in the work of the twentieth-century French thinker, Jacques Derrida. In the 1970s, it became part of Anglophone literary criticism's vocabulary. From the 60s to the present it has moved from a technical

philosophical term first co-opted by North American literary theorists to a word that pops up in offhand remarks by everyone from advertisers to educators and church leaders of various denominations. Even cake artists talk about creating deconstructed works.

Whatever *deconstruction's* original meaning, placed under the useless umbrella term *postmodernism*, the word has come to often mean “tear down” or “destroy” (usually when the object is something non-material, like truth, morality, or religion). Many in literature—not understanding what Derrida was doing—have used the word, positively and negatively, to mean something like, “playing with texts to show that they have no meaning.” (Cake artists and chefs might be closer to Derrida’s meaning than are those who use the word negatively: trying to show something new by taking apart and rearranging.) “Denying meaning” seems to be the way *deconstruction* is often understood among Latter-day Saint intellectuals generally, just as it is widely understood in North America. There, *deconstruction* is most often understood as a philosophy which teaches that truth and morality are merely relative. I challenge that understanding.

The devil usually gets all the best words, so I have no hope of changing the way the word *deconstruction* is now used in everyday English. We cannot but agree to use words in the way that most people use them. But perhaps showing what the word meant for Derrida will help some understand what it means in his philosophy and why the ills of strong relativism and meaninglessness cannot easily be laid at his feet.

As I said, I am not trying to convince anyone to be a Derridean. I am trying to convince readers not to merely dismiss Derrida based on what critical secondary sources say about him and his influence, or, on the other hand, to assume that what positive secondary sources say about that thinking is accurate. One must understand Derrida’s thinking itself, whether to use him or to criticize him. I hope what I do here will give those interested a background from which to do the needed primary research.

To explain Derrida’s thinking, I will first describe why Nietzsche became such an important figure for twentieth- and twenty-first-century European philosophy. Then I will give some background for Heidegger because of the influence of his thinking on Derrida (via Levinas).⁵ That background will help me explain Derrida’s thinking. Finally, I will give a sketch of deconstruction as Derrida understood it.⁶ I will focus on the relationship between his thinking and religion. At the

end, I will add a brief excursus on Derrida's style, seen as an irritating affectation by many — who are sometimes right.

Before getting to my sketch of Derridean ideas and their background, let me make a sidenote: I believe I often see the thought of Derrida and Michel Foucault connected in criticisms of Derrida, though there is little connection between their ideas. Working with European thinkers for much of the last forty-five years, I rarely heard the two mentioned in the same context. I would not be surprised to see Derrida's name connected to Gadamer, Levinas, or Marion. Their views and Derrida's are related, often overlapping, often disagreeing. The only connection I imagine between Derrida and Foucault in discussions of twentieth- and twenty-first-century French philosophy in the Anglophone world is that Derrida is sometimes charged with being someone who thought that truth is merely socially constructed meaning. That describes Foucault's view: truth is produced historically in discursive practices entangled in power relations. But it is not Derrida's position.

Nietzsche's Critique of the West

Most people have heard the name Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), and they know him as an atheist. Many have heard his name used as a marker for the relativism and nihilism of our age. Mostly because of the distortions of his work by his sister Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, he is often associated with amorality, egoism, antisemitism, misogyny, and other evils including racism and Naziism. After Nietzsche's 1889 mental collapse, she controlled and distorted his work, profoundly shaping — and often misshaping — early editions of that work to fit her own racist, nationalistic, colonialist, and antisemitic views.⁷ However, in the middle of the last century, Walter Kaufmann's work showed what Förster-Nietzsche's had done to Nietzsche's work, revealing a thinker very different than had been supposed — though still not a thinker whose ideas are unproblematic.⁸

Despite his sister's distortions, most, if not all, of the charges against him have some foundation in his writings, some more than others. Yet none are without complication. Like all of us, Nietzsche's soul was complex. In spite of the difficulties in his work, he is one of the most influential thinkers, for good and evil, of the last 150 years because he diagnosed the spiritual and intellectual disease of the West so well. Whatever dark spots were in his soul, his brighter side reveals more about our darker side.

Nietzsche's critique of Christianity has been particularly important. Ironically, it has probably been more important for theists than for atheists. Many atheists understand his criticisms of religion as just more fodder for what they take to be obvious. But they miss his point, a point more critical of atheism than religion; few atheists have taken up his challenge. On the other hand, his criticism of religion is sufficiently trenchant that, beginning in the twentieth century, most Christian thinkers have felt the need to respond.

Nietzsche makes his criticism of religion in a number of places, but one place in particular makes it brilliantly, a short passage from *The Gay Science* (§125, "The Madman"). There Nietzsche tells an allegory of a madman who, like the fourth-century BC Cynic Diogenes, lights a lantern in broad daylight and runs with it to the marketplace crying, "I'm looking for God! I'm looking for God!" Those in the marketplace who claim to be atheists can hardly contain their amusement at this strange figure who is trying to find God when (they assume) everyone knows there is no such being. They mock the madman: "Has he gone lost? asked one. Another asked, Has he lost his way like a child? Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Did he go somewhere by ship, emigrated?"⁹

Nietzsche's story is often taken to be a critique of religion and the idea of God, a tract for atheism. But if we read carefully, it becomes clear that "the death of God" is the death of the West's metaphysical foundation rather than an attack on a divine Being — *unless*, as was almost always the case for millennia, the two are assumed to be the same. Remember that the other characters in the story are atheists, and the madman criticizes *them* for killing God and not acknowledging, perhaps not even recognizing, that they have done so, nor the tragedy that has created. Like Diogenes, the madman has failed to find any honest people among the atheists in the marketplace. They think that getting rid of God is simply a matter of no longer believing in a particular being. But the God of which Nietzsche speaks isn't a being like that. He is not one thing among others, and they have destroyed what he was, namely the foundation for the West's self-understanding.

Thinking about Nietzsche's fable, it is important to keep in mind what Latter-day Saints know: The God in which we believe is certainly not *merely* one being among others of equal standing. He far surpasses any other being in merit and praiseworthiness. But he *is* a being among others rather than the metaphysical foundation for all being. The Latter-day Saint God is not the God of the tradition, so he is not the God whom Nietzsche attacks (nor, I believe, the God whom most

Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship, despite their theologies). It is unlikely that Nietzsche would understand our God, someone among things that already are, who creates the cosmos for those already existing things and gives the cosmos its order. Our God is not the transcendence that gives *all that is* being and structure. Nietzsche's madman is not searching for our God, but for something to take the place of the theological God of the tradition.

So, Nietzsche is not making a point about the status of religion or religious belief, at least not directly. His point is broader than that: Western civilization has had a way of understanding the world that, until relatively recently, had been successful. From at least about the time of Constantine's Edict of Milan, that way of understanding things dominated European thinking. The West, Nietzsche says, has understood the world by assuming a more-or-less Platonic metaphysical foundation that explains everything and, for much of Western history, identifying that foundation with God. The assumption was that there is one thing prior to all creation that accounts for all that is. That one thing was so much a part of our culture that it was taken for granted. It gave meaning and order to our world and experience and was so omnipresent in experience that we seldom thought about it. It was, we assumed, natural, the way things are. However, atheism has destroyed that metaphysical foundation.¹⁰ These God-deniers in the marketplace have killed what previously gave a foundation to human culture and thought in the West. But they will not take responsibility for having done so, for they do not even recognize what they have done.

Perhaps they were right to kill the God who is not God, *God*,¹¹ *but they have done so thoughtlessly*. They don't recognize the importance to Western culture and thinking of the unity that *God* provided. Not seeing the tragedy, they offer no alternative. After *God*'s death they go on as if there were still such a thing, though they argue, often vociferously, about which god is *the* god. (Is it the theological *God*? Is it pure reason? Empirical science? . . .) Instead of continuing those arguments, according to Nietzsche, they should be trying to discover what is to be done in the absence of our culture's metaphysical foundation, in the absence — death — of *God*.

Nietzsche's critique of Western thought is at the heart of much twentieth-century European philosophy, religious or otherwise, especially among those who speak Romance languages. It is certainly at the heart of Derrida's thinking: *In the absence of a foundation that is metaphysically beyond, before, or outside of the cosmos, what alternative*

source of thought and truth can there be?¹² Is there any alternative but some form of nihilism or pure relativism? Despite what many accusers say, for most European thinkers of the last 100 years, the answer is that there are alternatives. Religious thinkers in the Christian traditions agree. For them, the question becomes “If God is not the metaphysical foundation of the cosmos, how should we understand him?”¹³ Many of those in Nietzsche’s wake, both religious and not, begin to think about an answer to that question by turning to the work of Martin Heidegger.

Heidegger

Heidegger’s masterwork and first major monograph, *Being and Time*,¹⁴ pays scant attention to Nietzsche, though he shares with him the question of how to think about a ground for truth. Heidegger takes up Nietzsche in earnest a few years after *Being and Time*, and Aristotle still later. Though not obvious in *Being and Time*, Heidegger shares with Aristotle and Nietzsche the question of how to think about whatever there is that is (“what-is”): How do we understand the verb “to be?” With Aristotle and Nietzsche, Heidegger wants to answer that question without appealing to a Platonic, two-tiered metaphysics with the traditional God, Forms, pure Reason, or such, on one side and the world we inhabit on the other—the first being what makes the second possible and real. That question is central to those usually associated with twentieth- and twenty-first-century French and German philosophy.

Heidegger’s publications are numerous. His collected works are projected to comprise 102 volumes, approximately fifty of which have been published. Of those, I am reasonably conversant with less than ten, but it would be far too much to discuss even one of those ten in any detail here. So, I will first discuss briefly how he understands the possibility of meaning and truth in the absence of God. Then, to explain Derrida better, I will focus on two aspects of Heidegger’s thought: his notion of deconstruction and his thinking about religion.

Meaning and truth for Heidegger

With Aristotle, Heidegger’s basic argument is that there need not be an “ultimate reality” behind the things of our world, a Platonic reality that presumably would provide surety to our claims about this world. Truth and surety don’t require a God; they are always already a function of what-is as it is manifest in the world. What-is is what it is *in* its appearing rather than through some transcendent thing that is prior to

what-is and causes it to show itself as it does. What-is shows itself in events prior to concepts about those events or propositional reflection on them. My pen is what it is in its ongoing "life" in the world rather by supposedly re-presenting a metaphysically ideal pen.

What shows itself in the world does so in lived experience before doing so through what we think or say about that disclosure. I look at my pen and, doing so, I take up what is happening when it discloses itself to me. I don't usually think about my pen's characteristics while I am using it, but — using it — I see its shape and color. I feel its heft and texture. When reflecting on my pen rather than using it, I could make a list of as many such things as I might, but that wouldn't say anything about the actual *appearing* of the pen in its ongoing being a pen in the world. The pen discloses itself as itself when I write with it, carry it in my pocket, use it to hold down papers that the fan threatens to blow about, remember getting it as a present from my wife, or consider giving it to my pen-collecting grandson. It has a history in the world, as itself, as part of a longer history of writing instruments, and as part of my life with it in the world. All those things are together in the appearing of the pen in my experience rather than in thoughtful representations of its characteristics or in its relation to something metaphysically prior to this particular pen. Of course, it does not follow that the various ways of representing or expressing truth are not essential; there is a place for thought about ideals. To see truth as originating in the ordinary disclosures of things in the world is not to say that representation of and thought about those disclosures is unnecessary.

Thinking in this way, for Heidegger there is "first truth" (my term, not his), namely, the event in which what-is shows itself. There is also a second level of truth, what we say to talk about what we find in our experience. At the second level, truth comes in various forms: sometimes in narrative, sometimes in law, sometimes in poetry, sometimes in folk history, other times in academic history, and so on. But none of those can claim to be *the* way of expressing truth. Some, perhaps many of them, are incommensurable with other expressions of truth, but even if incommensurable, at least some are on an equal footing with each other as revelations of truth.

It is important to note, though, that what I am calling, heuristically, first and second truth are not discreet events; like Aristotle's prime matter,¹⁵ they are that which we name to understand theoretically what is in fact not divisible into parts. As terms, first and second truth merely name theoretical entities, concepts we create to help us understand

something but which themselves do not point to anything that exists in itself. In Euclidean geometry, a straight line is such a theoretical concept: there are no straight lines in the world, but the concept and our thinking about it helps us understand things and to live in the world. So, we have an experience, an event of truth, and at the same time, we have thoughts about it or say things about it as a way of not only speaking to others about our experience but also as a way of understanding it ourselves. All of that happens at the same time.

But a caveat: perhaps most often our thoughts about truth and the language we use to talk about it are not direct responses to an event of truth. Instead, our thought and language use the various conventions we have at our disposal for talking about truth: I say what one says in these circumstances; I think about this or that with the concepts I've learned to be appropriate to them. Most of our thinking and speaking about the world uses thought and language within the infinite space opened up by the thought and language we have inherited rather than in a direct response to an event of truth. An important question will be, "How do we experience and talk about first truth rather than only about already given second truth?"

Besides noticing that truth has those two ways of being understood (the disclosure of something and what we say or think about it), it is also important to remember something I pointed out earlier: Truth is ongoing. Truth happens as it continues to manifest itself in the ongoing disclosure of what-is. Truth is an ongoing event more than a static thing. We speak truly to the degree that our language manifests disclosure. Yet there is always a gap between first and second truth, the gap between our experience of life and the world and what we can say about them, the gap exposed in the fact that we can never say our experience or the things in it completely. That gap lies at the heart of Heidegger's and Derrida's questions.

The ongoing character of truth means, Heidegger argues, that first truth is disclosed in human practices and engagement in the world more than in such things as logical or scientific propositions purporting to represent what-is. (To repeat: that is not to say that propositional knowledge is unimportant.) Engagement is more fundamental to truth than representation because engagement is ongoing disclosure rather than static representation. So: "In his earliest works, Heidegger calls for the return to the concretely lived situation in order to retrieve this situation according to the manner (i.e., the 'how' or the mode) in which it unfolds as concretely lived."¹⁶ This is a call to take as

fundamental the event to which the term "first truth" points rather than any theory that subsequently reveals itself in human life as an account of that event.

Heidegger's deconstruction

But how do we make that return? How could any return to the original event avoid the fact that it would be *thought about* the event—or thought about other derivative thoughts about truth—rather than a return to the experience itself? In the summer of 1927, Martin Heidegger delivered a lecture course now published under the title, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, something like a preliminary overview of *Being and Time*.¹⁷ Given the topic of his lectures, Heidegger begins with a discussion of the nature of philosophy and, particularly, of the philosophical movement called *phenomenology*. Borrowing creatively from his teacher Edmund Husserl, Heidegger says that phenomenology is the name for a way of doing philosophy that includes three steps—reduction, construction, and destruction—and he explains that these three are mutually pertinent to one another.

Reduction means stepping back from a *particular* being we have encountered toward the meaning and structure of being (the meaning of structure of "to be" rather than the meaning and structure of *this* being). I may begin with my fountain pen. I want to know its structure in experience and what it means in the world. I make a reduction in thought to articulate something about what-is with the fountain pen as my starting point.

Construction is the work to articulate what shows itself in the reduction. But construction necessarily involves destruction, and Heidegger identifies destruction and deconstruction, *Abbau*,¹⁸ an ordinary German word that translates literally as "unbuild," but more naturally as "analysis." However, "deconstruction" is the most common way it is translated in Heidegger's work and the likely source of Derrida's French term *déconstruction*. The lexical and historical connection of *deconstruction* to *destruction* is obvious, especially post-Derrida, but Heidegger does not mean by *Abbau* quite what we mean by *destruction*. *Disassembly* is closer but not yet close enough.

As Heidegger conceived deconstruction, it was a way to deal with a philosophical problem, namely the fact that all philosophy is second truth that cannot help but depend on previous second truth: "All philosophical discussion, even the most radical attempt to begin all over again, is pervaded by traditional concepts and thus by traditional

horizons and traditional angles of approach.”¹⁹ When we begin to philosophize we cannot avoid using concepts, terms, and tools handed down from those who came before us. We cannot avoid our inquiries being historically and linguistically situated, perhaps determinatively. It seems impossible to think or talk about pre-linguistic experience rather than talk about that experience. But, if we cannot avoid entanglement in the language, tools, and thinking of those who preceded us (as well as our own previous thinking), how can we think about the world-as-it-is — what-is. All thought seems to be mediated by language. We seem unable to begin thinking from a rational zero point, free of any already given concepts, terms, or approaches. So, it may appear that we are forced to repeat the past and its mistakes. How can we ever get to anything new?²⁰

Given much of the current discussion of Heidegger’s work and the work that derives from it in what is loosely called “postmodernism,” it may surprise many that Heidegger’s response is, “No.” We can use inherited concepts, horizons, and approaches against themselves to allow what produced them to show itself again. That is what “deconstruction” means to him. We can deconstruct the tradition we find ourselves in by seeing the problems raised by the terms we have inherited. We use concepts and tools we have inherited against themselves to recover original insights and questions. The point of Heideggerian deconstruction is to help us clear away the unavoidable distortions in history of an original insight so that we wonder anew at what-is. Reawakening wonder through deconstruction will make new language appropriate to that wonder possible, but no language will fully capture the moment of wonder or put an end to the need for deconstruction.

The first truth that we glimpse again by means of deconstruction is primarily disclosed in human practices and engagement with the world rather than in the variety of languages (from logic to poetry, from empirical science to dance) that aim either to represent or help us see first truth. Engagement is fundamental to truth; logically, though not necessarily temporally, response in thought and language comes after engagement. That underlies Heidegger’s thinking about religion,²¹ and discussing that thinking will be more useful for understanding Derrida than a lengthy excursus on Heidegger’s response to metaphysics (a word Heidegger, Derrida, and many others in this family of philosophy use to refer to any metaphysics of a Platonic style, any thinking that relies on God or one of its analogues). If we agree with Nietzsche that

God is not the metaphysical foundation of the cosmos, then philosophy and theology have little or nothing to say about God. They can, however, say something about religion. But what and how?

For Heidegger, since the primary disclosure of first truth happens in our engagements in the world, being religious doesn't mean assenting to a doctrinal system. Instead, it means living a way of being that makes the world as a whole meaningful and that comes from outside oneself. On the one hand, doctrines and things like them may be part of that way of living, but they are not its foundation. On the other, being religious is anything but a merely subjective matter.

What is outside ourselves is a combination of things including the existential history of the community in which we find ourselves, the ecclesial and social structures of the community, its essential texts, the interpretations of the texts we have inherited, and our responses to that history and those texts with their interpretations, and so on. To be religious is to actively inhabit that nexus of meaningfulness as agents. As Wrathall says, to be religious "is to be in the world differently than those lacking religious faith."²² Like such things as "where I am from" and "ethnicity," the religious community of which I am part, with its history, texts, and authorities, shape the world I live in. I am who I am both as an heir of such things and as someone who cannot but respond to them: they give me the world I inhabit and, at the same time, the possibility of using what they have given in new ways. What I am, religiously and otherwise, depends on the world in which I live taken as a whole.²³

Of course, Heidegger's understanding of what it means to be religious leaves out things that are important to Latter-day Saints, in particular revelation and conversion. He speaks of them obliquely in saying that revelation is a lived transformation of one's life. But he consistently steps back from trying to tell his readers how to be religious to asking what it means to do a phenomenology of religion. Heidegger did so for sound methodological reasons: philosophy cannot confirm, deny, or explain revelation, so — as a *philosopher* — he remained agnostic about it.²⁴ Yet I don't think it is too much of a stretch to understand religion in more-or-less Heideggerian terms: It is grounded in human historicity, which includes, for Latter-day Saint understanding, a non-metaphysical God. Religion includes God's acts and intentions in the world as well. For the religious, those acts and intentions are manifested through history as understood religiously, but especially through texts such as scripture and prophetic remarks, revealed

through human beings in a variety of ways but reducible neither to history nor to merely the consciousness of scripture's writers.

In short, the truth of religion is found in its participatory expression (existential and informal before being reflective and rational) of the event of first truth, expression of a realm of human experience through history, narrative, law, poetry, rite, human relations, and so on. It is found only secondarily, if at all, in the second truths produced by rational reflections on first truth.

Derrida

Jacques Derrida agrees that Heidegger's notion of deconstruction gives us a glance at something fundamental. He agrees with Heidegger that our glance always conceals as well as reveals: there is always another side to any appearing, so we never see what-is in its entirety. But, Derrida argues, there is no pre-linguistic entirety. If there were, he says, that would amount to *God* slipping in unnoticed, something behind our experience of revealing and concealing that guarantees them.²⁵ For Derrida, revealing and concealing always go together. In fact, they are the same thing. He argues that Heideggerian deconstruction cannot get us to a first disclosure of truth, not even a glimpse of it, without implicitly reinstating *God*. But if we cannot use a Heideggerian deconstruction of the philosophical tradition to give us at least a glimpse of first truth, how can there be first truth—or any truth—at all? We seem to have arrived back at the same question with which we began.

Derrida finds a place for truth and meaning by inverting both the tradition and Heidegger. Truth is not a revealing and concealing of what is pre-given, though there is a pre-given reality. Truth is the expression of our *desire* for a settled ground for our claims to truth. With Heidegger, he recognizes the historical and cultural situatedness of claims to truth. But unlike Heidegger, he does not think there is anything pre-given that has resulted in those truths. Instead, meaning comes about in the *anticipation* of truth's disclosure—not an individual's anticipation, but the anticipation of truth that we can find in texts, often in spite of themselves.

The fullness of meaning is always “to come” (*à-venir*); for Derrida, a truth claim is a *prefiguration* of truth to come. Final meaning is “impossible”—on analogy with Christ's Second Coming for many contemporary Christians. It exists, but only as something more like a regulative idea—an idea that guides thinking, relying on a concept that can

never be actualized. Derrida argues that truth and meaning require this implicit expectation of/prefiguration of fulfillment as well as the networks of relations among words and phrases in which that desire appears.

For him, the desire for a fulness of truth is implicit in the ways that we speak truth, yet despite that, what we say defers the moment of full disclosure. Language that always implicitly promises to eventually give us clear and distinct access to the truth of what-is (even if it denies it is doing that), never fully succeeds in keeping its promise. The limitations of language and the boundaries of human knowledge make a full disclosure of truth impossible. When we speak truth, rather than revealing it, we are promising that it will come. Language bears witness of it in advance. Consequently, Derrida argues, meaning comes about through difference from and deferral to the to-come rather than through more or less successfully fulfilled intentions directed toward the pre-linguistic given.

Derrida's word for difference and deferral together is *différance*, a neologism suggesting (à la Saussure), first, that the meaning of words and signs is brought about in their relationships of non-identity with other words and signs. In other words, by being in relationships with other words and signs while, at the same time irreducibly differing from them. Second, *différance* suggests that complete, final meaning is always deferred, promised but never fully present in either a word or moment.

Notice that Derrida's understanding of meaning is *not* a claim that meaning is either merely socially constructed or subjective. The fact that final meaning is to-come takes meaning away from those possibilities. For Derrida, *différance* means that any claim to having said everything (including, for example, the claim that meaning is merely an historical construct or merely subjective) can be shown by deconstruction to be unfounded. A deconstruction shows us that something has been overlooked or omitted that is necessary for the text's claim to be true, full-stop. Deconstruction shows that the text implicitly demands the to-come. For Derrida, deconstruction shows us that those omissions — which remind us of the anticipated to-come — are structural to every text or text analogue.

Perhaps Derrida's most well-known example of deconstruction is his deconstruction of writing.²⁶ He argues that Western philosophy privileges speech because it is supposedly closer to thought and treats writing as derivative. Writing, he points out, is not just a copy

of speech. Consider the transcription of a voice mail in contrast to the voice mail itself: The transcription is visible and easily repeatable whereas the voice mail itself is not. In fact, the voice mail only works because it can be transcribed: repeated, cited, and remembered, all features it shares with writing. His argument is that what speech is supposed to overcome—for example, difference from the other person and the need for repetition and mediation—is what speech shares with writing and what makes it function.

Indeed, if writing is sequential and can be repeated, and it can have meaning in the absence of either or both the original writer or the person to whom the writing was intended, it makes sense, he says, to treat writing as more fundamental to truth and meaning than speech—though by *writing* he doesn't mean "decipherable marks on a page." *Writing* names the structures of language that make communication possible: iterability, the lack of a need for the living presence of another person,²⁷ openness to recontextualization (putting a text in a new context can change its meaning), and that the written mark(s) or spoken word(s) are never self-identical (in other words, their meanings depend on their relations to past usages and the meanings of other things in which they are in relation). In this broader sense, as the structures underlying communication, writing is the condition of meaning rather something produced by meaning. That explains the quotation often used to accuse Derrida of strange ideas about reality: "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte" (literally, "There is no 'outside-the-text'").²⁸ In other words, all understandable meaning occurs within iterable structures of difference and reference, within language in a broad sense. Since all existence is in time and space, the to-come is unavoidable. So, the ongoing anticipation of the to-come is structural to writing, describing, and explaining because it is structural to existence and experience.

The inability to say everything is not a failure of language, something to be overcome. Neither is it a point of new-age silliness or old-age magic (though it might be an origin of the latter). It is a consequence of what it means to be at all: it is impossible to say everything about anything. More important, whatever we experience shows that there is still more to be experienced and said, more to-come. The fact that there is more than what I see immediately, an excess *in* what I see, is part and parcel of seeing anything at all. There is always more in what I see than I can name. Kant might have called this fact about the excessive character of perception one of the conditions for the possibility of having an experience at all. To perceive an object is to know—in the

perception itself — that there is more to it. All experience is experience of more, of possibility. The experience of that possibility, the to-come, is at the same time unavoidably reflected in what we say about the world and ourselves.

Once again, my pen is a good example: It is a fountain pen, which puts it into relation with many other kinds of writing instruments and within a history of such instruments. Because fountain pens are no longer used for daily writing, it probably says something about my history and my relations to others: I grew up using a fountain pen; perhaps I also unconsciously see it as a way to say something about my social status or age. Whatever the case with that, my conscious understanding of why I use fountain pens is that I like their feel: their heft, the slide of the ink on good paper. Most obviously, I use my pen because I anticipate a need for writing. All those facts about it go toward giving it meaning in my experience, as I clip it in my pocket or put it away in its case, or as I write a note with it. But as much as I can say these kinds of things about my experience of my pen, I can always say more. Language cannot capture the fulness of that experience, the fulness of what is to-come, something I anticipate but cannot expect to reach.

Most of the time this understanding of the limits of language is irrelevant. For practical purposes I need only say what needs to be said, not everything.²⁹ I write for a particular audience. But once I've published my piece, it becomes public property. Regardless of my intent when I wrote, my writing may be taken up by other audiences or used for other purposes. Regardless of what Wordsworth had in mind when he wrote "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," as we have seen in various sermons, these lines from it have come to have meaning of their own:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
 The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
 Hath had elsewhere its setting,
 And cometh from afar:
 Not in entire forgetfulness,
 And not in utter nakedness,
 But trailing clouds of glory do we come
 From God, who is our home:
 Heaven lies about us in our infancy!³⁰

That the new meaning, within a Latter-day Saint context, is perhaps

not what Wordsworth had in mind is irrelevant. This language is public, as is its meaning.

Besides making fresh interpretations possible, the to-come character of writing in Derrida's sense means that every piece of writing is open to question. Someone can ask about the effects of my having written for my purpose and audience: Did doing so overlook someone? Does the text push meaning in a direction that I never intended? Are there political, social, or ethical implications of what I have written that I did not see but that should, nevertheless, be considered?

Deconstruction addresses these kinds of questions by examining the words and structures of the text, but not to produce an ideological critique. To answer questions like those above, Derrida does not compare the work to an external standard for what should be done (such as moral standards, scientific standards, or political ideology). Instead, he looks for ways in which the text itself shows what it has overlooked. Deconstruction is a form of *immanent critique*.

For example, Derrida writes about a footnote in Heidegger's *Being and Time* to show that—as a careful reading of the footnote will purportedly see—the book's claims are problematic.³¹ Derrida argues that Heidegger's work undercuts itself, without arguing that Heidegger ought to have written his book differently. Derrida's deconstruction claims to show that *Being and Time* overlooks something, not that it should or could have done otherwise. His deconstruction of Heidegger's footnote reminds us of the to-come structure of Heidegger's work.

Because Derrida is interested in this relation between the text and what the text aims to speak of but cannot fully do, some have compared his work to negative theology.³² After some initial hesitation, Derrida himself made the comparison,³³ though it would be a mistake to say that his work constitutes a negative theology.

To understand why this analogy between deconstruction and negative theology works, consider for a moment what negative theology does. It has two moments. It begins by accepting what positive theology has shown in its attempt to discover and say as accurately as possible the right names and descriptions of the Divine. Paradoxically, the second moment is to show that those names are inadequate. For example, positively one must say "God is just"; it is blasphemy to say otherwise. Nevertheless, once that is recognized, one must also acknowledge that the sentence is inadequate; from the point of view of a claim to have said the complete and final truth, it is untrue. We only

know what justice is by using our own justice as a reference point. Yet God's justice surpasses ours, so much so that some of his acts would be judged unjust by our standards. Thus, one must also say, "God is not just" — being careful not to read that as a straightforward denial of God's justice. It is instead a notice of the incapacity of language.

The negative theologian reminds us of God's infinity by showing us the failure of our affirmative theology. The point is not that what affirmative theology says is useless. It is not that there is no God or that God is not just. The point is that we cannot finish speaking of God, praising him, wondering in awe at his justice and our inability to understand it. We come to a glimpse of understanding when we find ourselves in the space opened by the contradictions between positive and negative theology. So, for the negative theologian, a true understanding of God comes in neither affirmative theology nor in negative theology. It comes in the "third way," the continued praise of God that is opened by the opposition between the two ways, a way that cannot be said except in praise and prayer.

For Christians, the final revelation of God's justice remains to-come; we await the Second Coming. In the meantime, in awaiting the to-come, we must live with language's insufficiency yet praise and pray in its absence.

Derrida is interested in a similar logic of saying and not saying, in the ways in which a text points to but cannot fully reveal the to-come. He is interested in using deconstruction to point to a third way in which texts point toward justice, ultimately a moment of praise and mystery — mystery in the sense of what cannot be said in our anticipation of the to-come.

Deconstruction can also be a matter of showing, not meaning that is only implicitly anticipated in the text's omissions, but also *whom* the text has omitted, *seemingly* overlooked, or forgotten. It may help us see where injustice to particular others hides in the text and bring us to include that recognition in our anticipation of the to-come.

Often our texts fail to recognize and anticipate God, someone with whom, contrary to many expectations, Derrida continued to be concerned. In a text always attentive to his relationship with his Jewish mother and saturated with attention to Augustine, with prayer and confession, and with address to God, he says that he rightly passes for an atheist.³⁴ Yet he also says:

I am addressing myself here to God, the only one I take as a witness, without yet knowing what these sublime words

mean, and this grammar, and *to*, and *witness*, and *God*, and *take*, take God, and not only do I pray, as I have never stopped doing all my life, and pray to him, but I take him here and take him as my witness, I give myself what he gives me, i.e. the *i.e.* to take the time to take God as a witness.³⁵

Beginning in the late twentieth century, at least partly because of the many misunderstandings of his work (misunderstandings for which he suggests he bears responsibility³⁶), Derrida was explicit about his focus on absence and omission as an ethical focus rather than a destruction of truth and meaning.³⁷ Like negative theology, his work is neither nihilistic nor merely playful. It is not merely an exercise in a new kind of literary criticism (though it may have implications for literary criticism). Ultimately, the point of deconstruction is ethical in the Levinasian sense of that word: our unavoidable responsibility to the other person. Deconstruction calls us to the act of remembering, wonder, and praise for the truth to-come. It calls us to a remembering relation to the to-come that we have forgotten—rather than to *descriptions* of what we have forgotten. Deconstruction calls us to the to-come of justice, justice for those overlooked or marginalized—for us, those no longer within the ambit of the to-come. Indeed, though ideas and words and meanings are important omissions, they are not nearly so important as are the unnameable people who are often omitted, excluded, forgotten even when, or perhaps especially when, we are sure that we have included them, when we are sure that justice for them no longer remains to-come or sure that we know what will bring about that to-come.

Deconstruction interrupts the apparent seamlessness of texts and practices so that we have some chance of noticing what makes those texts and practices possible—and the to-come they suggest—even if we can only notice “it” in the trace or spoor that it leaves behind. As Geoffrey Bennington explains: “What we have said about writing and the trace shows that no *autos* [“self-same”] is possible without an inscription of alterity, no inside without a relation to an outside which cannot be simply outside but must remark itself on the inside.”³⁸ In league with Heidegger, Levinas, Marion, and many other so-called postmodern thinkers, Derrida argues that there is no independent self that is not already related to what is outside. The interior of the self is necessarily effected³⁹ by what is outside. And, contrary to those who see in him an advocate of anarchy or simple relativism, Bennington says: “The law one gives oneself retains an irreducible relation to the

law received before the law."⁴⁰ As with his teacher Emmanuel Levinas, for Derrida ethics is the "law before the law." It is there that the anticipation of the to-come arises, in our attempts to deal with others justly, attempts we first notice in language but which reveal the ethical structure of the to-come.

Derrida is not so naive as to believe that any deconstruction or political project will bring an end to exclusion and forgetting, a failure to reveal the to-come. He is not Hegel or Marx for whom the to-come is already here in theory, only waiting to be made manifest in history. Language will never capture what it aims at completely because the things there are, whether words, material objects, persons, human relations, or God, cannot be captured fully—and that is because to think that something could be captured fully is to think of it as static, as no longer to-come, as dead in the strictest sense.

Deconstruction is critical philosophy, using the word *critical* in its philosophic sense: it shows the limits of the text or practice that we are examining so we can see the effects of those limits, that which appears in their to-come. Sometimes meanings are affected. Sometimes someone or some group of people are. Sometimes our relations to God are. Sometimes we may be unsure of what is affected, though we are sure that there are affects. But knowing the limits of a text or practice does not tell us how to respond to those limits. It may cause us to rethink our aims and, as a reasonable result, nevertheless continue with something like the status quo. (The parallel with negative theology is that we may continue to say the same things about God.) Presumably, however, even if we opt for the status quo after deconstructing it, we will have a new understanding of it and a new attitude toward it. We will wear our old clothing in a new way. We may opt instead for something "new" (we may create new theologies or new political structures, for example)—but if we do, we must know in advance that we will unavoidably omit and exclude new groups or persons, or ideas, or whatever. We may be tempted, like the inhabitants of Babel, to build and complete the rational tower that will finally achieve total justice. But, like them, we cannot but fail.

Derrida is not arguing for a new system or approach to philosophical, literary, or ethical problems. The point is not to replace the old theology or politics with a new one that overcomes the mistakes of the old. Neither is he arguing against a new system or approach. Rather, he wants us to "see" our omissions and exclusions and "failures" so we can think through them and decide, so we can act ethically

in response to them.⁴¹ Derrida's work is a work of praise and reverence for others — especially since, with thinkers like Levinas, Derrida believes that the other person, like God, always escapes my grasp and comprehension.⁴² His deconstruction is a praise for justice to-come, a glimpse that cannot say in advance what is to-come but desires and anticipates it anyway.

For Derrida, therefore, though deconstruction mostly deals with texts, it is not a method for criticizing texts, whether written, social, or otherwise. It is not a new literary tool. Deconstruction is an attitude⁴³ one has toward texts and their analogues, especially an ethical attitude (using *ethical* in the sense that Levinas uses it, to denote fundamental relations, not necessarily rules for living in those relations). Deconstruction is an attitude by means of which one injects theoretical and ethical humility back into the claims of texts and analyses. It is the attitude of continuing to re-member, of continuing to praise. In Aristotle's terms, deconstruction is an attitude of continued wonder. In Socrates' terms, it is the moment of ignorance, of what medievals later called "learned ignorance." Deconstruction is a repetitive moment in the continuation of philosophy.

Christians remember covenants via ordinances, sermons, the Christian life, etc. In other words, they remember what it means to be a Christian in their practices, which may include dogmatics, confessional membership, and theology but doesn't require them. Practice, not thinking, is the heart of being Christian.

From a religious viewpoint, one might say that Derrida looks for something like a covenantal relation in texts and philosophy, a relationship to the future that is ultimately unnameable within the text but that opens onto truth, meaning, and responsibility as the anticipated to-come. The parallel of Derrida's work to Christian covenant theology is fascinating and fruitful, though it is outside the purview of this essay.⁴⁴ Briefly, however, consider that not only is deconstruction a matter of remembrance and praise, because its focus is the to-come rather than what has been, it is also a matter of hope and faith. Derrida said: "There is no morality without faith, faith in the other. There is no social experience without bearing witness, without attestation, the recognition of a dimension of trust and faith. This is not a religious point; it is the general structure of experience."⁴⁵ That is not what someone who believes that everything is absolutely relative can say.

In Conclusion

Nietzsche's critique of Western culture and thought, that its metaphysical guarantor has crumbled but has not been replaced, is the background for much twentieth- and twenty-first-century European philosophy: philosophers responding to the absence of God.

Heidegger takes up the question of how to think about the foundation of our relations to each other and to the things of the world without God, arguing that it can be done, but not in the traditional way. As a kind of neo-Aristotelian, he argues that we should see truth as what-is giving itself in human experience over time. Original truth, the truth of disclosure, makes itself manifest in a variety of languages, not just the propositional language of post sixteenth-century philosophy and modern and contemporary science, but also and equally the languages of poetry, law, narrative, myth, and so on. There is truth in language, but it is not expressed fully in any one language, and it has no final expression (at least not in the human world).

Derrida takes up a roughly Heideggerian stance, but insists on what he says Heidegger overlooks: according to Derrida, not only can our accounts never be adequate to the knowledge and acquaintance that they aim for, but if that is true, then we do not *begin* by experiencing an original truth, not even in pre-linguistic experience. Despite that, we continue to write and speak as if that is our starting point. Deconstruction uses the words and concepts of a text or text analogue against themselves to show the places where the impossibility of reaching a pre-existing original truth shows itself. But even though *original* truth—foundational truth—is unreachable, that truth is what all language aims to give us. What we think of as foundational, an atemporal metaphysical truth that we assume comes first, is actually the anticipated but unnameable *to-come*. In speaking and writing, we express our hope and desire for the truth *à-venir*. Hence Derrida's interest in eschatology.

For Derrida, the most important glimpse of the to-come is found in ethics, in our infinite responsibility to other persons. Responsibility, the demand of justice, is not deconstructible.⁴⁶ Deconstruction does not collapse everything into relativism. Things like justice cannot be deconstructed. Following Levinas, deconstruction grounds (though *grounds* is an impossible verb for what the to-come does) ethics in the undeconstructible demand of the other person. And it opens a space for what he calls "messianic thought": responsibility, faith, and hope—for him, without dogma.

There is no question that those in this line of thinking do not hold to a traditional understanding of truth as accurate representation. But it does not follow that they deny there is truth. There are exceptions to that as with Michel Foucault. But Derridean deconstruction is not one of those exceptions, nor is the work of the majority of the other post-Nietzschean thinkers. Whether to respond to the crisis of the West that Nietzsche shouted about with a Heideggerian position, with Levinasian fundamental ethics, with Derridean deconstruction, or some other way of thinking is a question about metaphysics not religion, *unless one refuses to disconnect the two*. Christians, especially Latter-day Saints, have good reason to disconnect them.

As I said in the beginning, many believing religious thinkers have tried to disconnect them. They have taken up Nietzsche's critique and affirmed the possibility of religious belief in one post-Nietzschean or post-Heideggerian way or another, including deconstruction. But I must confess that it is difficult for me to understand how that is possible with a traditional understanding of God: *How can we separate the traditional understanding of God from God?*⁴⁷ Latter-day Saints have an answer, though I wonder how often we unsuspectingly invoke some version of God in our thinking and explaining. Whether we take up Derrida's theoretical position or not, he at least asks us to consider that question.

Western culture is in trouble and, by contagion, so are almost all other cultures. That trouble has been brewing for at least 150 years and, given that politics has involved the reign of blood and horror since Cain slew Abel, since the beginning of human time. It showed itself most visibly in the Roman torture and cruel execution of Jesus Christ, Messiah, the Son of God. That trouble goes much deeper than can be blamed on even the most nihilistic interpretation of deconstruction, much less on Derridean deconstruction.

Whatever the faults of books treating Latter-day Saint beliefs and practices unfairly or criticizing the moral decay of our culture, they cannot easily be attributed to Derridean deconstruction. There are any number of fake heirs out there, trying to lay claim to Derrida's work as the origin of their own and arguing for relativisms of various sorts or, perhaps worse, tribalism. They deserve to be criticized and rejected, but we ought not to believe their claims to a Derridean inheritance unless they can show that they are genuinely related. Those who criticize or praise Derrida should do so directly rather than through

secondary interpretations of his work (like this). Don't make Jacques Derrida the whipping boy.

What does this mean for Latter-day Saints?

Probably not much. Being a Christian is infinitely more important than thinking about being one, though thinking about what it means to be Christian can be helpful. In that regard, reading scripture carefully is more important both spiritually and intellectually than creating theologies of any sort. Yet, in spite of that, some of us get bitten by the theology bug. Is there anything in Derrida for them, any useful and spiritually uplifting antidote to the bug? If there is, I think it is in these points:

- Understanding truth as an anticipation of the to-come, with the ultimate to-come being the Second Coming
- Taking account of the limitations of language and human knowledge: there is always more that can be said and using deconstruction to call our attention to that more
- Including the ethical dimension of the to-come in all deconstructions of practice, scripture, and belief
- Thinking of deconstructive theology in analogy with negative theology, not as revealing previously unknown or improperly understood truths, but, in concert with our positive affirmations about our religion and our acknowledgments of the limits of language and knowledge, opening a space of wonder and praise

Appendix: Derrida's Style

Derrida's style puts some readers off, especially English-speaking readers. That is understandable. Some of what he has said in such places as *Memoires for Paul DeMan*⁴⁸ suggests that, because of its effects in American literary criticism, Derrida began to have second thoughts about the way he wrote. But his playful style is not just perversity. First, it is part of a long-standing and unfortunate tradition among some in German and French universities to lecture in an artificial language that assumes the audience has considerable background for the lecture (for example, knows Hegel and Heidegger as well others). As part of that, there is a close connection between literature and philosophy in France, so philosophers often take a literary approach to

their writing. In that context, Derrida writes in an exaggerated version of much of the French academy. He's part of the club and proving it.

Second, given the premises and goals of a deconstructive reading of a text, we can question the possibility of writing a straightforward essay on deconstruction.⁴⁹ A straightforward work does not recognize the necessity of omission. The original text is comparable to the necessary first moment of negative theology, in other words comparable to a preceding moment of *affirmative* theology. Deconstruction is perhaps comparable to negative theology, a response to affirmative theology. Affirmative theology says God is all-knowing, all-loving, infinitely good and wise. Negative theology then reminds us that we don't really know what "infinite" means when applied to God. Negative theology shows us that, on reflection, whatever we say about God affirmatively leads us into contradiction or unknowing. But affirmative and negative theology are supposed to work together to take us beyond our attempts to talk of God propositionally back toward the experience of God that is prior to language. The text and its deconstruction should take us beyond both the original text and its deconstruction toward the to-come that we can only speak of inadequately.

With deconstruction, Derrida often plays with the rhetoric of response and the idea of response without accusation, aiming to respond questioningly to the problems of the texts he examines and, at the same time, aiming to stretch his audience. He responds to affirmative thought with "negative" thought to show its weaknesses and omissions, *but not to show that it was meaningless*. Serious playfulness is a response to the ultimately ungrounded (though not without an overlooked to-come) seriousness of the tradition.

Third, Derrida wants his readers to work; he does not write for a lazy audience. In a fragment from a long sentence that embodies what it describes, Derrida says of his writing:

I remember having gone to bed very late after a moment of anger or irony against a sentence of Proust's . . . which says: "A work in which there are theories is like an object on which one has left the price tag," and I find nothing more vulgar than this Franco-Britannic decorum . . . I admit that I write with the price on, I display, not so that the price be legible to the first-comer, for I am for an aristocracy without distinction, therefore without vulgarity, for a democracy of the compulsion to the highest price, you have to pay the price to read the price displayed.⁵⁰

Many who write about Derrida's work, both affirmatively and negatively, do so without paying the price. They do not want to read deeply and widely from the European traditions. They do not want to learn other languages. They do not want to begin their deconstructive work with the background of careful scholarship. They want to skip the first moment of deconstruction's negative theology and deal with only the second. Others depend on someone else's account of Derrida's work (such as this one), or they remain committed to the Enlightenment ideal of complete, rational explanation without confronting the problems of that commitment. In either case, such people are unable to read the price tag of Derrida's work. I believe this expectation—perhaps too high an expectation even for the philosophically educated among those in his seminars in Paris—has made it relatively easy for readers, whether friend or foe, to misconstrue his writing and thought.

Yet Derrida's style is not only a consequence of being part of an academic elite in France. Nor is his writing the result of it being deconstructive work, which is only explicit in its practice. As Derrida sees it, his style is also a result of the excessive character of events and things themselves. The excessive character of what-is—its to-come character, the openness and possibility of what-is more than a set of determinate qualities—means that there is always play in things, experiences of things, and descriptions, the kind of play one finds in a steering wheel, looseness and variability, give and take more than joyfulness or silliness (though the latter are not impossible). The straightforward text cannot but have some play in it. No text, even a deconstructive one (perhaps *especially* a deconstructive one) can avoid it. Language is like that; things themselves are like that.

Unfortunately, however one accounts for Derrida's style, the result has been that some believe his work to be *only* a matter of play, just a matter of doing whatever one wishes with the text and, therefore, anything but a matter of praise and wonder. Among those who believe this, some take Derrida's writings to be a sign of his genius and others see it as a sign of his derangement. Both are wrong. However playful it may appear at first glance, genuine deconstruction cannot be a matter of mere playfulness.

Mere playfulness shows us only emptiness, rather than traces of the absence of meanings, persons, and God—rather than the metaphysical "failure" of our texts and the resulting anticipation of the to-come. Rather than calling us to remembrance of the to-come, mere playfulness suggests that there is nothing to await, in other words, that

we ought not to strive for justice if we have not found a sure ground for it, or if we discover that absolute justice is impossible. Mere playfulness is like simple atheism rather than negative theology. Like negative theology and unlike mere playfulness, Derridean deconstruction is always a matter of serious purpose and careful attention to the text or matter in question.

Thus, it is not enough to object to Derrida's style as obfuscatory. It may be opaque, often intentionally so. Sometimes unnecessarily so. However, for the most part that opacity is a matter of richness and fullness, a reflection of the richness and fullness of that which it tries to talk about. Surely neither poets nor religious people are generally committed to the idea that *all* language should be propositionally clear and distinct. I doubt that even many empirical scientists would be committed to that. If one is to object to Derrida, one must object to the *theory* of his style, a theory rich in antecedents and implications. Dismissal will not do.

To underwrite what I've said about Derrida's writing, consider this long quotation from an interview:⁵¹

I learned a lot from my teachers. . . . This instruction was very hard and heavy, very demanding according to classical norms. I was trained in those very classical norms. And probably people who read me and think I am playing with or transgressing norms – which I do, of course – usually don't know what I know: that all of this has not only been made possible by but is constantly in contact with very classical, rigorous, demanding discipline in writing. . . . The fact that . . . I am at some level true to this classical teaching is essential. . . . When I take liberties, it's always by measuring the distance from the standards I know or that I've rigorously been trained in. (5)

Deconstruction questions the *thesis*, theme, the positionality of everything. (8)

We have to study the models and the history of the models and then try not to subvert them for the sake of destroying them but to change the models and invent new ways of writing – not as a formal challenge, but for ethical, political reasons. (9)

I wouldn't approve of simply throwing literary texts into disorder. First, deconstructing academic, professional discourse doesn't mean simply destroying the norms or

pushing these norms to utter chaos. I'm not in favor simply of disorder. (10)

I start with the tradition. If you're not trained in the tradition, then deconstruction means nothing. It's simply nothing. (11)

I think that if what is called "deconstruction" produces neglect of the classical authors, the canonical texts, and so on, we should fight it. . . . I'm in favor of the canon, but I won't stop there. I think that students should *read* what are considered the great texts in our tradition. . . . Students could develop, let's say, a deconstructive practice – but only to the extent that they "know" what they are "deconstructing": an enormous network of other questions. (11)

I'm in favor of tradition. I'm respectful of and a lover of the tradition. There's no deconstruction without the memory of the tradition. I couldn't imagine what the university could be without reference to the tradition, but a tradition that is as rich as possible and that is open to other traditions, and so on. (12)

I think that the people who try to represent what I'm doing or what so called "deconstruction" is doing, as, on the one hand, trying to destroy culture or, on the other hand, to reduce it to a kind of negativity, to a kind of death, are misrepresenting deconstruction. Deconstruction is essentially affirmative. It's in favor of reaffirmation of memory, but this reaffirmation of memory asks the most adventurous and the most risky questions about our tradition, about our institutions, about our way of teaching, and so on. (20–21)

Consider also that in an essay by Geoffrey Bennington explaining Derrida's work,⁵² Derrida appends to the bottom of each page a series of reflections in response to what Bennington has written. Derrida's reflections are autobiographical, including reflections on his relation to his mother that take the form, among others, of a response to passages from Augustine's *Confessions*, perhaps his favorite book. One cannot write or remember in this explicit way without the benefit of a long history of autobiography, confession, philosophy, literature, art, religion, and so on. Without a kind of obscenity, one could not write about one's mother and her death and, at the same time, insist that texts don't matter, that words do not signify.

Beyond my attempts to explain Derridean deconstruction, the above excerpts from Derrida's work suggest that either deconstruction

has been much misunderstood or Derrida has never explained himself well. Having read many of his works, I think the first alternative is the better explanation (without ignoring that the second also plays a role). In fact, though I am neither Derridean nor anti-Derridean, I think that with my explanation and with what Derrida says in that interview in mind, his work changes its character, moving from playful, irritating, but nonsensical texts to playful, irritating, demanding, and sometimes profound texts.

With a long list of antecedents in Christian history and Christian philosophy, Derrida sees writing as an aid to memory (but one that is both a remedy to forgetfulness and a poison to metaphysical thought):⁵³ its purpose is to help us remember what is always nevertheless forgotten, what only too easily slips out of our grasp, whether what we forget are those with whom we live, or God—that which continues to be to-come. Derrida writes to nudge us to remember, and what we remember is always not only something inherited but, more importantly, the to-come that shows itself in what we have inherited as part of our anticipation of truth. As texts of memory, anticipation, and praise, Derrida's works move from being texts on the margins of literary criticism and philosophical interests to being texts that ask about *our* margins, about what is outside us, about what we have forgotten and, perhaps to our peril, ignored.



James E. Faulconer (Ph.D., Pennsylvania State University) was a professor of philosophy at Brigham Young University where, from 2008 to 2013, he also served as Richard L. Evans Professor of Religious Understanding. At BYU, he chaired the Department of Philosophy and served as the dean of undergraduate studies. In addition, he was a visiting professor at the Institute of Philosophy of the Catholic University of Leuven (“Louvain”) in Belgium and spent a year on research leave at the Bibliothèque d’École Normale Supérieure, in Paris.

Notes

1. The religious use of contemporary European philosophical thought appears to be possible. We see it among non-Latter-day Saint theologians who work within the post-Heideggerian philosophical turn in Europe and whom we would probably recognize as believing in God and, in most cases, as committed practicing Christians (often Catholics). To name a few: Jean-Luc Marion, Immanuel Levinas, Jean-Yves Lacoste, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Paul Ricœur, Richard Kearney, Michel Henry, John Milbank, John Panteleimon Manousakis, Kevin Hart, Merold Westphal, Robyn Horner, and Graham Ward. There are others, such as Catherine Keller, John D. Caputo, and Peter Rollins, who understand themselves to be believers, but whose thinking might be difficult to square with what most consider to be belief in God.
2. The pre-linguistic given is something supposedly available to us prior to interpretation through language or concepts.
3. If interested, see James E. Faulconer, "Paul Ricœur on Scripture," in *Remembrance and Return: Papers in Honor of Louis C. Midgley*, ed. Ted Vaggalis and Daniel C. Peterson (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Salt Lake City: Eborn Books, 2019), 59–75, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ifb/22/; and James E. Faulconer, "On the Literal Interpretation of Scripture," in *The Expanded Canon: Perspectives on Mormonism and Sacred Texts*, ed. Blair G. Van Dyke, Brian D. Birch, Boyd J. Peterson (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2018), 47–57.
4. Gadamer, a non-practicing but believing Protestant, was a student of Heidegger, whose understanding of religion I will discuss later. Marion was a student of Derrida, who was a student of Immanuel Levinas, an Orthodox Jew. Marion is now an *immortel* of the *Académie Française* in recognition of his work in the philosophy of religion. He is a devout Catholic.
5. Biographical notes about two of the main players in this essay:
 - (1) Tragically, in the 1930s Heidegger associated himself with the "Blut und Boden" (blood and soil) of National Socialism, joining the party and sometimes acting shamefully. After World War II, he distanced himself from Nazi philosophy by publishing several earlier lectures, some of them revised to mark that distance. For an excellent, balanced discussion of Heidegger's Naziism, see Richard Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 153–64.
 - (2) There are also questions about Derrida being a signatory to a 1977 petition, *Lettre ouverte à la Commission de revision du code penal pour la révision de certains textes régissant les rapports entre adultes et mineurs* ("Open Letter to the Commission for Revising the Penal Code Regarding the Revision of Certain Texts Governing Relations Between Adults and Minors"). This has been depicted as a petition supporting pedophilia; the petition's title suggests as much. However, because the French laws governing sexual issues, regarding which this letter called for reforms, were complicated, it isn't easy to parse the relationship of any particular signatory to the petition's demands. One of the petition's primary claims was that French law in sexual issues was outdated and overly punitive. Many signatories took that as their reason for signing once having done so became notorious.

Nevertheless, the demand that consent between parties involved in sexual relations be the standard, rather than age, was part of the petition. So, some claimed to have understood a reduction of inappropriately harsh penalties as the goal of the petition. They later said they were asking for certain legal reforms; they did not intend to support the sexual exploitation of children. Yet others went further, insisting on decriminalization of sexual acts between consenting adults and minors—a view that is deeply problematic today and was hardly unproblematic at the time. Michel Foucault publicly argued in support of allowing sexual acts between consenting adults and consenting minors. See Michel Foucault, “Sexuality and Moral Law,” in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977–1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013), 278.

Derrida’s relationship to the letter was and is murky: he acknowledged signing the petition but he neither apologized for doing so, clarified his understanding of the petition’s purpose, nor repudiated it. Neither did he explain his thinking regarding the petition’s various demands. Perhaps the closest thing to an explanation is his reflections on how signing something relates to responsibility: Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 307–30; Derrida, “Signature Événement Contexte,” in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972), 365–93, archive.org/details/margesdelaphilos0000derr/page/366/mode/2up. Note that this essay was published in French in 1972, prior to the publication of the petition. He and I never discussed the petition or its themes.

The disconnect between the politics of philosophers and their thought is hardly new. It started at least with Plato, who tried, quite unsuccessfully, to reform the government of Syracuse according to his political theories. For millennia philosophers have often been on the wrong side of politics: theoretical intelligence rarely yields either practical, political, or religious intelligence.

Nor do biographical details offer us much for the best way to understand a thinker. Levinas knew only too well the horrors of Naziism, having lost in the death camps every member of his extended family except his wife and daughter, who were concealed in a convent in Orléans. He refused to set foot in Germany after the war, saying: “Heidegger has never been exculpated in my eyes from his participation in National Socialism.” Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 41, archive.org/details/ethicsinfinity00levi/page/40/mode/2up; “Heidegger ne soit jamais disculpé à mes yeux de sa participation au national-socialisme,” Levinas, *Éthique et Infini: Dialogues avec Philippe Nemo* (Paris: Fayard, 1982), 38, archive.org/details/ethiqueetinfinid0000levi/page/28/mode/2up.

Yet Levinas also said Heidegger’s *Being and Time* “is one of the finest books in the history of philosophy,” Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 37; “*Sein und Zeit* . . . C’est un des plus beaux livres de l’histoire de la philosophie,” Levinas, *Éthique et Infini*, 33; and “In Heidegger there is a new way, direct, of conversing with philosophers and asking for absolutely current teachings from the great classics,” *Ethics and Infinity*, 43; “Chez Heidegger, il y a une nouvelle manière, direct,

de dialoguer avec les philosophes et de demander des enseignements absolument actuels aux grands classiques," Levinas, *Éthique et Infini*, 41.

I'm unable to say anything about how Derrida understood his signature on the 1977 letter. But I can say something about his character in his interactions with me and others around me, and—more importantly—I can say something about how to understand his thought.

6. Parts of what I say cannibalize an essay on deconstruction that I wrote sometime before 2010. It circulates in various places and versions on the internet though I no longer feel to claim it.
7. Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche and her husband, Bernhard Förster, were German nationalists and antisemites who went so far as to establish an Aryan colony in Paraguay. Not surprisingly, it failed.
8. Walter A. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 4th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).
9. My translation from the original German: "Ist er denn verloren gegangen? sagte der Eine. Hat er sich verlaufen wie ein Kind? sagte der Andere. Oder hält er sich versteckt? Fürchtet er sich von uns? Ist er zu Schiff gegangen? Ausgewandert?" Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, "Der tolle mensch," in *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* ("La Gaya Scienza") (Leipzig, DE: Verlag von E. W. Fritzsche, 1887), 153, archive.org/details/bub_gb_LNEuAAAAYAAJ/page/n161/mode/2up.
10. On Nietzsche's view, many of those he addresses may profess belief and believe that they believe in God. But they are nevertheless atheists because their belief was merely that, only *belief* in the metaphysical God rather than life in a world structured by that God.
11. From here on, I will use *God*, the word *God* with a line through it, to refer to the metaphysical god and its analogues in such things as pure reason or scientific law and *God* to refer to the one God, except in quotations.
12. The answer is only "obviously none" if we beg the question by assuming that there cannot be truth without a metaphysical foundation/*God*.
13. For Latter-day Saints the first question ("Is there an alternative?") is a genuine question to which we answer yes. But given what we are taught about God, the answer to the second question ("Is nihilism the only alternative?") depends on what one means by *nihilism*. If it means "the belief there is no meaning," then clearly we are not nihilists and would answer no. But if *nihilism* means "the disbelief in *God*," then—oddly—we may be nihilists of a sort. See my unpublished essay, "What Does Nihilism Affirm? In Praise of Naivete," (lecture, Pembroke College Oxford Seminar on Faith and Reason, March 2017, drive.google.com/file/d/1Nuhl3jfTWrOX-1AngNh54dpe-1SCCaQ3/view) for an argument for a form of religious nihilism.
14. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), archive.org/details/beingtime0000heid_j2i5/mode/2up; Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Halle an der Saale: Niemeyer, 1927).

15. Aristotle, *Physics*, 192a31-b8, archive.org/details/aristotlephysics0000tran/page/94/mode/2up.
16. Brian Rogers, "Traces of Reduction: Marion and Heidegger on the Phenomenon of Religion," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 52, no. 2 (June 2014): 187.
17. Martin Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie, Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt, DE: Vittorio Klostermann, 1975). *Basic Problems* is a transcription of the 1927 lecture course.
18. Heidegger, *Basic Problems*, 23; *Grundprobleme*, 31. He first introduces *Abbau* in Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §6, but his discussion in *Basic Problems* is clearer.
19. Heidegger, *Basic Problems*, 22; *Grundprobleme*, 31: "Alle philosophie Erörterung, auch de radikaliste, neu anfangende, von überkommenen Begriffen und damit von überkommenen Horizonten und Hinsicht durchsetzt ist."
20. For Heidegger, this problem is only apparent. Historicism and relativism are mistakes consequent on the representational thinking of modernism. See Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Volume 2: The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), especially section 16.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, Heidegger's assistant in Marburg for three years in the 1920s, explains this well in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method (Wahrheit und Methode)*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 1989), archive.org/details/gadamer-truth-and-method. See my review of that book: James Faulconer, "Recovering Truth: A Review of Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*," *Mormon Review* 2, no. 3, *Times and Seasons* (blog), web.archive.org/web/20120508193050/http://timesandseasons.org/index.php/2010/09/mr-recovering-truth-a-review-of-hans-georg-gadamer-truth-and-method/.
21. My thanks to Robert Metcalf (University of Colorado, Denver) for his unpublished essay, "Thinking Beyond the 'Philosophy of Religion' with [William] James and Heidegger." He helped me better understand Heidegger's thinking about religion. The most relevant text is Martin Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Martin Heidegger, *Phänomenologie des Religiösen Lebens*, ed. Matthias Jung, Thomas Regehly, and Claudius Strube, *Gesamtausgabe* vol. 60 (Frankfurt, DE: Vittorio Klostermann, 1995). This is a transcription of lectures given in Freiburg in 1920–21.
22. Mark Wrathall, "The Phenomenology of Religious Life," unpublished manuscript.
23. This might not rule out cultural relativism. There are cultural differences that are relevant to how we understand what is true, but the kind of absolute cultural or personal relativism that most find untenable is made impossible by Heidegger's understanding of the openness revealed by deconstruction rather than historical or other kinds of determinism. Truth comes to us through events that make personal or cultural experience possible. We can glimpse truth in those events entangled in history and culture, but not created merely by them.
24. In a private discussion with Gadamer (July 1991), I asked about Heidegger's

religion. He reminded me that shortly after their marriage in 1917 Heidegger and his wife, Elfride Petri, became "house Christians," people who practiced their faith in private rather than in an institutional church, and that both were buried as Catholics. Gadamer had been Heidegger's assistant and was confident that Heidegger continued to think of himself as a practicing Christian. We know little about Heidegger's religion, but it is doubtful that he was an atheist.

25. See Jacques Derrida, "Ousia and Grammé: Note on a Note from *Being and Time*," *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 29–67; Jacques Derrida, "Ousia et grammé: note sur une note de Sein und Zeit," *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972), 31–78, archive.org/details/margesdelaphilos0000derr/mode/2up.
26. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), Part 1, 6–73; Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967), 15–108, archive.org/details/delagrammatologi0000derr.
27. Derrida, *Grammatology*, 158; Derrida, *Grammatologie*, 227.
28. Notice that Derrida's claim is not the simple and obvious claim that all truth has a context. It is, rather, that all truth is constituted by context, as well as other structures.
29. For an interesting, relevant discussion of this, though anything but a Derridean one, see Jerry A. Fodor, *The Elm and the Expert: Mentalese and Its Semantics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).
30. William Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1807), 2:150–51, archive.org/details/poemsintwovolume00word/page/150/mode/2up.
31. Derrida, "Ousia and Grammé," 39–40.
32. In, for example, Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1991).
33. See, for example, the two essays, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy," and particularly the second on Pseudo-Dionysius, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials" in Jacques Derrida, *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1992), 25–71, 73–142; Jacques Derrida, *D'un ton Apocalyptique Adopté Naguère en Philosophie* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1983); and Jacques Derrida, "Comment ne pas Parler: Dénégations," in *Psyché: Invention de L'autre*, vol 1 (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1987), 55–595.
34. Jacques Derrida, "Circumfession," in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 155.
35. Derrida, "Circumfession," 155.
36. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Willis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), throughout; Jacques Derrida, *Donner la Mort* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1999), archive.org/details/donnerlamort0000derr/page/n9/mode/2up.

37. This ethical focus most clearly shows the connection of Derrida's thought to that of Levinas. For example, see Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Derrida, *Donner le Temps. 1, La Fausse Monnaie* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1991); Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Derrida, *L'autre Cap* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1991); Derrida, *Gift of Death*; and such essays as "Foi et Savoir: Les deux sources de la 'religion' aux limites de la simple raison," in Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, *La Religion* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1996).
38. Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 253–54.
39. *Effected* rather than *affected* is the word I intend.
40. Bennington, *Jacques Derrida*, 254.
41. Derrida, *Gift of Death*, may be the best example of this aspect of his thinking. There he reads Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* alongside the biblical story of Abraham to argue that absolute responsibility is unavoidable, requires responsibility to a particular other, cannot be fully justified to others, and always involves risk: there is no rationalizable guarantee that one has made the right decision.
42. The other person is always absent from any merely rational system, if for no other reason than that any embodied, material being, especially a living one, escapes complete rationalization in virtue of its temporality—in religious terms, in virtue of its ability to repent.
43. Here *attitude* has a meaning like that when we speak of the attitude of an airplane wing and its orientation to the air through which it moves.
44. Those interested should begin with Hart, *Trespass of the Sign*.
45. Private discussion with Derrida at the École Normal Supérieure in Paris, 1 March 1996.
46. "Justice in itself, if such a thing exists, outside or beyond law, is not deconstructible." Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority," (lecture, Cardozo School of Law, October 1989), fswg.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/derrida-force-of-law.pdf.
47. I do not intend to demean the work of the Christian theologians I have named and others like them. All are smarter and better educated than I. Their work is fascinating and often yields incredible insights. Nevertheless, I have yet to see one who I think has reconciled the God of the Bible with the rejection of God. Perhaps some variation of mysticism is the only possible result.
48. Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, trans. Cécile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava, and Peggy Kamuf, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), archive.org/details/memoiresforpaul0000derr/page/n5/mode/2up.
49. I do not believe the chestnut that if you can't explain what you think to a child you probably don't understand it yourself. Disciplines have their own vocabularies for good reasons and it should be possible to "translate" what is written in

those languages and make them accessible to an educated layperson. But most of Heidegger's and Derrida's work had educated academics as its audience, not educated laypeople. I have used some of their technical vocabulary as a shortcut, and I hope that I have each time given an explanation of that vocabulary. My intention has been to write for educated laypeople who care about these issues.

50. Derrida, "Circumfession," Period 12, 62–63.
51. Gary A. Olsen, "Jacques Derrida on Rhetoric and Composition: A Conversation," *Journal of Advanced Composition* 10, no. 1 (1990): 1–21, jstor.org/stable/20865695?seq=1.
52. See Derrida, "Circumfession," throughout, but especially in Periods 1–10.
53. In philosophy, the discussion of the double-face of writing begins with Plato's *Phaedrus* (274c–275a), dn720706.ca.archive.org/0/items/phaedruslysisand02platuoft/phaedruslysisand02platuoft.pdf. Derrida follows Plato's lead in *Of Grammatology* and in "Plato's Pharmacy."

