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ALMA'S PROPHETIC COMMISSIONING TYPE SCENE

Alan Goff

Abstract: *The story often referred to as Alma's conversion narrative is too often interpreted as a simplistic plagiarism of Paul's conversion-to-Christianity story in the book of Acts. Both the New and Old Testaments appropriate an ancient narrative genre called the prophetic commissioning story. Paul's and Alma's commissioning narratives hearken back to this literary genre, and to refer to either as pilfered is to misunderstand not just these individual narratives but the larger approach Hebraic writers used in composing biblical and Book of Mormon narrative. To the modern mind the similarity in stories triggers explanations involving plagiarism and theft from earlier stories and denies the historicity of the narratives; ancient writers — especially of Hebraic narrative — had a quite different view of such concerns. To deny the historical nature of the stories because they appeal to particular narrative conventions is to impose a mistaken modern conceptual framework on the texts involved. A better and more complex grasp of Hebraic narrative is a necessary first step to understanding these two (and many more) Book of Mormon and biblical stories.*

The idea of conversion has both
a history and a geography.¹

As a BYU graduate student, I read (not for the first time) Fawn Brodie's catalogue of narratives Joseph Smith purportedly plagiarized from the Bible:

Many stories he borrowed from the Bible. The daughter of Jared, like Salome, danced before a king and a decapitation followed. Aminadi, like Daniel, deciphered handwriting on a wall, and Alma was converted after the exact fashion

of St. Paul. The daughters of the Lamanites were abducted like the dancing daughters of Shiloh; and Ammon, the American counterpart of David, for want of a Goliath slew six sheep-rustlers with his sling.²

This frequently quoted passage from Brodie's oft-and-still-cited book³ initiated a mission. I decided to examine each of these five narratives, convinced that this list represented neither an adequate philosophy of history nor suitable textual theory. In the more than 30 years since, I have addressed each narrative (this is the first of the five interrogations of Brodie's examples to be published; the other four will be forthcoming); sometimes the insight came serendipitously from stumbling across a book in the library, and sometimes I directly searched out biblical criticism sources to explain the textual connection.

Brodie isn't alone in concluding Smith plagiarized biblical narratives. Here is Wayne Ham's plagiarism of Fawn Brodie's passage:

Other apparent biblical allusions in the **Book of Mormon** include Alma's conversion in a similar fashion to Paul's; Ammon, like David, slaying six sheep rustlers with a sling; the daughter of Jared, like Salome, dancing for the king in return for a decapitation; Jesus' blessing of the children; and an abduction scene similar to that involving the daughters of Shilo.⁴

If similarity indicates plagiarism, then Ham plagiarizes while accusing Joseph Smith of plagiarism (Ham doesn't cite Brodie as a source for this passage), adding one item Brodie omits — Jesus's blessing of the children. Similarly, a psychobiography of Joseph Smith claims the source of Alma's conversion narrative is Acts: of Mosiah's sons and Alma, the writer asserts that "their conversion story is patterned after that of Paul in Acts 9:1–31."⁵ Such reductive readings are common. B. H. Roberts was already responding to similar claims in 1909 when one John Hyde (writing in 1857) stated that among other plagiarisms, Alma's conversion story imitates Paul's.⁶ More recently Susan Curtis also said that among other biblical narratives, Smith borrowed Alma's conversion from Paul's.⁷

Much has been published on issues concerning the difference between ancient historical narrative and modern historical writing, research entirely ignored by these writers who blithely and simplistically assert meaning without citing a single source. In this article I take up

what Brodie, Ham, Curtis, and Vogel (among others) assert is Smith's theft of Paul's Damascus-road narrative.

Conversion is curious and unpredictable. Often thought a one-way street from atheism to theistic belief or trading one religious tradition for another, conversion narratives need to be treated as a literary genre with different standards of judgment than one might find in modern historical treatments (1) by historians who assert they do scientific history free of all literary influence and (2) by historical writers who don't recognize that narratives from antiquity can't merely be assimilated to the expectations of modernity without losing tremendous and vital aspects of what gives antique stories their character and quality. But in antiquity, as in modernity, "traffic went the other way as well. Jews became Pagans, like the assimilationists in Alexandria who started out in the front seat at the synagogue, moved back to the last seat, and finally ended up singing in the Pagan religious processions on the street outside."⁸ Conversion narratives have a complex cartography of starting and ending points. Front seat, back bench, to the streets outside: how one figures conversion impacts how one tells stories about conversion. A hymn shouted from the street procession carries a different timbre from one sung in the front pew. The stories of Alma₂'s, Paul's, and Augustine's conversions require historical and diegetic context neither researched nor explored by the Brodie school as catechists to the religion of modernity, most of whom traveled the route from front pew to back pew to the parades in the streets.

History of the Separation of History and Literature

Only in the past century and a half have moderns insisted that literature and history shouldn't substantially coincide. From antiquity to the 1850s, history and literature were overlapping genres. They both shared a common trunk — rhetoric — and figurative language and literary style were valued in both literary forms. In the modern period, when humanists and social scientists saw the power of natural science to predict and control, they aspired to similar effect. Imitating the sciences and influenced by Enlightenment rationality, historians severed the discipline's literary connections to pursue scientific status. This scientific history fashion began in the early 1800s and lasted for well over a century. The apex occurred when Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) articulated a historical method the discipline adopted (one most historians still espouse but whose theoretical foundation has been hollowed out),

a methodology based on source criticism, empiricism, and archival research.

Influenced by Rankean modernity (Leopold von Ranke laid the foundation for modern history with its emphasis on source criticism, repeatable scientific method, and objectivity that is still the dominant conceptual framework of the historical profession today — even if what that profession learned from Ranke wasn't exactly what he taught or wrote), historians aspired to write in the plain style; to avoid metaphors because they distort the world as it really is; to get to the brute facts of the past, free of all embellishment and figuration; and to avoid adding imagination to the historical record. In the best-known modern definition of history, Johan Huizinga articulated this putative difference between literature and fiction: "The sharp distinction between history and literature lies in the fact that the former is almost entirely lacking in that element of play which underlies literature from beginning to end."⁹ Although wrong when one considers the element of interpretive play available to the historian and the metaphorical templates historians inevitably impose on their histories, this definition has an element of adequacy because some imaginative play with sources and events is available to the novelist but not the historian. Bound up too tightly with this historical view is the idea that the presence of any literary motif undermines the account's historicity, because (presumably) history is a linear process rather than a repetitive series of events and any recurrent motif must come from the later example plagiarizing the earlier.

The literature/history chasm is commonly assumed rather than argued. Tal Ilan (an Israeli historian of women in the history of rabbinic Judaism, among related topics), at least, justifies why literary themes might undermine historicity in rabbinic stories involving women characters, applying standard historical judgment to these stories: the later a story is (removed from the events described), the less likely it is to be historically accurate. The closer geographically to the place of origin, the more likely it is to pass historicity standards. Ilan doesn't naïvely believe in automatic disqualification by literary motif, but its presence raises questions. Literary motifs are themes that appear in more than one source: "Within rabbinic literature discovery of a recurring literary motif can undermine the historicity of a narrative. When a literary framework is carried over from one composition to another, and in the process the anonymous characters of the motif acquire names and biographies of real people, this does not make the story more historically sound. Thus, one must be constantly on the lookout for the common literary

motif when dealing with a source that claims to be telling a seemingly historical event.”¹⁰ This idea dominates the historical discipline to the extent that it is often assumed as self-evident.

A Sharp Distinction between Literature and History in Biblical Criticism

Robin Lane Fox is a historian of antiquity presenting the dominant view of history's relationship to literature. “If we read biblical narrative as a story, we abandon its historical truth. If we read it as literature, we will often find literary art in it, but this art takes us further from truth which corresponds to fact: the fourth Gospel is an author's strong interpretation, not an exact memoir.”¹¹ For Fox, John's gospel contains artistic and narrative elements that edge out historical truth: “If we allow this degree of art and shaping, the results of literary study are already pushing historical truth to one side.”¹²

The allusiveness in biblical narrative has caused those influenced by this positivistic idea to reject biblical narrative's historicity. The gospel infancy narratives, Jesus's parables, and the passion are filled with references to Old Testament passages.

Not surprisingly, much of the material in these sections has repeatedly been equated with midrash, and the question has been raised whether the Old Testament passages might not have given birth to the narratives and teachings associated with them. In other words, the gospel writers would not be recording actual historical events but imaginatively involving Jesus in fictitious narratives and teachings inspired by Old Testament texts.¹³

Examples of such midrashic touches would be to invent a story about Jesus's birth at Bethlehem because of a biblical passage (Micah 5:2) or Jesus's betrayal for 30 silver pieces concocted because of Zechariah 11:12–13.

The gospels have different last words for Jesus according to another commentator: “My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me” (Matthew and Mark), “Father into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke), and “It is accomplished” (John), each alluding to Old Testament passages. Literary critic Randel Helms concludes that these utterances are fictional. “Each narrative implicitly argues that the others are fictional. In this case at least, it is inappropriate to ask of the Gospels what ‘actually’ happened; they may pretend to be telling us, but the effort remains a pretense,

a fiction.”¹⁴ This positivistic premise that literary features undermine historicity is a potent presupposition built into the modern project. It is also wrong.

What Christians call typology (*type scenes*, *archetypes* or any other word whose etymology traces to the Greek *tupos*) is to Helms fictionalizing. “Such a view of the Old Testament allowed it to supply the basis for entire scenes in the fictively historical books of the New.”¹⁵ The gospel writers “rummaged” through Old Testament narrative to rework stories as Christian prefigurations: the prophet who heals King Jeroboam’s hand (1 Kings 13:4–6) becomes Jesus’s Sabbath healing of a withered hand (Matthew 12:10–13).¹⁶ Jesus’s calming the sea is based on the book of Jonah, “a literary fiction built from a supposed prefigurement” with Jonah’s sailors exhibiting great fear and the apostles also after witnessing the calm water.¹⁷ Helms has Luke reading widely in ancient literature, purloining Paul’s conversion from Euripides’s *The Bacchae*.¹⁸ Similarly, New Testament scholar John Darr falls into this positivistic habit, first criticizing researchers who refer to Luke’s literary quality applying “highly questionable assumptions about Luke-Acts’ historicity (it is more ‘historical’ than the other gospels and thus less likely to indulge in poetic allusion).”¹⁹ Later in the same chapter, Darr endorses this binary opposition between poetics and historicity.²⁰

Similarly, E. P. Sanders, a major historian in the historical Jesus quest, asserts that typological New Testament textuality causes problems because although Jesus doubtless acted in ways consonant with Old Testament passages, the gospel writers go beyond those real-life actions to invent other parallels. The birth narratives are particularly vulnerable to this charge.²¹ The typological connection between New and Old Testament events undermines the former’s historicity. All gospel accounts aren’t necessarily fabricated because, doubtless, Jesus thought his actions fulfilled biblical passages: “This does not mean that every single passage in the gospels that has a reminiscence or echo of Hebrew scripture really took place.”²² Even parallels within the gospels might reflect “literary art” rather than historical reality.²³

I don’t want to pile on with excessive examples, but a few more will demonstrate the ubiquity of this positivistic assertion. Biblical critic Raymond Brown notes the similarities between the infancy narratives and Moses’s birth story,²⁴ parallels between Pharaoh and Herod²⁵ and between Herod and King Balak,²⁶ Old Testament annunciation type scenes and those to Mary and Elizabeth,²⁷ and the slaughter of the innocents and the Babylonian exile.²⁸ Brown’s conclusion: “Such a perfect

adherence to literary form raises a question about the historicity of the stereotyped features in the Lucan story.”²⁹

Similar assumptions have been applied to Old Testament narrative, questioning its historicity. The loudest part of this debate goes under the umbrella of the minimalist/maximalist schools. Minimalists have disparaged biblical historical claims, asserting that literary features diminish historical reliability. The same approaches applied to Abraham and Moses, David and Jeremiah, are now being applied to the gospels. New Testament stories, like biblical narratives about David and Daniel, repeat folk tale and literary patterns. “A historical Jesus is a hypothetical derivative of scholarship. It is no more a fact than is an equally hypothetical historical Moses or David.”³⁰ The writer, according to this argument, had no historical intentions but literary, allegorical, theological, and mythic goals. Consequently, “there is significant need, not to speak of warrant, to doubt the historicity of its figures to the extent that such figures owe their substance to such literature.”³¹ Biblical figures including Jesus are literary creations, which presumably precludes their also being historical.

This false dichotomy between literature and history that Huizinga posited “is rightly rejected by most scholars of ancient texts, and by many who study modern historical writing as well.”³² Definitions stressing the opposition between history and literature, claiming scientific status, or appealing to authorial intention are all difficult to defend.³³ Recent decades have reversed historiographical assumptions regarding the history and literature relationship. Influenced by thinkers such as Hayden White and Jacques Derrida, all writing is now seen as literary, history writing included. An important critic of this sharp separation has been Robert Alter: he notes that history and literature are overlapping categories. “What we need to remind ourselves, as several contemporary theorists of historiography have proposed, is that those two categories are not mutually exclusive oppositions.”³⁴ Alter argues that many historians confuse history and the history-like. Relying on “modern biblical scholarship rooted in a nineteenth-century positivist mindset,” these historians hold a simplistic concept of truth and fiction.³⁵ This goes for all literary features said to undermine historicity:

As we attempt to identify symbols in John's Gospel, we will bear in mind that something can be both symbolic and historical. We can discern symbolic significance in images, events, or persons without undercutting their claims to historicity, and we can recognize that certain images, events,

and people are historical without diminishing their symbolic value.³⁶

Critics of the Alma story haven't recognized that Paul's Damascus-road experience belongs to a literary genre, the Old Testament prophetic commissioning type scene. Consequently, to call both stories fictional is to accept an intellectually and historically undermined theory of textual relationship.

That Luke uses Hebraic literary forms does not entail the narrative's fictionality,

for it is entirely possible for quite accurate historical materials to be set down in different specific literary forms. Just as a given writer's *individual, characteristic style* need not mutilate the truth he intends to describe, so also the *common literary style* of a given historical period or a specific circle of writers need not produce a distortion of historical facts. What we have in fixed literary forms is the common literary style of a given historical period.³⁷

The historical discipline's center of gravity coalesces around an uncritical view that literary elements undermine historical accuracy; philosophically sophisticated and theoretically informed historians are aware that the distinct separation between history and literature can no longer be maintained, but few are the historical theorists compared to practitioners who take an earlier generation's philosophy of history for granted.

The Hard Distinction between Literature and History in Book of Mormon Criticism

Again, Brodie sees Book of Mormon repetitions as proof of fiction: for Brodie, "Alma was converted after the exact fashion of St. Paul."³⁸ Some examination of Alma's conversion and Paul's Damascus-road story is in order: "Other apparent biblical allusions in the Book of Mormon include Alma's conversion in a similar fashion to Paul's."³⁹ Other Book of Mormon critics have asserted that the historical and literary have no communion, because, presumably, historical representations are free of literary and rhetorical structuring.

In the case of claims about chiasmic structuring of entire books, we must ask if the historical sequence of events produced the chiasm or if the chiasm arranged the historical episodes. Because Book of Mormon apologists say that chiasmus is an

intentional literary device, they must conclude that chiasmus can arrange historical episodes. At a minimum this means that some historical details of the Lehi story may not have occurred in the order presented in the narrative. Apologists must also allow for the possibility that some historical incidents never actually happened but were fictions imposed on the text to complete a chiasmic structure designed to convey a moralistic or theological teaching.⁴⁰

Literary devices are antithetical to historical writing according to this positivistic historical theory. "Everything we know about the Jaredite ruler bears an analogue to the corrupt Nephite king. These mirrorings suggest that one narrative may depend on the other, and that only one, or perhaps neither, represents a factual account of historical events."⁴¹ Similarly, if two Book of Mormon characters are typologically figured, this similarity undermines historical claims.

Still, allowing for a literary device, questions regarding historicity remain since it is possible that Noah and Riplakish were actually monogamists but were portrayed as polygamists to accentuate their debauchery. If Noah and Riplakish existed anciently, the historicity of every detail of their biographical sketches is nonetheless uncertain.⁴²

This view asserting a definitive boundary between history and literature is positivistic; another critic asserts that because the exodus motif is repeated in the Book of Mormon, the typology undermines confidence that historical events and people are being described: "It is remarkable that many of the Nephite ideas and events occur at the same point in the chronology and at similar places as in the Israelite wilderness experience. These twenty shared motifs suggest dependency on the Bible exodus story."⁴³ Though widely shared by historians who don't follow the contemporary debate about history and literature (narrative theory is where historians, philosophers, literary critics, and others gather to focus on what all narratives — historical and fictional — have in common), support for this positivistic historiographical position has been increasingly attenuated recently.

The Crumbling Boundaries between History and Literature

Since modern historians attempted to make their discipline scientific, historical narrative has fallen under suspicion. Rather than math or statistics, measurements or computerized data, geological strata or

biological specimens, historians are stuck with stories. Historical narratives too much resemble fiction to satisfy those with scientific aspirations. “Fictionality is a counter-concept of objectivity in the semantic context of a positivistic epistemology.”⁴⁴ Fictionality is opposed to the objectivity of facts empirically verifiable, according to this view. “Fictionality thus marks the ontological and epistemological status of those elements in historical knowledge and historiography which don’t share the pure factuality of the information from the sources. This term makes sense under the unquestioned presupposition of a positivistic epistemology.”⁴⁵ Historians fled from narrative between the 1880s and the 1970s. Now that history has undergone a new literary baptism, no longer can the positivistic distinction between historical factuality and fictionality be assumed. Like economics, sociology, and political science among the social sciences, history attempted to abandon story for nomological science. “Positivist attacks on the narrative mode, it seems, have left scars on its epistemic reputation that have never fully healed.”⁴⁶ The positivistic criticism of narrative is that narrative structure is imposed on brute data, not least to give the story a beginning, middle, and end, as opposed to, say, letting the facts speak for themselves.

This positivistic conception of narrative’s noncognitive status has been discarded as researchers in philosophy, literary criticism, history, and other disciplines have recognized the ubiquity of story. But positivists still dismiss storytelling as a mode that doesn’t deliver knowledge. If the historian imposes narrative structure on history instead of finding the pattern in the past, facts, or archive, this view undermines the representational status of narrative; other poetic devices (figurative language) are suspect to such historians. But conceding that history is constructed by historians, it doesn’t follow that the interpretation is untrue. History can be both figural and literal at the same time, simultaneously historical and literary.⁴⁷

The traditional argument would be to differentiate between factual and fictional narrations. Historical narration is usually defined as dealing only with facts and not with fictions. This differentiation is very problematical, and finally not convincing, because the all-important sense of a history lies beyond the distinction between fiction and fact. In fact it is absolutely misleading — and arises from a good deal of hidden and suppressed positivism — to call everything in historiography fiction which is not a fact in the sense of a hard datum.⁴⁸

Responding to claims that biblical literary features negate historical reference, Hoffmeier argues that “using a literary or structural framework that includes such features as chiasm and doublets need not militate against the historicity of the narratives.”⁴⁹ The problem is not with Hebraic narrative but with positivistic notions about history.

The tendency, in contemporary English biblical studies, is to consider literary-critical and historical aspects of theological reflection as sharply distinct and to concentrate on the latter to the neglect of the former. This tendency derives from a period when positivistic conceptions of historical understanding went hand-in-hand with non-cognitive accounts of literary and poetic statement (which carried the implication that the fruit of literary-critical reflection on the biblical narratives could only be “subjective” in character). But if it has sometimes been assumed (in theology and elsewhere) that there is a “natural tension between the historian and the literary critic,” there is no timeless validity to this assumption.⁵⁰

To assert lack of historicity because a text has literary features is to be 50 years outdated in the philosophy of the disciplines. Continental philosophy, Anglo-American philosophy, and every landmass's and ocean's literary criticism assert that the clear-cut distinction between “empirical narratives” and literary narratives is obsolete. The fossilized position desired to uncover the empirical facts underlying the historical story. “For positivism, the task of history is to uncover the facts which are, as it were, buried in documents, just like, as Leibniz would have said, the statue of Hercules was lying dormant in the veins of marble. Against the positivist conception of the historical fact, more recent epistemology emphasizes the ‘imaginative reconstruction’ which characterizes the work of the historian.”⁵¹

This narrative transformation profoundly impacts biblical readings. For example, the gospel of “Mark is a self-consciously crafted narrative, a fiction, resulting from literary imagination, not photographic recall. To say it is a fiction does not necessarily mean that it has no connection with events in history; rather, describing Mark as fiction serves to underscore the selection, construction, and choice behind the story it tells.”⁵² Selection, construction, and choice are present in all narrative. Literary features in narrative indicate nothing about fictive or historical status, because historical and literary narratives share those elements indifferently.

Most theorists distinguish between the fictive and fictional. All narratives (especially histories) are fictive — that is, fashioned to serve specific purposes as the etymology of “fictive” indicates — but such shaping doesn’t make them fictional (that is, not about actual events and people). Mark is the specific example here, but the same is true of all biblical narrative:

Although understanding Mark to be fiction and to develop its own coherence and unity does not mean that what is related in the story bears no relationship whatsoever to the events of the external world, it does mean that the nature of that relationship is complex and difficult to ascertain. Even in modern views of history writing as a factual record of “what really happened,” the constraints of narrative form on historiography blur the distinction between history and fiction. The simultaneous convergence of events, actions, characters, and the constant bombardment of visual, aural, and vocal stimuli that all together constitute every moment of real life simply cannot be represented by linear narrative with its ordered sequence and grammatical requirements. Thus, even modern, scientific history is but a highly selective distillation of “what really happened.” It is an interpretation of an event. Ancient historiography, particularly Hellenistic historiography, never pretended to be anything other than an interpretation. Speeches, characters, and even whole incidents could be created by the Hellenistic historian, and events for which records or sources existed were often thoroughly embellished. The aim of ancient history writing was rarely to produce an accurate chronicle or record; rather, its purposes were moral edification, apologetics, glorification of certain families, and mainly entertainment. Indeed, if one were to assume that the Gospel of Mark belonged to the genre of Hellenistic historiography, one would still be involved in the dynamics of fiction.⁵³

Awareness of history’s fictive status has been excruciatingly slow to filter into Mormon studies. Consequently, older ideas still dominate.

Literary/Historical Readings of Hebraic Narrative

Hebraic narrative operates under different assumptions than does modern historiography. Moderns find repetition faulty, a narrative

mishap. They use words such as *fictional*, *plagiarized*, *redundant*, or *copied* to make sense of repeated motifs. Ancients viewed repetitions as more real than mundane life because these recurrences connected later events to foundational occurrences. "In the Bible, however, the matrix for allusion is often a sense of absolute historical continuity and recurrence, or an assumption that earlier events and figures are timeless ideological models by which all that follows can be measured. Since many of the biblical writers saw history as a pattern of cyclical repetition of events, there are abundant instances of this first category of allusion."⁵⁴ The Bible repeats exoduses under Joshua, the judges, Ezra and Nehemiah, and many others because God's saving acts are paradigmatic for later Israelites. Similar insights have come from the literary side of biblical studies:

I will examine the narrators' use of covert allusions to other narratives known to them and to their audience; specifically, instances where the biblical narrator shaped a character, or his or her actions, as the antithesis of a character in another narrative and that character's actions. The new creation awakens in the reader undeniable associations to the source-story; the relationship between the new narrative and its source is like that between an image and its mirrored reflection: the reflection inverts the storyline of the original narrative. Thus, the discerning reader, considering the implicit relation between the two narratives — the original and its reflection — and observing how the new character behaves contrary to the character upon which he or she is modeled, will evaluate the new hero in light of the model, the comparison created between the two stories sheds new light on the source story and its protagonist.

I call these 'inverted' stories *reflection stories*.⁵⁵

Metcalfe, Brodie, and others assert such reflection stories indicate Book of Mormon fictionality. Grant Hardy, a literary aficionado/historian not given to positivism, provides an entire chapter (chapter 6) on such "parallel narratives" in the Book of Mormon.⁵⁶ Such recognition places high demands on biblical, New Testament, and Book of Mormon readers:

In contrast to what we have been taught by biblical scholars in the past who isolated literary units and analyzed them with no interest in their canonical content, one realizes that

the biblical narrators did not function in a cultural-literary vacuum but constructed their stories in dialogue with existing compositions known to their audience. The narrators propound a riddle to their readers, from whom they expect a high level of sophistication — a reader who absorbs the links and discerns the relationships between stories and their sources and who will take note of the contrasts between protagonists of the stories. The biblical narrator expects readers to become active partners, leaving to them the job of evaluating characters but equipping them with an important (though covert) tool: the reflection story. I invite all students of the Bible to place the phenomenon of reflection stories on their agendas.⁵⁷

These parallel narratives should also be underscored for any Book of Mormon reader. Reading under modern assumptions that fictive qualities preclude historiographical status is fallacious: “Let me emphasize that the fictional quality of the struggle between God and the nation does not preclude the historicity of the text In the Bible, history and literature go hand in hand, more explicitly than in modern historiography,”⁵⁸ and, even so, in modern historical narrative. What happens in biblical narrative happens also in Book of Mormon narrative.

Asserting that Alma’s conversion is copied from Paul’s is to mistake both literary dependence and historicity. Alma’s call has a sophisticated intertextual relationship to biblical prophetic commissioning stories (of which Paul’s is merely one example), a relationship much more complicated than a positivistic textual theory permits.

Blake Ostler has addressed this commissioning story genre, comparing Lehi’s throne theophany and prophetic commission narrative to biblical and pseudepigraphal stories.⁵⁹ John Welch also made a case connecting Lehi’s commission narrative to Hebraic models.⁶⁰ The Book of Mormon already draws upon biblical models of prophetic activity before and after the Alma story. Form criticism (Ostler’s essay is specifically labeled an exercise in form criticism: the study of a story in terms of adherence to and deviation from a literary genre) doesn’t imply that a narrative is either historical or nonhistorical: “To declare that a particular passage has a particular literary form says nothing about its historicity.”⁶¹ Ignoring this well-established principle is perilous.

Ostler notes two call narrative versions: one where a dialogue ensues between the newly called prophet and the Lord (or a representative) and the throne-theophany variety where God is revealed before the commission

is extended.⁶² Black notes the oldest of the prophet commission type scenes: Micaiah's throne theophany in 1 Kings 22:19–22. Isaiah's throne theophany in chapter 6 shows some departures from the *Gattung* (German for “form,” in this case “literary form or genre”) with Ezekiel and Jeremiah developing the pattern still differently. “Among all these variables, however, two features of the tradition seem to be constant, the throne-vision and the divine word of calling and commission.”⁶³ Lehi's vision is the throne-theophany variant and Alma's the narrative form. Both versions were “eventually absorbed into the genre ‘apocalypse,’”⁶⁴ which explains so many pseudepigraphal examples. Using Old Testament examples (Moses, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Micaiah ben Imlah, Jeremiah), Ostler details elements of the prophetic commission:⁶⁵

1. Historical introduction: the details of the commission and confrontation are laid out.
2. Divine confrontation: either the Lord or an angel appears to extend the commission.
3. Reaction: the recipient often collapses or expresses inadequacy.
4. Throne-theophany: the prophet sees God on His throne or witnesses a divine council.
5. Commission: the prophet is assigned a task.
6. Protest: the prophet proclaims unworthiness or inability.
7. Reassurance: God assures the prophet support.
8. Conclusion: the prophet takes up his assignment.⁶⁶

A common element Ostler omits is the sign. Gideon asks for a sign (the fleece narrative), and Moses sees the burning bush.⁶⁷ The sign in Alma₂'s commissioning narrative is his being struck dumb and immobile.

These commissioning stories, like all biblical type scenes, display both uniformity and innovation. They don't adhere mechanically to a genre but modify the form to local needs.⁶⁸ Additionally, the reader must read with proper assumptions. Assuming a literary pattern negates historicity is problematical. “One can no more distinguish fictional story from factual history on the basis of *formal* characteristics than one can distinguish nonreferential from referential paintings on the basis of *brush strokes*.”⁶⁹ Regardless of the story's origin dates, “Understanding conversion was a hermeneutic project in the twelfth century, as it is today.”⁷⁰ Approaching the text with presuppositions too modern results in inadequate interpretations.

Paul's Commissioning Type Scene

If textual similarity means plagiarism, then Paul's prophetic commission story is itself already plagiarized. Paul's conversion story isn't novel, for "Luke's accounts of Paul's conversion are deliberately patterned on Hebrew prophecy,"⁷¹ including commissioning stories of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah.⁷² The apocalyptic form was absorbed into Christianity eventually and influenced the Revelation and Paul's commission.⁷³ These call type scenes function as "vindication and legitimization of the prophet in his office."⁷⁴ One biblical scholar notes 27 Old Testament examples of commission type scenes,⁷⁵ but the New Testament contains 37.⁷⁶ Hedrick disagrees with Munck about some elements in Paul's call scene. They agree, though, that the Paul narrative adheres to the prophetic commissioning formula. "A simpler and more reasonable explanation is that Luke was responsible for stylizing the narratives in Acts along the lines of the OT call narratives."⁷⁷ The version in Acts 26:16–17 makes adherence to Old Testament prophetic call narratives clear by alluding to language from other commission stories: Ezekiel 2:1, Jeremiah 1:8, Jeremiah 1:7, and Ezekiel 2:3 (which are all patterned on Moses's prophetic call story).⁷⁸ This Pauline conversion story is so studded with biblical allusions that any adequate reading would concede its intentional allusive quality. Moses's call is the gold standard for such narratives, but the calls of Gideon, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Micaiah, and Deutero-Isaiah also fit the pattern. Invoking the pattern claims an ancient authority for a new prophet. "The employment of the literary form in no way negates the reality of the call encounter itself, but underscores the relevance of this form for the public affirmation of the claims which the prophet is making as Yahweh's spokesman."⁷⁹

Paul's story (or Alma₂'s) fits the cultural background of the ancient world,⁸⁰ so simplistic and reductive readings that assume its modern provenance should minimally consider the narrative's depth and complexity. For example, Second Maccabees contains the story of Heliodorus, a better parallel to Alma₂'s narrative than Paul's, showing a rebel against God and whose conversion is initiated by the people's prayers led by the high priest, resulting in the recipient's being struck dumb and prostrate until supplication revives him from death's threshold. Heliodorus, commanded by the Seleucid king, journeys to Jerusalem to confiscate temple treasury. The high priest, temple priests, and people pray for divine intervention. At the temple, two divine beings "remarkably strong, gloriously beautiful and splendidly dressed" (2 Maccabees 3:26, RSV) and a mounted warrior accost the temple defiler, he collapses, and

he is carted away on a stretcher — blind, prostrate, and dumb. Fearing the king's retribution, the high priest and the people intercede, praying and offering sacrifice for recovery. Heliodorus recovers after being warned again by the messengers, whereupon he sacrifices to God, testifying “to all men of the deeds of the supreme God, which he had seen with his own eyes” (2 Macabees 3:36 RSV). The similarities between Paul's experience, Heliodorus's encounter, and other Hellenistic parallels are a commonplace of Pauline scholarship.⁸¹ That cluster of commissioning narratives should include Alma₂'s.

Scholar of early Christianity Paula Fredriksen doubts *conversion* is the right word for Paul's sidestep into Christianity; it implies a shift between belief systems. But Paul's change was between two varieties of Jewish belief.⁸² *Call* is a better word. We might casually refer to Paul's or Alma₂'s conversion, but any such reference should mean a prophetic call which foregrounds the biblical roots of the *Gattung*. For Paul and Alma₂ the change is dramatic (from fighting the church to advocating for it).

The prophetic commission has common elements. In Table 1 I note the eight elements biblical scholarship usually lists as part of the form. The Lehi and Paul stories closely follow the literary form. The two versions of Alma₂'s prophetic commission adhere faithfully to the pattern also, as shown in Table 2.⁸³

The most obvious clue to a prophetic commission type scene occurs when Alma₂ quotes from Lehi's throne theophany: “Methought I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising their God; yea, and my soul did long to be there” (Alma 36:22). Even with the omission of this element in the first iteration (Mosiah 27:11–17). This reference connects the two most prominent call narratives to each other and to the biblical tradition by foregrounding the divine council.

Considering Old Testament call narratives, historian of religion and biblical scholar István Czachesz says of Acts 9 that “it is not difficult to isolate most of the above-mentioned components there. Scholars agree that *Acts* 9 presents us with a commission narrative that shows remarkable similarities to the commission of the prophets in the Jewish Scriptures.”⁸⁴ Paul's narrative varies in detail from other commissioning stories,⁸⁵ adding innovative touches such as the role of Ananias and multiple visions. But none rotely repeats the tradition.

Each Lukan narrative differs based on the author's intent. In Acts 9, Luke presents the “institutional” commissioning version following Jewish traditions of Saul's commissioning as Israel's first king

Prophet	Introduction	Divine Confrontation	Reaction	God Sitting on Throne	Commission	Protest	Reassurance and Rejection by People	Conclusion
Moses (Ex. 3–4)	Moses at Horeb	Angel in burning bush	Who am I?	Shoes off on holy ground	Go to Pharaoh & deliver	I'm not eloquent	Lord will give you words	Take this rod and go
Jeremiah (Jer. 1)	Historical setting	Word comes to Jeremiah	I cannot speak	Lord touched his mouth	Before birth made a prophet	I am but a child	The Lord will deliver	Lord is with thee
Isaiah (Is. 6)	Year Uzziah died	The Lord and seraphim	Woe is me	Saw the Lord on throne	Whom to send? Send me	I have unclean lips	Lips purified with coal	Go and tell the people
2 nd Isaiah (Is. 40)	Comfort my people	Lord's glory revealed	The people are grass	God calls heavenly council	Prepare Lord's way	What shall I cry?	God's word abides	Lord will feed the flock
Ezekiel (Ez. 1–3)	Historical setting	Sees glory of Lord	Fell on face	Likeness of a throne	Sent to rebellious people	What do I say?	Be not afraid	Eats the scroll
Micaiah (1 Kg. 22)	Historical background	Lord holds a council	—	The Lord on throne	Whom to send? Send me	—	—	Prophet confronts Ahab
Lehi (1 Ne. 1)	Reign of Zedekiah	Pillar of fire & vision	Cast himself on bed	Saw God on throne in council	Lehi preaches	Lehi fears and quakes	Lord's tender mercies	People reject his message
Paul (Acts 9)	Paul goes to Damascus	Divine light	Falls to earth	Hears the divine voice	Paul a chosen vessel	Paul had rejected Jesus	Paul will suffer	Apostle to the Gentiles

Table 1. Elements of prophetic commissioning.

Prophet	Introduction	Divine Confrontation	Reaction	God Sitting on Throne	Commission	Protest	Reassurance and Rejection by People	Conclusion
Alma (Mosiah 27)	Alma and Sons of Mosiah rebel (verses 8–11)	Angel descends in cloud & earth shakes (11)	All fall to the earth (12)	Alma sees the angel who delivers God's message (15)	Alma teaches the people (32)	Alma had rejected the redeemer and traditions of the fathers (30)	Alma and his cohort preach through tribulation and persecution (32)	Alma and the sons of Mosiah try to make up for past errors by ministering (33–37)
Alma (Alma 36)	Alma seeks to destroy the church (6)	Angel speaks with thunder and earth trembles (7)	All fall to the earth (7)	Like Lehi, Alma sees God on His throne (22)	Alma labors without ceasing to preach the word (24)	Alma remembers his sins and iniquities (13)	Alma has been supported in trials, troubles, afflictions, prison, bonds (27)	God will deliver Alma as He delivered the fathers from bondage (27–29)

Table 2. Elements of Alma's prophetic commission.

(remember Paul's earlier name, Saul, plus both were Benjaminites). Acts 22 and 26 portray the event differently, relying on different Jewish traditions. Acts 22 shows Paul as heir to Isaiah and Jeremiah, prophets in conflict with their own people. Acts 26, narrating Paul's apology before Agrippa and Festus, depicts Paul as a wandering philosopher divinely commissioned.⁸⁶ Commissioning stories written by the same author vary according to rhetorical purpose and audience.

Galatians contains Paul's own commission account, independent of Lukan versions. Galatians 1:12–16 alludes to Old Testament prophetic call narratives, paralleling his own calling. He was called an apostle before birth, referring to Isaiah 49:1 and Jeremiah 1:5, where the prophets were called from the womb. "Thus in Galatians Paul describes his experience in terms of a prophetic call similar to that of Isaiah and Jeremiah. He felt hand-picked by God after the prophetic model to take the message of God and Christ to the Gentiles."⁸⁷ This calling isn't a conversion, according to Krister Stendahl, because that wording implies a change of religious orientation. Instead, Paul shifted from one view of Torah and Israel's chosenness to a different orientation within Judaism.⁸⁸ Johannes Munck, professor of early Christianity, notes not only the allusion to Paul's calling from the womb, but also includes Sampson's commission, called as a Nazarite from the womb (Judges 16:17).

When Paul applies these biblical expressions to his own call, he must be thinking, not only that he thereby illustrates God's call to him personally, but that that call is the same as it was in the case of Jeremiah and Deutero-Isaiah, a renewal of God's will for the salvation of the Gentiles, giving him a place in the history of salvation in line with those Old Testament figures.⁸⁹

Not only does the Galatians passage allude to Old Testament callings, but the three accounts in Acts do also.⁹⁰ "Paul thought that those texts from the prophets expressed his own call."⁹¹ Acts 22 differs from the better-known story in Acts 9. Acts 22:16–18 relates Paul's mission to turn the Gentiles from "darkness to light" and is "virtually a direct reference to Ezekiel 1:28" and Ezekiel's commission continued in 2:1, 3. The language also invokes prophetic missions from Jeremiah and Isaiah.⁹² In Acts 26, in front of Agrippa — a reputed Roman authority on all things Jewish — Paul's speech is "an elaborate tissue of OT quotations: Old Testament prophecies find their fulfillment in Paul's call to the Gentile mission."⁹³

A common feature in OT prophetic commissioning type scenes is some prophetic inadequacy. For Paul, in Galatians 1:13, the obstacle is Paul's persecution of Christians. Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel

also have weaknesses. Of all the prophetic commissions alluded to in Galatians, Isaiah 49:1, 5 is most relevant and foremost on Paul's mind. "Paul did not understand his commission in terms of any particular prophet. He describes his call in terms and motifs that are analogous to the call of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the Servant of the Lord. ... It comes as no surprise that Isa 49 holds the dominate place" among these prophetic calls.⁹⁴ Similarly, Alma₂'s weakness is his former enmity toward God and his inherited religious tradition: "I rejected my Redeemer, and denied that which had been spoken of by our fathers" (Mosiah 27:30), "yea, I saw that I had rebelled against my God, and that I had not kept his holy commandments" (Alma 36:13).

New Testament scholar Fernando Méndez-Moratalla cites a consistent pattern of Lukan conversion stories, what he calls a "paradigm of conversion" making up "the oldest Christian narrative style."⁹⁵ The paradigm includes the following: God takes the initiative to save the world (especially the poor and outcast) through the Son, society's marginalized are welcomed despite their rejection by the rich and powerful, all need salvation because even the religious establishment and wealthy are sinners, the sinners repent and turn to God (donating their worldly goods to help the poor), the repentant receive forgiveness and are welcomed to messianic feasts where status reversal occurs, the marginalized being honored.⁹⁶ This conversion paradigm then becomes normative for the tradition following Luke so Paul's story models readerly expectations of radical transformations: "The prominence that the stories on the conversion of Paul have received has overshadowed other similar accounts to the point that Paul's experience has become normative for all conversions, and expressions such as 'Damascus road experience' have become tantamount to any conversion-like experience, not only in the religious sense."⁹⁷ Ultimately Paul's narrative overwhelms our own, for "Paul was destined to become the prototypical convert in the imagination of western Christianity."⁹⁸ In the Western tradition this narrative exemplifies radical change, so it establishes the expectations for other notable conversions by Augustine and Luther.⁹⁹

Paul's experience became a template by which later Christians understood their own conversions; that typicality doesn't make conversions fictional. "Like Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, upon which it is demonstrably modeled, Augustine's above conversion scene has become one of the principal, well-worn paradigms of Western Christianity."¹⁰⁰ Lewis Rambo uses that word *paradigm* to generalize about the impact of Augustine's story on later generations: "Conversions,

especially within the Christian tradition, typically generate stories of that process which may then stimulate conversion in others. These stories as they are retold orally and composed as autobiographies become the paradigms by which people interpret their own lives.” Rambo cites convert examples with lives transformed from reading Augustine’s *Confessions*. But Augustine’s conversion type-scene is already belated: “The tradition of conversion stories is derived, at least in part, from the Book of Acts in the New Testament. The conversions of Paul, Cornelius, the Philippian jailer, and Lydia point to the personal impact of religious change. Every story of conversion calls for a conversion, confirms the validity of conversion, and shapes a person’s experience of conversion.”¹⁰¹ Scholars have noted the patterns among conversion narratives, positing six motifs: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectational, revivalist, and coercive. The “*mystical* conversion is considered by some to be the prototypical conversion, as in the case of Saul of Tarsus. Mystical conversion is generally a sudden and traumatic burst of insight, induced by visions, voices or other paranormal experiences.”¹⁰² Paul and Augustine are the two great exemplars in the Christian tradition — prototypes — of dramatic changes wrought by conversion.¹⁰³ Alma’s name ought to be added to this list.

Augustine’s Conversion

Augustine’s conversion story exemplifies how literary features are assumed to contradict historicity when alien, modern, positivistic assumptions are employed.

Leo Ferrari tells his own stereotyped story of encounters with Augustine’s conversion account: how he proved “the essentially fictional character of his famous conversion scene” in the *Confessions*.¹⁰⁴ Positivistic indicators are abundant in Ferrari’s claims. Ferrari found a “scientific” method to explore Augustine’s compositions, compiling a concordance and using computers to analyze the saint’s words, leading to “*irrefutable proof* of the fictional nature” of Augustine’s conversion narrative, “born of the fertile imagination and ingenuity of the then forty-three-year-old Augustine.”¹⁰⁵ With computer and concordance, plotting references in Augustine’s writings to a specific timeline, Ferrari claims to have “*scientifically demonstrated* for the very first time in history [that the conversion scene was] obviously quite *fundamentally fictional in nature*.”¹⁰⁶ Rather than being historical, Leo Ferrari asserts the *Confessions* conversion is a dramatic event that lacks historicity, for “we must bear in mind that Augustine saw no contradiction between

truthful history and figurative expression. Indeed, Augustine explicitly defends the use of figures in spiritual writings, including even the Bible itself.¹⁰⁷ I side with Augustine on this one; I see no inherent contradiction between historical truth and literary expression. Ferrari is burdened with dated positivistic ideas about history and figuration.

Ferrari believes his account is “scientific,” indisputable, proven, empirical, certain. He rails against the research consensus that perversely refuses to accept his argument. He imputes evil motives to his opponents rather than accepting that they might begin from nonpositivistic presuppositions. Ferrari dates the debate between “historicists” and “fictionalists” to 1888 when two crucial studies were published.¹⁰⁸ For Ferrari, a literary element such as a symbol (the fig tree in Augustine’s story) fundamentally indicates fiction; for Ferrari, historical narration is less truthful when incorporating literary elements (citing a contrast between literary and empirical/verifiable controls that positivists commonly invoke). “These various aspects of Augustine’s notion of truth in the *Confessiones* bespeak an interiorized mystical mode of truth far removed from the empirically verifiable kind called for by the debate about the conversion scene.”¹⁰⁹ For Ferrari, Augustine’s conversion scene can only be true in a symbolic way; it didn’t factually happen in history. “We have seen how Augustine’s notion of truth in the *Confessiones* transcends empirical verifiability, and so too the whole question of the factuality or fictionality of the conversion scene.”¹¹⁰ For one brand of positivist, an event must be empirically verifiable in order to rise to the level of historical knowledge (epistemological questions about how the past can be empirically verified are rarely addressed by positivists). “It was shown [in a 1968 study] that the fig tree, by reason of its widespread symbolism in Augustine’s milieu, had a very definite relation, not merely to the conversion scene, but to the entire eighth book of the *Confessiones*. This demonstrated yet again the extreme care with which the entire description of the conversion scene had been constructed, and so supported the claims of the fictionalists.”¹¹¹ Ferrari has difficulty reconciling the Augustine who wrote tracts against lying with the writer of the *Confessions* who “made up” the most crucial event in his story. Ferrari uses the concept of fiction: the *Confessions* is a dramatic staging of conversion with more influence if it follows a well-known conversion type scene.¹¹² Augustine himself, according to Ferrari, asserts that one can lie using figurative language and not really falsify because of figuration. “Coming as it does, just before the writing of the *Confessiones*, that manner of signification offers a convenient

starting point for the subject of truth and figurative language in regard to Augustine's paulinizing of his conversion scene."¹¹³ According to Ferrari, Augustine took liberties with the historical record because "the demonstrable similarities of Augustine's conversion to that of Paul would not only increase the impact upon his audience, but such similarities would leave no doubt about the origins of his own conversion and the spiritual tradition to which it belongs."¹¹⁴ Similar positivistic claims about the Book of Mormon's symbolic truth while lacking historicity are sometimes made within the Mormon tradition: Augustine's "lively appreciation of figurative language becomes an important factor in interpreting the conversion scene as a metaphorical expression of an extraordinary transformation which has undoubtedly occurred in his life, if not in exactly the form described in the justly famous conversion scene."¹¹⁵

Similar to Ferrari, Fredriksen reconstructs Augustine's conversion such that the church father's own perspective changed radically between the event in 386 and his account of the event in the *Confessions* in 400 AD when Augustine needed to rehabilitate Paul's image in the father's polemic with the Manicheans.¹¹⁶ "Augustine's account of his conversion in the *Confessions*, in other words, is a theological reinterpretation of a past event, an attempt to render his past coherent to his present self. It is, in fact, a disguised description of where he stands in the present as much as an ostensible description of what occurred in the past. And he constructs his description from his reading of Acts 9 as well as from his new theological convictions."¹¹⁷ Paul becomes a prototype of Augustine's own passage from sinner to salvation, from rebel to believer.¹¹⁸ According to this textual theory, Augustine fictionalizes his own account of his own experience.

Ferrari summarizes the "Historicists" who believe Augustine's conversion account is historical. But others, the "Fictionalists," find Augustine's accounts "embellished" minimally and "romanticized" maximally. When a literary feature emerges (the fig tree in Augustine's story parallel to the fig tree in Nathaniel's call — John 1:48), this signifies to Fictionalists literary midrashing going on, undermining historicity.¹¹⁹ Here two trends emerge in the relevant literatures: the positivistic one sees any literary theme, motif, or feature to indicate fiction. The other views life and history as inherently fictive experiences, always corresponding to motifs and themes with the literary as inescapably part of historical narrative.

Alma₂'s Commission and Theophanies

Alma₂'s commissioning narrative is complex; allusions to biblical passages are just one aspect of that complexity. Readings asserting larceny are too simplistic to explain this sophistication. To adequately treat Alma₂'s call account, the reader must begin earlier with the prophetic commissionings in the book of Mosiah.¹²⁰

Mormon, in editing the record, doesn't discuss Abinadi's prophetic commissioning; he just hints by having Abinadi say the following when he emerges publicly: "Behold, thus saith the Lord, and thus hath he commanded me, saying ..." (Mosiah 11:20), suggesting direct discourse between the Lord and the newly called prophet. When Abinadi reemerges (initially in disguise) after two years, he again pronounces his calling: "Thus has the Lord commanded me, saying — Abinadi, go and prophecy unto this my people" (Mosiah 12:1). We aren't told the nature of the disguise,¹²¹ but veils and disguises are often part of these commissioning scenes. Abinadi's two-year absence and disguise when he returns are forms of concealment symbolically invoking a traditional biblical formula. "In several scenes of prophetic commission or recommission, particular emphasis falls on the silence or concealment of the prophet," which, "taking Moses and Elijah as models, I identify prophetic silence or concealment as part of a type scene of prophetic crisis and commission (or recommission)."¹²² Moses veils his face (Exodus 34:33–35), Elijah also disguises himself (1 Kings 19:13), and Ezekiel conceals his face (Ezekiel 12:6) by divine command. Abinadi's story alludes to this tradition with the nexus of wicked king, confrontational prophet, and disguise (Mosiah 12:1), and his successor Alma₁ conceals himself (Mosiah 17:4) emphasizing the feature. The type scene is flexible, but "the prophet is concealed (or restrained) at a moment of danger and theophany" with four customary elements: (1) a crisis emerges because the people have broken God's covenant, (2) resulting in a theophany, (3) followed by a prophetic commissioning, and (4) a "new divine plan is given and it takes effect immediately."¹²³ This narrative form fits the Abinadi narrative.

The nature of Abinadi's disguise isn't specified, but in the biblical type scene, "most prophetic concealment or restraint is accomplished by a garment: a veil, mantle, cloak, or the cords of netting that bind Ezekiel."¹²⁴ The root of the conflict for Moses and Elijah is the Israelites' rebellion against God: Elijah flees to the desert after his confrontation with the priests of Baal, and Moses destroys the golden calf, and then derides the people for faithlessness.¹²⁵ Abinadi also speaks for God

that “this generation, because of their iniquities, shall be brought into bondage” (Mosiah 12:2), this because they violate the law of Moses (Mosiah 12:29). Like Elijah and Moses, Abinadi contemplates his own death (Mosiah 13:7–9).

Theophany is another element. Both Elijah and Moses visit the sacred mountain, sitting in the rock cleft for 40 days, talking with God, lamenting covenantal breakdown and wickedness. In each biblical theophany, concealment of the prophet’s face is required. After Noah and his priests declare Abinadi insane and attempt to seize him, the story invokes the Moses narrative: “Touch me not,” Abinadi charges, “for the Spirit of the Lord was upon him; and his face shone with exceeding luster, even as Moses’ did while in the mount of Sinai, while speaking with the Lord” (Mosiah 13:3, 5). Abinadi’s command not to touch him introduces a common theophanic theme: proximity to divine manifestations is dangerous. In the bloody bridegroom episode, God almost kills Moses, Aaron’s sons are killed in the tabernacle, and Uzzah is killed for steadying the ark.¹²⁶ In the golden calf narrative, the “veil episode is part of the reordering of the community and the renewal of the covenant,”¹²⁷ serving as a folk theophany. Other biblical passages point to the radiance emanating from God, God’s messenger, or God’s prophet. “Something of the divine radiance was imparted, then, to Moses’s face, which thereafter also shone.”¹²⁸ The Israelites fear Moses and keep their distance. After the first shining face event followed by a veiled covering, the occurrence becomes routine with Moses always donning the veil after the theophany to commune with the people.

Abinadi’s face is by this time uncovered, but the radiance functions to reveal God and establish prophetic authority. Moses’s face shines in his official capacity as messenger. He only dons the veil when returning to private life,¹²⁹ and the shining effects linger after the theophany. Abinadi’s initial disguise openly reveals the prophet’s shining face. “The status of the prophet mirrors the status of the covenant. Concealment reflects the majesty of a theophany and the tension between revelation and concealment in ancient Israelite religion.”¹³⁰ The concealment theme emerges once more. Abinadi cites a suffering servant theme from Isaiah (Isaiah 53); this servant is “despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and we hid as it were our faces from him” (Mosiah 14:3). While Abinadi’s face is revealed in splendor, the people hide their own faces from the covenantal mediator who bears their grief and carries their sorrows. Britt cites a similar passage from Micah 3:4–8 where the Lord hides his face from the people who

have embraced false prophets.¹³¹ As Abinadi and Paul associate their ministries with Moses's, so do the people with Alma₂ (especially in the manner of his death, Alma 45:19). The three are joined by stories of prophetic commissioning. Paul's experience is patterned after Moses's encounter with divinity. In 2 Corinthians 2–4 Paul frames his own calling in terms of Moses's throne theophany and another prophetic commission in Isaiah 42 (especially 2 Corinthians 3:13–18).¹³² Abinadi's Moses connection is powerfully made as Abinadi teaches the law of Moses, isolating the ten commandments (Mosiah 12:27–37, 13:11–35). The discourse's first half focuses on the violated Mosaic law and the second half on the telos of that law, the atonement of Christ when "God himself should come down among the children of men" (Mosiah 13:34). The argument's structure is reflected in the message. The focus shifts to Christ's intercession: "Salvation doth not come by the law alone; and were it not for the atonement, which God himself shall make for the sins and iniquities of his people" (Mosiah 13:28). The law isn't mentioned again until Abinadi's last words: "Therefore, if ye teach the law of Moses, also teach that it is a shadow of those things which are to come — Teach them that redemption cometh through Christ the Lord, who is the very Eternal Father, Amen" (Mosiah 16:14–15).

An additional element of the type scene is the prophetic commissioning or recommissioning. Often this (re)commissioning strengthens the prophet for the difficulties ahead and reaffirms the covenant. In the Book of Mormon story, the commissioning comes with the appointment of a successor to the prophet. "In almost every case there is a reference to the concealment or silence of the prophet."¹³³ Alma₁, one of the priests and Abinadi's prophetic successor, fled the court and "went about privately among the people, and began to teach the words of Abinadi" (Mosiah 18:1), but he must flee further into the wilderness and hide from the king's servants (Mosiah 18:5). The next element requires some physical journey as the covenant is reaffirmed. The prophet is again established as the covenantal mediator and "this sometimes involves the continuation of a physical journey: back to Israel, back into battle, or back to the work of mediating between God and people."¹³⁴ Alma₁, the new prophet of the renewed covenant, reaffirms that pact as he baptizes (Mosiah 13:8–10). But Noah discovers this defection, and the Alma group flees further (Mosiah 13:34). They settle in Helam where Alma₁ refuses kingship. They appoint new teachers and keep the commandments, prospering in their work. The Lamanites enslave them,

and they eventually migrate to Zarahemla where the people reorder their political system.

Moses's veil is a form of masking, and it is about establishing his authority. "The research suggests that Moses's masking contains cultural and theological significance about God, leadership, law, and community."¹³⁵ The Abinadi story also has the prophet masking and also has Abinadi with a shining face. Throughout the episode the story explicitly refers to the Moses story, the ten commandments, and the law of Moses; Abinadi's shining face demonstrates God's glory (*kabod*) shining through his prophet and shows not only that Abinadi's power comes from God but places the prophet and his message on par with Moses. Thomas Dozeman views both the veil and the shining face to be masks: "A mask, according to Ronald Grimes, is any mode of facial stylization intended to transform the body. A mask, therefore, is a disguise, but a paradoxical one. It both conceals and reveals identity. Masks often hide the identity of the wearer in order to represent another power or person. Thus, a mask transforms the wearer, bringing about metamorphosis or alteration of identity."¹³⁶

Masks have two functions, concretion and concealment. Each is illustrated in the Moses and Abinadi stories. For concretion, the shining face of Moses demonstrates God's power penetrating through the mask: "The mask gives substance and form to this outside power, by representing deity. In the process the everyday identity of the wearer is concealed and transformed."¹³⁷ Concealment, or masking, works differently than concretion. "Masking as concealment both hides the everyday identity of the wearer and associates the primary face with that person. As a result, masks of concealment accentuate the authority of the wearer by separating the person from everyday culture."¹³⁸ As with Abinadi (King Noah asks, "Who is Abinadi, that I and my people should be judged of him" [Mosiah 11:27] on this question of the prophet's authority), Moses's veil separates him from the Israelites and increases his authority (Abinadi's confrontation takes place in a judicial context — his own trial — a trial in which the prophet berates the people for breaking legislation, requiring a reiteration of the ten commandments and reassertion of the Mosaic law). "The veil symbolizes unification and consolidation of judicial authority in Moses. It designates Moses as the lawgiver, who administers divinely revealed legislation into the life of Israel."¹³⁹ This legal emphasis in Moses's story is also why Abinadi refers insistently to the law of Moses the Zeniffites are violating.

Masks are about prophetic office. Coats asks if Moses's veil is particular to Moses or representative of some office. The shining face and the veil represent the prophetic office, his authority to speak in God's name. Coats notes the transfiguration of Jesus (Matthew 17) has a similar function. "The concern of the transfiguration scene, whether in the Moses tradition or in the Jesus tradition, is to paint a picture of the leader who carries the authority of God for his community."¹⁴⁰ These biblical motifs are used in the New Testament. "The briefest glance at the Markan transfiguration scene reveals a narrative liberally seasoned with Jewish motifs" pointing mostly to Moses's theophany that includes a six-day timeframe, setting on a mountain, a physical change in the hero, tents, clouds, voices, and the visit of Moses and Elijah "have led many to argue that the transfiguration account is purely a reformulation of Exodus 24 and 1 Kings 19."¹⁴¹ Mark could be described as plagiarizing the Moses and Elijah accounts. The narrative richness is deepened by the allusive quality. The brightness of the divine commission veils the meaning from superficial readers who see plagiarism at work instead of allusion.

Many prophetic commissioning stories transition prophetic authority to a successor. Elijah anoints Elisha. Moses appoints Joshua.¹⁴² Abinadi doesn't anoint his successor, Alma₁, because the narrative doesn't have them meet personally except as they both were present at the prophet's trial. The prophetic call stories in Mosiah not only have a succession but also a bonus narrative; Abinadi is followed by Alma₁ and the latter by Alma₂, so by Mosiah 29 Alma₂ has succeeded his father as high priest and prophet (he is recognized a prophet by Amulek — Alma 8:20 — and the angel — Alma 10:7).

The setting of Alma₂'s commission is one of rebellion. As Alma and Mosiah's sons go about this business, an angel appears, causing the earth to shake and they collapse. Like Paul and Alma₂, both Isaiah and Ezekiel are "thrown to the ground by the impact of the divine manifestation."¹⁴³ Septuagint divine commissions often shift from the reproof stage to the calling by commanding to "arise" and "enter." This is reflected in Acts 9:6 where Paul is told to "arise."¹⁴⁴ Similarly, in Mosiah 27:13 Alma is commanded to "arise and stand forth."¹⁴⁵ After the stunned recipients gain sufficient wits to understand, the angel notes that "the Lord has heard the prayers of his people, and also the prayers of his servant, Alma, who is thy father" (v. 14) and has intervened following that intercessory prayer. Present in many non-biblical theophanies but no biblical examples, the intercessory prayer is usually offered by the prophet.¹⁴⁶

For Alma₂'s commissioning, his father, Alma₁, is the high priest. Alma₁ organizes an intercessory prayer for Alma₂ (Mosiah 27:20–22), and the prayer triggers the angelic intervention (Mosiah 27:14).

After the intervention, the angel specifically commands Alma₂ to “go, and remember the captivity of thy fathers in the land of Helam, and in the land of Nephi; and remember how great things he has done for them; for they were in bondage, and he has delivered them” (Mosiah 27:16). Almost every narrative involving Alma₂ hereafter emphasizes how he keeps the angel's injunction. In Zarahemla, Alma₂ recalls the Zeniff colony's deliverance from Noah and the Lamanites, asking if the audience has similarly remembered, comparing physical deliverance to the spiritual redemption: “Have you sufficiently retained in remembrance the captivity of our fathers? Yea, and have you sufficiently retained in remembrance his mercy and longsuffering towards them? And moreover, have ye sufficiently retained in remembrance that he has delivered their souls from hell?” (Alma 5:4–7). Similarly preaching at Ammonihah, Alma₂ asks, “How have ye forgotten the tradition of your fathers” and the commandments of God (Alma 9:8)? He reminds them of Lehi's deliverance from Jerusalem and the many instances since that God “delivered our fathers out of the hands of their enemies, and preserved them from being destroyed, even by the hands of their own brethren” (Alma 9:10). After meeting with the sons of Mosiah, Alma₂ laments he can't more forcefully declare the gospel. He reminds his readers of the “calling” he received: “Thus we see the great call of diligence of men to labor in the vineyards of the Lord” (Alma 28:14) and has to be satisfied his calling is different from Mosiah's sons (Alma 29:6). This call language recalls his own commissioning scene reported in Mosiah 27: “O that I were an angel, and could have the wish of mine heart, that I might go forth and speak with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth” (Alma 29:1). The angel who commissioned Alma₂ and the sons of Mosiah did exactly that, spoke with an earth-shaking voice. These similarities between Alma₂'s commissioning narrative and this passage are apparent, as shown in Table 3.

Alma₂ can't preach in foreign lands as the sons of Mosiah did, but he commends their work and notes he kept the angel's injunction: “Yea, and I also remember the captivity of my fathers; for I surely do know that the Lord did deliver them out of bondage . . . Yea, I have always remembered the captivity of my fathers” (Alma 29:11–12). This remembrance injunction emerges twice when Alma₂ recounts his conversion experience because that passage is a chiasmic structure. He urges his son Helaman that he

“should do as I have done, in remembering the captivity of our fathers” and their deliverance (Alma 36:2; again in verse 29).

	Mosiah 27	Alma 29
The Angel and the Earth Shaking	The angel spoke with a voice of thunder (verse 11) And did cause the earth to shake (11, 15)	I wish I were an angel; I would declare repentance to every soul with a voice of thunder (1–2) I wish I could speak with the trump of God to shake the earth (1)
Command to Remember	“Go, and remember the captivity of thy fathers in the land of Helam, and in the land of Nephi” and remember the Lord’s deliverance from bondage (16)	“I also remember the captivity of my fathers ... Yea, I have always remembered the captivity of my fathers” (11–12)
Alma’s Calling	Alma teaches the gospel from the time the angel speaks to him (32)	“Why should I desire more than to perform the work to which I have been called?” (6)
Instrument in the Lord’s Hands	Alma and his friends taught the gospel and “thus they were instruments in the hands of God in bringing many to the knowledge of the truth” (32, 36)	“This is my glory, that perhaps I may be an instrument in the hands of God to bring some soul to repentance” (9)

Table 3. Similarities between Mosiah and Alma accounts.

Alma₂ has a second theophany when preaching at Ammonihah. The people completely reject him. While departing, the angel from his commissioning scene stops him (Alma 8:14–17) to redirect and strengthen him. An auxiliary theme in biblical commissioning type scenes is food. Sometimes the theme is feasting and sometimes fasting (both Moses and Elijah fast for forty days at Horeb),¹⁴⁷ and when Moses has the Mt. Horeb theophany with all Israel witnessing his shining face, the feasting theme emerges: “Mentions of food in the type scene can relate to fasting, sacrifice, divine provision, or divine displeasure,” all centered around the people’s breaking of the covenant (1 Kings 18; Judges 6; Ezekiel 3–4; 12:18–19; Exodus 32; Numbers 11).¹⁴⁸ Similarly, when Alma₂ reenters Ammonihah, “he was an hungered” (Alma 8:19) and asks Amulek for food, for Alma₂ “had fasted many days” (Alma 8:26). Not only does Amulek “impart [of his] food” to Alma₂ (Alma 8:20), but he gives bread until Alma₂ “was filled” (Alma 8:22–23).

After repenting, Alma₂ begins a new life phase. His prophetic commission is implied. As noted, both the angel and Amulek call him

a prophet (although his official title is more commonly used — high priest). From his commission, Alma₂ “began from this time forward to teach the people” (Mosiah 27:32) although the rest of the chapter focuses on the sons of Mosiah. Alma₂ uses angel and the earth-shaking imagery from his conversion scene to refer to the “work to which I have been called” (Alma 29:6, 13); he also refers more generally to all who “have been called to this holy calling” of preaching (Alma 13:4). When Alma₂ talks about his life-changing event, he notes that “I have labored without ceasing” (Alma 36:24) since to let others taste the gospel fruit, and in Ammonihah, he notes his calling to preach by the spirit of revelation and prophecy (Alma 8:24) and refers to the preaching he performed after the holy order to which he had been called (Alma 43:1–2). Although understated, the Mosiah 27 experience is the beginning of Alma₂’s prophetic calling.

A standard feature of commissioning scenes has the Lord warning about the difficulty of the task. Commonly, the prophet is comforted that the Lord will strengthen and enable him. Ezekiel 2:6–7 exhorts Ezekiel to fearlessness. Jeremiah 1:8 also contains this admonition which Zimmerli says demonstrates this “to be an essential part of a call-narrative.”¹⁴⁹ Most commissioning scenes anticipate hardship and rejection. “Jeremiah and Ezekiel are told to expect harsh opposition from the people, and Isaiah’s commission to deceive the people in order to bring about their destruction [Isaiah 6:9–11] is hardly the sort of behavior calculated to lead to popular acclaim.”¹⁵⁰ Similarly the narrator notes that as Alma₂ and his friends teach immediately after his call, he faced “much tribulation, being greatly persecuted by those who were unbelievers, being smitten by many of them” (Mosiah 27:32), but always being “supported under trials and troubles of every kind, yea, and in all manner of afflictions” (Alma 36:27, the matching chiasmic element in verse 3).

As with biblical call stories, prophetic commissioning narratives in Mosiah don’t mechanically follow a schema: “The elements of the type scene do not march in lockstep, but they form a constellation-like pattern that adds interpretive value because of their associations.”¹⁵¹ The relationship between the two main iterations of Alma₂’s prophetic commission is sophisticated, as is the relationship between Alma’s commissioning scene and Paul’s. Asserting plagiarism is too naïve to be satisfactory.

The Conversion Paradigm

Conversion stories always
idealize.¹⁵²

From early Christianity conversion stories to the convert arrived yesterday, the narratives presume some pattern moving from a sinful life, through a radical break, leading to a new faith. My Latter-day Saint stake holds missionary firesides monthly; since I started work on this conversion concept, I have attended several. The converts' stories follow a consistent pattern: the investigator meets a member or missionary, the inquirer overcomes resistance, the prospect encounters other obstacles, and then the person receives a testimony and embraces baptism. I happen to believe the stories: I think they are historical despite their formulaic content. "The roots of this understanding of conversion are with the Early Church, and in particular with the prototypical conversions of Paul and Augustine. Each man experienced a dramatic moment of conversion, Paul on the road to Damascus and Augustine in the garden at Milan. Both described conversion as a sudden but permanent change: the rebirth of a sinner."¹⁵³ The pattern begins not with Paul but with OT antecedents. The transformation from Saul to Paul reverberates through history to our day. Justin Martyr tells his conversion story using a "common literary convention" of the philosopher sampling philosophical schools before discovering true philosophy in Christianity.¹⁵⁴ Although Justin's conversion story isn't built on the same pattern as Paul's, "we should bear in mind that neither Paul nor Justin has given us an unretouched account of his experience. All these reports are retrospective, written many years after the event, and all are shaped by conventions both of the larger culture and of the movement the writers have joined, as well as by the rhetorical strategies that led each author to recall his conversion. Thus, while we do not obtain from them a clear picture of the experience of Paul and Justin, we are able to discover in their use of the conversion reports moments in the process of the institutionalization of conversion."¹⁵⁵ So common is the conversion pattern that sociologists often discuss the "model of a typical 'conversion career' that is believed in by the group," and each supplemental narrative adheres to the model and adds innovation.¹⁵⁶ Even the Christian pattern of conversion isn't so original; it fits into larger narrative patterns. "In the Epicurean 'Garden,' if not in other philosophical schools, we find that dimension which, I will argue, is essential to early Christian conversion: the change of primary reference groups, the resocialization into an alternative community."¹⁵⁷

Moderns find conventional narratives problematical. But that is a modern problem, not an ancient one. An example from modern history might helpfully show that literary convention doesn't necessitate an unhistorical judgment. "To be sure, there is often an element of *patterning* in the Bible's portrayal of people and events, but this does not disprove the essential historicity of those portrayals. The life of Abraham Lincoln can be recounted according to the man-of-humble-origin-makes-good pattern, but no one would cite this fact as evidence against the historicity of Lincoln's career. On the contrary, it is Lincoln's historical experience that has contributed to the fondness for such stories."¹⁵⁸ Other Lincoln type scenes of boy born into poverty making his way to the White House are popular. Other variations on the theme include Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. In the Bill Clinton story this theme was embodied in the inaugural campaign video: *The Man from Hope*. The film traced a story of boy born into poverty and a broken family. An abusive stepfather was overcome, and gradual ascent began through education and ambition until the boy became president. Similarly, Barack Obama's parents met as students, and he faced the difficulty of being mixed race and impeded by prejudice. With the father's abandonment, he faced the difficulty of a broken family and suffered through poverty so deep that at times he left his mother to be raised by grandparents. Enduring drug use, street life, and a partially misspent youth, the young man eventually turned things around to attend Harvard and later orchestrated a meteoric political ascent. A variation on this motif is the rags-to-robes type scene for Supreme Court justices, witnessed in the nomination process for Clarence Thomas and Sonia Sotomayor. None of these characters are fictional nor does the typical aspect of the story negate their historicity. It explains why we find the narratives compelling.

I find what are often called deconversion (or conversion to modernity) narratives to be highly stereotyped: think of biblical critics (such as Bart Ehrmann) or critics who have departed Mormonism: David Wright, Edwin Firmage, Jr.,¹⁵⁹ or Martha Nibley Beck. Their stories follow a pattern. Jon Levenson emphasizes that the pattern is common to those who study academic biblical criticism. The applications to the doctoral program in religion he had joined as a faculty member had autobiographical narratives following a two-step pattern. The students discussed their conversion to an uncritical Christian faith and then a second conversion to modernity (in the form of a commitment to historical criticism of the Bible). A colleague reassured Levenson that

after two weeks the program would have all the applicants straightened out as fully catechized adherents to modernity.¹⁶⁰

That these deconversion narratives result in the convert attaching to a new religion called modernity told through highly conventional stories does not mean the stories are fictional. Capps notes that historical characters — Lincoln is the example — often find their meaning in history because their lives adhere to mythic themes. We can't separate their historic from their mythic status. "Oftentimes, myths successfully locate the 'life' within the context of a preexisting model or paradigm. Jesus is perceived as the new Adam, the new Moses, the new Abraham. Whether or not Jesus himself considered his life to be the mirroring of these well-established paradigms, his followers and supporters believed it necessary to interpret his life in terms of these primitive mythical models. His own life, in turn, may itself become an exemplary model, worthy of emulation because it has demonstrated its affinity with traditional models."¹⁶¹ The fit between historic and mythic is imperfect, so adjustments between the two must be made, usually to make the historic particular fit the exemplary pattern. "There is nothing in these adjustments to imply deliberate deception or conscious distortion. It simply means that the model provides the basis for the selective evaluation of the life. Usually, therefore, the highly idiosyncratic aspects of the leader's life and personality are muted or entirely eliminated, and those aspects which coincide with the exemplary model are retained and even highlighted."¹⁶²

Lewis asserts that Americans, having severed themselves from important European sources of mythology, had to reconstitute important stories out of their own resources and history. They needed the myth of a dying god (Osiris, Adonis), and the Lincoln story filled that need. Persistent belief that John Wilkes Booth had survived and escaped after the assassination provided another folklore theme: the myth of the wandering malefactor (the Wandering Jew, Pilate's servant who struck Jesus, the Flying Dutchman, the Mysterious Huntsman).¹⁶³ These archetypes soon attached to the Lincoln narrative, and his assassination on Good Friday bred many familiar archetypes. Many thought "that the Lord had sent Lincoln to earth as His mysterious representative, to die for His people, was a belief that rose from many of the Easter sermons and grew with time to blend into the American faith that the humble backwoodsman had been by some miracle, the savior of the Union."¹⁶⁴ Some thought Lincoln a Moses who guided the people through the deserts of the Civil War,¹⁶⁵ and a Joshua shall be raised up who would

lead the people into the promised land.¹⁶⁶ Others saw his death during Passion Week as an antitype of Jesus being sacrificed on the cross,¹⁶⁷ and Booth as Lincoln's Judas.¹⁶⁸ Lincoln needed to die to expiate the sins of slavery, making Lincoln a martyr and savior figure.¹⁶⁹ But Lincoln wasn't only a type of Christ but also of Moses: "Ministers both black and white pointed out that God had permitted Moses to lead his people to the Promised Land but not to enter it."¹⁷⁰ That Lincoln toured recently conquered Richmond, the Confederate capital, the week before his death also pointed to a Christian parallel: "Death on Good Friday made parallels with Jesus inescapable, not to mention a Christian understanding that saw the president's recent entry into the enemy capital as parallel to Jesus's entry into Jerusalem before crucifixion."¹⁷¹ Like Moses, Lincoln was permitted to see the end of the long journey through the Civil War as it were from Mount Nebo, but not get to enter the Promised Land of a country reunited by charity instead of malice and warfare.

A more complex view of the relationship between history and literature must be grasped in order to make sense of the historical claims of all conventional stories, not the least stories about Lincoln, Alma₂, and Paul.

Reductive Readings and Religious Explanation

Attempts to explain religious behavior in nonreligious terms are ultimately no more empirically verifiable than properly religious interpretations, because they too depend on the foundational assumptions of the investigator.¹⁷²

One can't explain ancient texts (modern texts for that matter) or the past without making pretheoretical and theoretical assumptions, and those assumptions precede the explanatory narratives proper while never being free of ideological entailments:

Every scholarly discipline, whether biblical studies or sociology or literary criticism, of necessity works with a number of foundational assumptions that shape its theoretical work. These may be called control beliefs, or root metaphors, or metaphysical axioms, or worldviews, but they are pervasive and inescapable. To deny that they exist, or to deny that they *necessarily* exist, is a form of positivism — a view of the

academic enterprise which I take to have been thoroughly discredited in the philosophy of science in recent decades.¹⁷³

If the researcher denies the possibility that God can be known by humans to work in history and asserts that true knowledge must be based on empirical observation, that narrative similarity is an indication of plagiarism, such claims are some of these foundational assumptions that “all involve choices of a kind that are difficult to define, but which may be called personal and existential, as well as broadly cultural. I would argue that they are, in fact, ultimately religious.”¹⁷⁴ In explaining the past, the researcher’s presuppositions play a significant role in determining what will count as evidence and what won’t: “Postmodern attacks on the ideal of historical objectivity have proven convincing enough to show that what counts as evidence in any historical investigation depends to a significant degree on the researcher’s prior assumptions.”¹⁷⁵ Constricted ideas about the dichotomy between history and literature narrow the possible interpretations too much to be useful.

What is true of the pursuit of the historical Jesus is just as true of the pursuit of the historical Alma. “There is no story of the historical Jesus that can be isolated from faith convictions, and this is as true for the stories told by ‘scientific, critical historians’ as it is for the story told by the Church. The story of Jesus is always a story of a Jesus of faith.”¹⁷⁶ Some critics adhere to the faith assumption that they can confidently tell the difference between historical stories and fictional ones. But this requires a huge, and too frequently uncritical, leap of faith.

The situation is no different in Mormon studies than in biblical studies that an older model of historical explanation, demonstrated to be inadequate, continues to dominate the subdisciplines: “In spite of the progress made in the philosophy of history in the last third of the twentieth century, and the concomitant innovations in the academic field of historiography, biblical studies in the historical mode has generally continued on the basis of an ‘old historicism’ (i.e., a mode of critical study that tied meaning to historical reconstruction, behind the text) not identical with but with close ties to the historical positivism of the nineteenth century,”¹⁷⁷ that often proceeds uncritical of its own ideological presuppositions and asserts the past can be known, as Ranke is often thought to prescribe “as it really happened.”

Book of Mormon readings need to improve drastically if they are going to prove adequate. A recent study of the Mormon scripture asserts that “if the Book of Mormon is a work of fiction, it is more intricate and clever than has heretofore been acknowledged.”¹⁷⁸ If the reader has a more

complex view of the relationship between history and literature, the task of reading the text becomes even more complicated, and necessary.

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Endnotes

- 1 Brett Christophers, *Positioning the Missionary: John Booth Good and the Confluence of Cultures in Nineteenth-Century British Columbia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1998), 114.
- 2 Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1982), 62–63. Only intellectual sloppiness would permit saying that Alma's story is "in the exact fashion" of Paul's experience. For one thing, the book of Acts presents three different versions of the narrative; some of the details between them are contradictory (and that doesn't count Paul's own first-person account in Galatians). For another, Paul is blinded, not Alma, who is incapacitated and struck dumb. Other differences are apparent upon careful comparison.
- 3 Roger D. Launius notes that Brodie "set the agenda for much of the historical research conducted since that time" in Mormon history. Launius largely sees the legacy to be negative. "From Old to New Mormon History: Fawn Brodie and the Legacy of Scholarly Analysis of Mormonism," *Reconsidering No Man Knows My History: Fawn M. Brodie and Joseph Smith in Retrospect*, ed. Newell G. Bringham (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1996), 196. Launius thinks Brodie's impact has been malignant because her biography focused the research too much for the next couple of generations on issues of Mormon origins. I think Brodie's impact

has been negative because she set an excessively low standard for textual and historical analysis.

- 4 Wayne Ham, "Problems in Interpreting the Book of Mormon as History," *Courage: A Journal of History, Thought and Action* 1, no. 1 (September 1970): 22n8. Ham doesn't stick with the language of allusion but shifts to discussing the material as plagiarism.
- 5 Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 196.
- 6 Brigham Henry Roberts, *New Witness for God*, vol. 3 (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), 512. The heading under which this page falls is titled "Alleged Plagiarism of Historical and Biblical Events."
- 7 Susan Curtis, "Early Nineteenth-Century America and the Book of Mormon," *The Word of God: Essays on Mormon Scripture*, ed. Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 94n10.
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- 11 Robin Lane Fox, *The Unauthorized Version: Truth and Fiction in the Bible* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 399.
- 12 Ibid., 388.
- 13 Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1987), 45. Blomberg is summarizing the standard position in biblical criticism, not expressing his own view.
- 14 Randel Helms, *Gospel Fictions* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1988), 15.
- 15 Ibid., 19.
- 16 Ibid., 69.
- 17 Ibid., 79.

- 18 Randel McCraw Helms, *Who Wrote the Gospels?* (Altadena, CA: Millennium, 1997), 90–91.
- 19 John. A. Darr, *Herod the Fox: Audience Criticism and Lukan Characterization* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 128.
- 20 Ibid., 136.
- 21 E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 84–85.
- 22 Ibid., 96.
- 23 Ibid., 117.
- 24 Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 35–38.
- 25 Ibid., 111–15.
- 26 Ibid., 193–96.
- 27 Ibid., 157–60, 264–81, 292–98.
- 28 Ibid., 217.
- 29 Ibid., 296.
- 30 Thomas L. Thompson and Thomas S. Verenna, eds. “*Is This Not the Carpenter?*” *The Question of the Historicity of the Figure of Jesus* (New York: Routledge, an imprint of Acumen, 2014), 10.
- 31 Ibid., 11. Robert Price’s essay presents the classic modern argument for dismissing the gospel stories because they are rewrites of Old Testament stories. Robert M. Price, “Does the Christ Myth Theory Require an Early Date for the Pauline Epistles?” “*Is This Not the Carpenter?*” *The Question of the Historicity of the Figure of Jesus*, ed. Thomas L. Thompson and Thomas S. Verenna (New York: Routledge, an imprint of Acumen, 2014), 113–14.
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- 33 Ibid., 12.
- 34 Robert Alter, “Imagining History in the Bible,” in *History and ...: Histories within the Human Sciences*, ed. Ralph Cohen and Michael S. Roth (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 70.

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- 39 Ham, “Problems in Interpreting,” 22n8.
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- 45 Ibid.
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- 73 Ostler, "Throne-Theophany," 72.
- 74 Klaus Baltzer, "Considerations Regarding the Office and Calling of the Prophet," *Harvard Theological Review* 61, no. 4 (1968): 568.
- 75 Terence Y. Mullins, "New Testament Commission Forms, Especially in Luke-Acts," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95, no. 4 (1976): 603, citing Benjamin J. Hubbard, *The Matthean Redaction of a Primitive Apostolic Commissioning* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974) 33–65.
- 76 Mullins, "New Testament Commission," 605.
- 77 Charles W. Hedrick, "Paul's Conversion/Call: A Comparative Analysis of the Three Reports in Acts," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100, no. 3 (1981): 415.
- 78 Karl Olav Sandnes, *Paul—One of the Prophets? A Contribution to the Apostle's Self-Understanding* (Tübingen, Ger.: Mohr Siebeck, 1991), 76.
- 79 Habel, "Call Narratives," 317.
- 80 A list of similar stories in the Jewish tradition is given in Raymond F. Collins, "Paul's Damascus Experience: Reflections on the Lukan Account," *Louvain Studies* 11, no. 2 (Fall 1986): 99–118.
- 81 Hedrick, "Paul's Conversion/Call," 416, 423.
- 82 Paula Fredriksen, "Paul and Augustine: Conversion Narratives, Orthodox Traditions, and the Retrospective Self," *Journal of Theological Studies* 37, no. 1 (Apr. 1986): 15–16.

- 83 Mark Alan Wright acknowledges that Lehi's commissioning type scene fits the pattern of prophetic commissioning stories but denies that the pattern applies to Alma: "Unlike Lehi, later prophets in the Book of Mormon — those grounded firmly in the New World — did not receive their commissions according to this ancient Near Eastern pattern; rather, their calls conform to a pattern that can be detected in ancient Mesoamerica," in "According to Their Language, unto Their Understanding: The Cultural Context of Hierophanies and Theophanies in Latter-day Saint Canon," *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 3 (2011): 59. Obviously, I disagree with Wright's assessment.
- 84 István Czachesz, *Commission Narratives: A Comparative Study of the Canonical and Apocryphal Acts* (Leuven, BEL: Peeters, 2007), 2–3.
- 85 The commissioning narrative, as the larger category of the prophetic commissioning story, is more common in the New Testament than it is in the Old Testament. Mullins, "New Testament Commission," 604. The largest number of these commissioning stories occurs in Luke-Acts with 10 examples in Luke and 17 in Acts (609).
- 86 Czachesz, *Commission Narratives*, 88–89.
- 87 Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among the Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 8.
- 88 Ibid., 9.
- 89 Johannes Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1977), 25–26. Note that Alma₂ points out that all who are ordained priests after this holy order (Alma 13:1) were "called and prepared from the foundation of the world" to be "called with [such] a holy calling" (Alma 13:3).
- 90 Ibid., 27–30.
- 91 Ibid., 29.
- 92 Stendahl, *Paul Among the Jews*, 10.
- 93 Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary*, trans. Bernard Noble and Gerald Shinn (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 109.
- 94 Sandnes, *Paul, One of the Prophets*, 64–65.

- 95 Fernando Méndez-Moratalla, *The Paradigm of Conversion in Luke* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 20–21.
- 96 Ibid., 217–21.
- 97 Ibid., 2.
- 98 Wayne A. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 19.
- 99 Segal, *Paul the Convert*, 3.
- 100 Leo C. Ferrari, “Book Eight: Science and the Fictional Conversion Scene,” *A Reader’s Companion to Augustine’s Confessions*, ed. Kim Paffenroth and Robert P. Kennedy (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2003), 133.
- 101 Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 159.
- 102 Ibid., 14–15.
- 103 Fredriksen, “Paul and Augustine,” 3.
- 104 Ferrari, “Book Eight,” 128.
- 105 Ibid., 129. Emphasis in original.
- 106 Ibid., 135. Emphasis in original.
- 107 Ibid., 136.
- 108 Leo Charles Ferrari, “Truth and Augustine’s Conversion Scene,” *Collectanea Augustiniana*, ed. Joseph C. Schnaubelt and Frederick Van Fleteren (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 9. Ferrari, by the way, was a founding member of the Flat Earth Society of Canada, a satirical society through which Ferrari attempted his own fictional engagements.
- 109 Ibid., 12.
- 110 Ibid., 14.
- 111 Ibid., 9.
- 112 Leo Ferrari, “Beyond Augustine’s Conversion Scene,” *Augustine: From Rhetor to Theologian*, ed. Joanne McWilliam (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992), 102.
- 113 Ferrari, “Truth and Augustine,” 12.
- 114 Ferrari, “Beyond Augustine,” 104.

- 115 Ferrari, "Truth and Augustine," 14.
- 116 Fredriksen, "Paul and Augustine," 22–24.
- 117 Ibid., 24.
- 118 Ibid., 26.
- 119 Leo C. Ferrari, *The Conversions of Saint Augustine* (Philadelphia: Villanova University Press, 1984), 57–58. Ferrari details the close correspondences between Paul's conversion narrative and Augustine's on pages 65–68.
- 120 Welch and Ostler have already treated the commissioning story of Lehi, so I don't feel the need to begin that early in the Book of Mormon.
- 121 I have explored the connection of Abinadi's disguise to biblical type scenes of prophet/king confrontations which incorporate disguises. Alan Goff, "Uncritical Theory and Thin Description: The Resistance to History," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 7, no. 1 (1995): 170–207. Abinadi's disguise is at least effective enough that "they knew him not" (Mosiah 12:1) until he announces his name in the same verse.
- 122 Brian Britt, "Prophetic Concealment in a Biblical Type Scene," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2002): 37.
- 123 Ibid., 38.
- 124 Ibid., 43.
- 125 Ibid., 45.
- 126 George W. Savran, *Encountering the Divine: Theophany in Biblical Narrative* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 190–92. Our understanding of Nephi's command for his brothers not to touch him should also be mediated by Abinadi's warning: 1 Nephi 17:48.
- 127 Britt, "Prophetic Concealment," 50.
- 128 Menahem Haran, "The Shining of Moses' Face: A Case Study in Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Iconography," *In the Shelter of Elyon: Essays on Ancient Palestinian Life and Literature in Honor of G. W. Ahlström*, ed. W. Boyd Barrick and John R. Spencer (Sheffield: JSOT, 1984), 159–60.
- 129 Julian Morgenstern, "Moses with the Shining Face," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 2 (1925): 5.

- 130 Britt, "Prophetic Concealment," 52.
- 131 Ibid., 54.
- 132 Sandnes, *Paul, One of the Prophets*, 140, 144.
- 133 Britt, "Prophetic Concealment," 46.
- 134 Ibid.
- 135 Thomas B. Dozeman, "Masking Moses and Mosaic Authority in Torah," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119, no. 1 (2000): 23.
- 136 Ibid., 26.
- 137 Ibid., 27.
- 138 Ibid., 27–28.
- 139 Ibid., 28.
- 140 George W. Coats, *Moses: Heroic Man, Man of God* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1988), 138.
- 141 Candida R. Moss, "The Transfiguration: An Exercise in Markan Accommodation," *Biblical Interpretation* 12, no. 1 (2004): 72.
- 142 Savran, *Encountering the Divine*, 175.
- 143 Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1, a Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24*, ed. Frank Moore Cross and Klaus Baltzer, trans. Ronald E. Clements, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 109.
- 144 Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 59.
- 145 Terence Mullins notes that "the function of the reference to standing or a command to stand or rise is to indicate that the person who stands (or is commanded to stand) is accepted as a representative of the commissioning person," and he cites Paul and Peter as examples. "New Testament Commission Forms," 612.
- 146 Ostler, "Throne-Theophany," 75.
- 147 Britt, "Prophetic Concealment," 46–47.
- 148 Ibid.
- 149 Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, 106.
- 150 Savran, "Theophany as Type Scene," 124.

- 151 Britt, "Prophetic Concealment," 57.
- 152 Meeks, *Origins of Christian Morality*, 23.
- 153 Brent Christophers, *Positioning the Missionary*, 113. Christophers notes that this simple notion of radical change has been modified recently to emphasize the process of conversion in addition to the event.
- 154 Meeks, *Origins of Christian Morality*, 20.
- 155 Ibid., 21.
- 156 Ibid.
- 157 Ibid., 26.
- 158 Long, *The Art of Biblical History*, 114.
- 159 Edwin Firmage, Jr., "Historical Criticism and the Book of Mormon: A Personal Encounter," *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 1–16.
- 160 Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 106.
- 161 Donald Capps, "Lincoln's Martyrdom: A Study of Exemplary Mythic Patterns," *The Biographical Process: Studies in the History and Psychology of Religion*, ed. Frank E. Reynolds and Donald Capps (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), 393.
- 162 Ibid., 394.
- 163 Lloyd Lewis, *Myths after Lincoln* (New York: Readers Club, 1941), 354–55.
- 164 Ibid., 92.
- 165 Ibid., 93.
- 166 Ibid., 94.
- 167 Ibid., 95.
- 168 Ibid., 97.
- 169 Martha Hodes, *Mourning Lincoln* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 108.
- 170 Ibid. 111.

- 171 Ibid.
- 172 Susan Rosa and Dale Van Kley, "Religion and the Historical Discipline: A Reply to Mack Holt and Henry Heller," *French Historical Studies* 21, no. 4 (Fall 1998): 616.
- 173 Al Wolters, "No Longer Queen: The Theological Disciplines and Their Sisters," *The Bible and the University*, vol. 8, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey and C. Stephen Evans (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 59.
- 174 Ibid., 60.
- 175 Rosa and Kley, "Religion and the Historical Discipline," 618.
- 176 C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), vii.
- 177 Joel B. Green, "Which Conversation Shall We Have?" *"Behind" the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 4, ed. Craig Bartholomew, C. Stephen Evans, Mary Healy, and Murray Rae (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 145.
- 178 Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, xv.

