

The Lost 116 Pages



Reconstructing the
Book of Mormon's Missing Stories

Don Bradley

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GREG KOFFORD BOOKS
SALT LAKE CITY, 2019

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Cover design by Loyd Isao Ericson

Published in the USA.

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ISBN 978-1-58958-760-1 (paperback); 978-1-58958-040-4 (hardcover)

Also available in ebook.

Greg Kofford Books
P. O. Box 1362
Draper, UT 84020
www.gregkofford.com
facebook.com/gkbooks
twitter.com/gkbooks

Library of Congress Control Number available upon request.

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In memory of those I have lost,
my little brother Charles
and my parents Edward and Patricia Bradley
&
for those I have found,
my sons Donnie and Nicholas.

INTRODUCTION

LOOKING FOR WHAT WAS LOST

In the early summer of 1828, the sole manuscript copy of centuries of Nephite history that Joseph Smith had translated from the golden plates and lent to his scribe Martin Harris disappeared from Martin's locked drawer and was never seen again. Joseph's response to the theft of this manuscript was pure anguish: "Oh, my God!" his mother recalled him exclaiming, "All is lost! all is lost!"¹

The theft of this manuscript, comprising the first half of Mormon's abridged history of the ancient Nephites, raised fears that the thieves would attempt to use it to discredit any retranslation Joseph might do—fears confirmed by later revelation saying the conspirators had doctored the manuscript's words to create contradictions. Instead of retranslating Mormon's account from this manuscript, Joseph therefore *replaced* it with another, shorter account from Nephi. The resulting book, though still published under Mormon's name was now a hybrid. Mormon's original design for the book had been upended, and Joseph Smith's earliest words of written revelation were forever gone.

For Latter-day Saints ever since, the Book of Mormon's "lost 116 pages" have taken on a kind of mythical status, as if everybody knows part of the Book of Mormon is missing, but nobody knows what was in it. The surrounding mythos has spawned its own narrative of heroes and villains, with Martin Harris's wife Lucy being cast in the role of villain (or, for opponents of the faith, hero) for purportedly taking the manuscript and destroying it. The episode is often treated by former Mormons, and by irreverent observers like the creators of the "South Park" series, as if it is completely obvious that the skeptical ("smart, smart, smart") Lucy Harris burned the manuscript and that Joseph Smith's failure to reproduce the manuscript word for word displays a disingenuousness in his report of translating it. For Latter-day Saints, the manuscript loss and replacement take a very different meaning, displaying the hand of providence in Joseph Smith's life. The lost manuscript hovers spectrally at the edges of Latter-day Saint consciousness as an ever-present absence, and every once in a while rumors emerge that the hole has been filled by the lost pages being found.

1. Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book : A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir*, 414–16.

The Story Behind This Book

As a child I remember learning in my Primary classes that Joseph Smith lost the first many pages of the Book of Mormon, and I recall asking, baffled, “What was in them?” That childhood curiosity later evolved into an effort to understand the part of the Book of Mormon we *do* have. What insight could I gain into the second half of Mormon’s narrative by better understanding the first? How would this detail enhance my understanding of the small plates of Nephi account used to replace the first half of Mormon’s account? Fifteen years ago I began hunting for work by other scholars on the subject and found mostly just a single brief book chapter devoted to the subject.²

Yet there *were* people who knew what was in the lost manuscript. Joseph Smith had translated it. Martin Harris and members of his family had read it. Had they shared with others any of the missing text’s contents? Mormon had narrated the remainder of his account with occasional backward glances to his missing narrative, and the authors of what have become known as “the small plates of Nephi” that replaced this narrative had summarized it. What clues lay hidden in those accounts? If I gathered these clues like the pieces of a picture puzzle, what pictures of missing narrative would start to emerge? I assembled the known clues, dug for more, and analyzed what I’d found.

Methodology for Reconstructing the Missing Stories

The Book of Mormon’s lost pages are not the first notable historical manuscript to go missing, and I am not the first scholar to attempt to reconstruct a missing text. The work of reconstructing lost texts has a long and venerable history. Scholars have many times attempted to map out missing portions of an ancient manuscript or extrapolate the overall plot of an ancient narrative from its surviving fragments or reflections in later texts. Such problems are confronted by scholars in a range of historical disciplines.

Biblical scholars seek to reconstruct the “J,” “E,” “P,” and “D” strands of tradition behind the five books of Moses and the “Q” text, a common source that can be discerned behind the shared material in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.³ Classicists frequently work with fragmentary manuscripts that

2. While brief, this chapter was also extraordinarily useful, providing an initial starting point for my research. John A. Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book: Insights from a Book of Mormon Scholar*, 37–52.

3. For a description and examples of work on the textual strands within the Pentateuch, see Richard Elliott Friedman’s *Who Wrote the Bible?* and *The Hidden Book in the Bible*. For work on “Q,” see James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffmann, and John S. Kloppenborg, eds., *The Critical Edition of Q: Synopsis including the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Mark and Thomas with English, German, and French Translations of Q and Thomas*.

require a *restitutio textus*.⁴ Scholars of Chinese history and literature have engaged similar puzzles since at least 1772, when work began on the reconstruction of the great Yongle Encyclopedia.⁵ Arabists and Islamicists attempt to reconstruct early Muslim sources and lost portions of medieval literary works.⁶ Efforts to reconstruct the contents of missing texts have even been made in a Book of Mormon context, with BYU religion professor S. Kent Brown having attempted to reconstruct from the Book of Mormon's internal clues what was in Lehi's personal record spoken of by Nephi—a record that (as discussed in Chapter 6) overlaps the lost manuscript.⁷

Despite the frequency with which the problem of missing texts occurs for investigators of the past, a methodology for addressing the problem has yet to be systematically developed. As one practitioner has observed, efforts to “work out general principles of procedure” for textual reconstruction have achieved “only small results” so far, possibly because the methods vary widely depending on the text and because it is difficult to explain the methods used without demonstrating them in practice.⁸

Some of the methods used in this book, developed by the author, bear considerable similarity to those used in the reconstruction of classical Greek and Roman plays. A key method in both is to identify narrative patterns or structures in other texts by the same author (e.g., Mormon's available abridgment) or in works the author used as models (e.g., the biblical accounts of the Exodus drawn on by Mormon) and then situate the surviving fragments at the appropriate places in the structure. Thus, for example, Utah State University historian of ancient theater Mark L. Damen, extrapolates missing sequences of action from gaps in the plays of Menander based on how the playwright structures such sequences in his surviving plays and from the ways later playwrights modeled their own plays on Menander's.⁹ Repeated structures in Mormon's

4. See, for example, the papers by Mark L. Damen discussed and cited below.

5. For details on this Herculean task and the emperor who decreed it, see Mark C. Elliott, *Emperor Qianlong: Son of Heaven, Man of the World*. Regarding similar efforts in the nineteenth century and today to reconstruct historic Chinese texts, see Edward L. Shaughnessy, *Rewriting Early Chinese Texts*, 195, 256; Robert F. Campany, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth: A Translation and Study of Ge Hong's Traditions of Divine Transcendents*; and T. H. Barrett, “On the Reconstruction of the *Shenxian zhuan*,” 229–35.

6. Lawrence I. Conrad, “Recovering Lost Texts: Some Methodological Issues,” 258–63; and Ella Landau-Tasseron, “On the Reconstruction of Lost Sources.”

7. S. Kent Brown, “Lehi's Personal Record: Quest for a Missing Source,” 19–42.

8. Campany, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth*, 127n29.

9. Mark L. Damen, “Translating Scenes: Plautus' Adaptation of Menander's Dis Exapaton,” 205–31; and Mark L. Damen, “Reconstructing the Beginning of Menander's Adelphoi (B),” 67–84. Dr. Damen graciously corresponded with me about

abridgment of Nephite history and the Book of Mormon's repetition of the typological structures of the Bible make it possible to similarly extrapolate from the patterns of clues left for us within the published Book of Mormon text and combine these with external sources that provide fragments of the lost narrative.

Patterns in the available Book of Mormon narrative and in the way it appropriates biblical narrative provide templates for ordering the various narrative fragments into cohesive wholes. So, for instance, the presence of a Mosaic Exodus pattern in the available narrative of Lehi's journey makes this narrative a plausible context into which we can plug the report from someone who interviewed Joseph Smith Sr. of the building of a "tabernacle" in the wilderness early in lost narrative (see Chapter 8).

The presence in the current Book of Mormon of a brief small-plates replacement for the lost manuscript provides a narrative map on which many of the fragments of the lost manuscript's narrative can be pinned to provide a fuller picture of the early Nephite narrative. So, for instance, details from the extant text's narrative callbacks (such as the reference to Aminadi interpreting the writing on the wall of the temple in Alma 10:2) and from external sources (such as a statement by Martin Harris's brother about Muloch [see Chapter 14]), can be added at appropriate points to the small plates narrative.

The reasoning used in this process is known as inference to the best explanation.¹⁰ Inference to the best explanation, frequently used in science and the staple of historical thinking, involves developing the simplest, most elegant and comprehensive model to explain the traces of the past left to us in historical sources.

While this book presents several new historical sources that are key to its reconstruction—sources I will begin introducing in Chapters 6 and 7—it also makes new use of older sources. Many of these are available in Dan Vogel's enormously useful *Early Mormon Documents* series. Still others appear in the Book of Mormon itself. Bringing new analytical questions to these old sources can enable them to speak afresh, disclosing previously unknown truths about the past, like an old acquaintance who has never related a certain story simply because we have never asked the right question. As philosopher of history Robin G. Collingwood explained, growth in our knowledge of the past does *not* come primarily through the finding of new documents; rather:

The enlargement of historical knowledge comes about mainly through finding how to use as evidence this or that kind of perceived fact which historians have hitherto thought useless to them.¹¹

the methods he employs in his work. Another analogous problem brought to my attention by classical historian Trevor Luke would be reconstructing lost portions of the ancient Greek "epic cycle."

10. Peter Lipton, *Inference to the Best Explanation*. It is also termed abductive reasoning.

11. Robin G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 247.

Every study has its limitations. One limitation of this book is the necessary stylistic infelicity that the methodology of reconstruction requires that some evidence used in earlier reconstructions must be repeated again in later reconstructions where it is relevant. Another limitation is that the reasonable size of a single volume prevents me from laying out fully everything that can be gleaned about the Book of Mormon's lost text from the sources I have examined thus far.

The certainty of the conclusions that I can draw from those sources varies, with some—such as Ishmael's lineage from the tribe of Ephraim—approaching complete certainty, and others—such as the presence of the land of Sidom in the lost manuscript—being less certain. *All* historical reconstruction is probabilistic, and some facets of the past can be reconstructed with greater certainty than others. Because the models used in this book are probabilistic, they are capable of being improved indefinitely, and doubtless will be over time—including by some readers of this book.

Addressing Both Latter-day Saint and Non-Latter-day Saint Audiences

Writing as a Latter-day Saint, expecting to be read to a good extent by other Latter-day Saints, and yet wanting this work to also be accessible to non-Latter-day Saints and contribute to wider scholarship involves decisions on how to balance various audiences and concerns. Given my own faith, and that this faith will be shared by many of my readers, I have elected to write about a work we mutually embrace as scripture in the language of faith. I speak of the golden plates as real physical objects, of Joseph Smith translating those plates, and of Mormon as a real voice speaking from the narrative in those plates. For non-Latter-day Saint readers, this particular language of faith may be a foreign tongue. Yet in other ways I have framed the work with these readers in mind.

As a scholar of religious studies and an historian of religion specializing in nineteenth-century America, rather than an archaeologist or historian of the ancient world, my methods are best suited to getting *at* the Book of Mormon text rather than to getting *behind* the text. Recognizing that my own expertise is focused in this way, and that a number of my readers will not be Latter-day Saints, I have made every effort to limit my work to reconstructing the Book of Mormon's lost contents using evidence compelling for both Latter-day Saints and non-Latter-day Saints.¹² This means omitting certain kinds of

12. Thus, for instance, when I include arguments in this book hinging on the Hebrew meaning of the name *Benjamin* in Chapter 15, I have first verified that this meaning, “son of the right hand,” would have been available in biblical commentaries

potential evidence and focusing on other kinds. So, for instance, there may be Mesoamerican cultural practices that (given a Mesoamerican setting for the Book of Mormon) could illuminate the Book of Mormon's descriptions of the Nephite discovery of (the scrying instrument) the interpreters. Yet, since that Mesoamerican context is not one that all readers can agree is relevant, I have excluded such arguments. To present arguments that will work for readers across a range of worldviews, I have attempted to substantially limit, and where possible omit, from my arguments a presumed context of origin—something on which readers of various stripes will not agree. A seeming exception to this is that I frequently place the Book of Mormon in the world of the Bible. However, since it seems to me incontrovertible that the Book of Mormon both begins within the Bible and emerged in a world where the Bible was well known, this strikes me as both a well-grounded and a necessary context in which to examine it.

My methodology for reconstructing the Book of Mormon's lost text *does* assume that this text was consistent and coherent—an assumption that is both necessary¹³ and warranted.¹⁴ Yet, since that methodology only attempts to get *at* the text and not *behind* it, it does not require the reader to adopt a particular worldview as a precondition for understanding what was in the Book of Mormon's lost manuscript.

In this way, my approach in this volume is similar to that of textual critics of the Bible. A textual critic working on the Resurrection narrative at the end of the Gospel of Mark can take the reader *to* what the earliest text said, but cannot take the reader *beyond* what the earliest text said, to the actual Easter events behind it. I have endeavored to similarly take the reader *to* the account offered in the lost manuscript.¹⁵

of Joseph Smith's time in addition to being evident to speakers of biblical Hebrew. Similarly, arguments employed herein that depend on the details of the biblical world may be understood by non-Latter-day Saint readers as indicating that Joseph Smith was an unusually close reader of the Bible.

13. As Wolfgang Iser argued, the process of reading or interpreting a text assumes that the text has a fundamental coherence and seeks to find that coherence. Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, 125.

14. Literary analyses of the Book of Mormon by Grant Hardy and John Christopher Thomas, among others, have demonstrated that the Book of Mormon can be profitably approached as a coherent narrative populated by self-consistent characters and narrated by personae who demonstrate distinctive motives and voices. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide*; John Christopher Thomas, *A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon: A Literary and Theological Introduction*.

15. For further discussion of the methodological issues involved in doing history tied to religious claims, see the Introduction to Don Bradley, "American Proto-Zionism and the 'Book of Lehi': Recontextualizing the Rise of Mormonism."

The Structure of this Book

This book is divided into two parts. Part I, comprising Chapters 1-5, consists of a history *of* the lost pages. Chapters 1 and 2 narrate the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, telling the familiar story in an unfamiliar way in order to introduce background material needed to make sense of the lost manuscript's translation (Chapter 3) and theft (Chapter 4). Chapter 5 describes the physical manuscript itself, including an assessment of how much material it contained, arguing that this is more than has been assumed.

Part II, comprising chapters 6-15, consists of my reconstruction of the history *in* the lost pages—its missing stories. Chapter 6 describes the sources that have been identified as standing behind the lost manuscript and how this information can be used to help reconstruct some of the lost stories. This chapter also describes other sources used in the reconstruction, as well as more of the methodology of reconstruction, and introduces the meta-narrative of building a new, American Israel that runs across the succeeding five chapters. These chapters, 7-11, reconstruct the events in Lehi and Nephi's building of this new nation of Israel, including their exodus from Jerusalem at Passover, their construction of a new "tabernacle" in the wilderness, their division into a nation of seven tribes, their "conquest" of the new land, and their re-establishment of sacrificial worship in Nephi's temple. Chapters 12 and 13 make close use of the Book of Mormon's internal evidence to describe what can be known from the middle of the lost manuscript, including the narrative of the prophet Aminadi reading God's writing from the wall of the temple (Alma 10:2). The available evidence overwhelming focuses on the early part of the lost Book of Mormon text and the late part of the lost text. No identified nineteenth century source describes events from the *middle* of the lost manuscript, making this middle portion a much more obscure period in Nephite history.¹⁶ Chapter 14 pieces together the lost manuscript's crescendo, the little known but vital story of Mosiah₁, leader of the Nephite exodus to Zarahemla and founder of the dynasty to which King Benjamin was heir. Chapter 15 fleshes out the early reign of Benjamin from the lost manuscript's final chapters and brings the narrative to the beginning of our available portion of Mormon's abridgment at Mosiah 1:1. A conclusion rounds out the book by distilling from the work of reconstruction new insights on the Book of Mormon and the Restoration.

16. The dearth of sources on the lost manuscript's middle contents is probably due to what are known as serial position effects in memory, including the primacy effect and the recency effect, by virtue of which people tend, respectively, to recall early or later items in a series or narrative better than middle items. My thanks to Nicholas Bradley for contributing to this insight.

Key Terms and Use of Scripture Citations

A number of key terms in this work merit clarification. The term “Original Manuscript” means the translation manuscript for the Book of Mormon produced by Joseph Smith’s scribes at his dictation. Although the Book of Mormon’s *lost* manuscript fits this definition, I generally reserve the term Original Manuscript for the *extant* portion of the translation manuscript. (The term “extant,” often used in history and textual criticism, means “surviving” or “available.” The extant portion of the Book of Mormon is the part available to us now, as distinguished from the lost manuscript.) The term “Printer’s Manuscript” refers to a copy made from the Original Manuscript so the book could be typeset without once-again putting the manuscript in jeopardy of theft.

Although I generally use the term “lost manuscript” for the missing Book of Mormon text, the term has its disadvantages. It is awkward to speak of Joseph Smith translating “the lost manuscript,” since the manuscript obviously wasn’t lost while he was translating it. So when speaking of the manuscript *before* its loss I will generally refer to it as “the *initial* Book of Mormon” “manuscript,” or “the initial manuscript.” For the sake of smoothing out prose, I sometimes also refer to the lost manuscript as the “lost pages” as well.

“Book of Lehi” is another term used in this book, one that has sometimes been used a name for the entire lost manuscript. As used in this book the name “Book of Lehi” refers more specifically to the lost manuscript’s opening portion, which (as discussed in Chapter 5) appears to have been titled “The Book of Lehi” and to have narrated the story of Lehi and perhaps also the subsequent story of his son Nephi.

Another set of unfamiliar names readers may encounter in these pages includes variant spellings for names from the Book of Mormon. As explained at appropriate points in the text, these variant spellings—particularly “Muloch” instead of “Mulek”—are the spellings given in the earliest manuscripts, as identified by Book of Mormon Critical Text director Royal Skousen.

Another usage of names that needs to be clarified is the use of first names for some figures involved in the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. After introducing the major players in the historical narrative surrounding the lost manuscript, I will generally use their first names. These historical figures are closely familiar to most of those who have read the Book of Mormon. The use of first names will also help to avoid confusion arising from the fact that people in the narrative often belong to the same family. Thus the name “Harris” could refer to Martin Harris or to his wife Lucy Harris.¹⁷

17. Note that Joseph Smith Sr. in my narrative will always be designated as such. Joseph Jr. will only be designated as such when necessary to distinguish him from Joseph Sr.

Scripture is cited frequently in this book, so it is necessary to spell out that all Bible quotations below are from the King James Version unless otherwise noted, and all italics in scriptural quotations are my own. Books of scripture cited parenthetically are abbreviated according to standard abbreviations used in the published standard works of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

For ease of distinction, this book follows standard conventions of capitalizing certain terms from the Bible, such as Exodus, Tabernacle, Promised Land, and Conquest. Using these conventions will help distinguish *Lehi's* exodus from the biblical Exodus, the Nephite promised land from the biblical Promised Land, and so forth.

The Purposes of this Book

As should be clear from everything said above, this book is a work of scholarship and not of inspiration. My conclusions, like all empirical conclusions, are subject to revision as the evidence grows. We will learn to make better use of the sources we have, including closer reading of our available Book of Mormon text. New sources will also be found that will require revision of existing interpretations—and also enable the confirmation and expansion of those interpretations. Already some of these working models for interpreting the evidence provide powerful explanatory tools in accounting for the data and integrating our understandings of the Book of Mormon.

My reconstructions of the lost manuscript are obviously not scripture, yet they may, and hopefully will, shed *light* on scripture. I personally believe that key pieces of the lost manuscript's content (most obviously those in the small plates but also those given in an interview by the Prophet's father, and others) were providentially preserved for that very purpose—so we could better understand the Book of Mormon text we have.

On one level, this is a book about the Book of Mormon's *lost* text, an attempt to satisfy some of my own thirst and that of others for knowledge about Joseph Smith's earliest recorded revealed text—the lost half of Mormon's abridgment. On another level this is a book about the Book of Mormon's *familiar* text, the canonized text that we as Latter-day Saints read, study, pray about, share with others, and seek to apply in our lives. The more we know about the missing first part of Mormon's book, the better we will grasp the portion we have. My greatest hope in presenting this book to the world is that better understanding the lost manuscript will enable us to better comprehend, appreciate, delve into, and live out this other testament of Jesus Christ, the Book of Mormon.

CHAPTER 13

GOD AND AMINADI IN THE TEMPLE

As the Nephites' deviations from the commandments grew more extreme, God's covenant curse on the land for violating the commandments became more threatening and the time for the exodus of the righteous and the destruction of the city of Nephi loomed nearer.

Two centuries after Lehi left his first land of inheritance in quest of a new one, the blessing clause of the covenant had been strikingly fulfilled, with the Lord verifying his promise to the Nephites that if they would keep the commandments they would prosper in the land. The Lord had "preserved them from falling into the hands of their enemies" (Omni 1:6). Yet by the late 200s, a generation before the destruction of "the more wicked part" of the Nephites in the year 320, even Jacob's heir in keeping the prophetic record, Omni, was by his own account "a wicked man" who had not kept the commandments (v. 2). Another measure of the people's spiritual state in Omni's day is how much responsibility he attributes to God in ensuring their security. When Omni reports that he had "fought much with the sword to preserve my people, the Nephites, from falling into the hands of their enemies, the Lamanites" (v. 2), he uses language that elsewhere ascribes *God* to having "kept and preserved them from falling into the hands of their enemies" (v. 6; cf. Mosiah 1:14, 2:31). As the Nephites continued their slide into wickedness, the burden of preserving them in safety progressively shifted from God's shoulders onto their own.

In Omni's generation, the Nephites succeeded at self-preservation. He fathered two sons who also survived the destruction of 320 and, in succession, kept the small plates. The second of these sons he named "Chemish," a slight variation on the name of the god Chemosh, to whose idolatrous worship the children of Israel were tempted, perhaps reflecting an amalgamation in Omni's day of the monotheistic faith of Israel with idolatrous traditions (1 Kgs. 11:7, 33; 2 Kgs. 23:13).

The first son, Amaron, inscribed on the plates a brief overview of the divine judgment visited on the Nephites 320 years after the Lord led Lehi out of Jerusalem:

Behold, it came to pass that three hundred and twenty years had passed away, and the more wicked part of the Nephites were destroyed, for the Lord would not suffer, after he had led them out of the land of Jerusalem and kept and preserved them from falling into the hands of their enemies, yea, he would not suffer that the words should not be verified, which he spake unto our fathers, saying

that: Inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall not prosper in the land; wherefore, the Lord did visit them in great judgment; nevertheless, he did spare the righteous that they should not perish, but did deliver them out of the hands of their enemies. (Omni 1:5–7)

Though Amaron's brief account does not specifically identify how or from whom the righteous were delivered, it hints at the larger course of events. In other places where the Book of Mormon speaks of people being delivered "out of the hands of" their enemies, those delivered had either been in bondage to their enemies or threatened with annihilation by a much more formidable enemy force (eg. Mosiah 7:15; 3 Ne. 4:8).

The usual enemies from whom the Nephites required deliverance were the Lamanites. But marauding Lamanite armies, ever equal-opportunity destroyers, may not have discriminated between "the righteous" and "the more wicked part" of the inhabitants of the land of Nephi. Other possible scenarios of destruction may include Nephite civil war, in which the righteous either do not participate, or they heed prophetic warning and temporarily relocate to beyond the city while destructions occur. The author's spare description of the event leaves the temporal details of this destruction ambiguous, allowing for these and other possible military scenarios. However, it makes its spiritual cause crystal clear. Amaron explicitly ascribes the destruction to his people's refusal to keep the commandments:

Inasmuch as ye will not keep my [the Lord's] commandments ye shall not prosper in the land; wherefore, the Lord did visit them in great judgment. (Omni 1:7)

The lesson of this destruction, for those who did not die demonstrating it, is that God's *punitive* clause in the prosperity covenant, like His positive promises, was in earnest. Having fulfilled His blessing to Nephi, that if the Nephites kept the commandments they would prosper, God would not allow the accompanying curse He had spoken to go unfulfilled but would write it in stone and verify it in deed.

Based on Book of Mormon precedent and principle, the people of the land of Nephi should have been warned repeatedly, and then with urgent finality, that in resisting the commandments they were ripening for destruction (cf. Alma 45:16; Hel. 8:26; Ether 2:9, 15). The pattern of God first sending prophets to warn His people, intensifying the warning as the end draws near, and sometimes also sending a deliverer to lead the righteous to safety are played out in the destruction of the city of Ammonihah, the destruction following the crucifixion of Christ, and the final destructions of both the Jaredites and the Nephites. Nephi, the son of Lehi, even raised these patterns to the level of general principles:

And as one generation hath been destroyed among the Jews because of iniquity, even so have they been destroyed from generation to generation according to their iniquities; and never hath any of them been destroyed save it were foretold them by the prophets of the Lord. (2 Ne. 25:9; cf. Amos 3:7)

And he raiseth up a righteous nation, and destroyeth the nations of the wicked. And he leadeth away the righteous into precious lands, and the wicked he destroyeth, and curseth the land unto them for their sakes. (1 Ne. 17: 37–38)

We are told in the small plates of warnings to the people of Nephi a century in advance of the year 320 (Jarom 1:10), but we are not specifically informed on how and by whom they were warned on the eve of their destruction. Mormon's later abridgment, however, gives us a strong candidate for a prophet on whom the burden of this final warning fell: Aminadi.

Amulek's Forefather Aminadi

A man of commerce who became a prophet, Amulek had been a long-time inhabitant of the city of Ammonihah before Alma₂, high priest over the church, arrived to preach repentance. Amulek and Alma₂ were the two prophets who gave a final warning of destruction to Ammonihah, an American sister city to Sodom and Gomorrah, sharing both their wickedness and their fate. In introducing himself as a preacher of repentance to his fellow citizens, Amulek emphasized his stature in the community as “a man of no small reputation” who had “acquired much riches by the hand of my industry” and had “many kindreds and friends” (Alma 10:4). But before appealing to his individual merits he grounded his status in a recitation of his lineage, highlighting his descent from Aminadi:¹

I am Amulek; I am the son of Gidanah, who was the son of Ishmael, who was a descendant of Aminadi; and it was that same Aminadi who interpreted the writing which was upon the wall of the temple, which was written by the finger of God. And Aminadi was a descendant of Nephi, who was the son of Lehi, who came out of the land of Jerusalem, who was a descendant of Manasseh, who was the son of Joseph who was sold into Egypt by the hands of his brethren. (Alma 10:2–3)

Amulek's emphasis on his ancestor Aminadi and explanation that his Aminadi was “that same Aminadi” who interpreting the writing on the wall show that the story was a familiar one and that Aminadi was a man of stature in Nephite history—as Brant Gardner put it, “an illustrious ancestor (Aminadi) known by name to all those present.” Despite having known but little of religion previous to Alma₂'s arrival, Amulek was keenly aware of his ancestor's role in the writing-on-the-wall incident (Alma 10:5). Aminadi's

1. Brant Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 4:164

role in the incident was also sufficiently renowned that even the citizens of Ammonihah, an irreligious people on whose hearts “Satan had gotten great hold” and who rejected as “foolish traditions” the tenets of the church, could be assumed to know it (Alma 8:9, 11).

Just what is the story of Aminadi that was familiar to the Nephites but only touched on in our surviving Book of Mormon text? As scant as the mention of Aminadi’s story is in our text, even this brief allusion provides information with which we can begin to place Aminadi in his proper time, place, and circumstance to recover his prophetic message.

The Time of Aminadi

Commentators on Alma 10 who have attempted to locate the Aminadi story chronologically and geographically have placed it at the temple in the city of Nephi prior to Mosiah₁’s exodus to Zarahemla. Nineteenth-century Book of Mormon scholar George Reynolds argued that although Amulek’s story gives no record of when Aminadi lived, “it must have been in the land of Nephi before the Nephites migrated to Zarahemla as he was at least four generations separated from Amulek.”² Brant Gardner suggests that this event may have “occurred before Mosiah₁ led his people out of the city of Nephi.”³ And Verneil Simmons places it in the city of Nephi at a time when “destruction was imminent.”⁴

The text provides clues by which we can judge these surmises. First, Aminadi’s role in the writing-on-the-wall incident logically places it in the land of Nephi before the exodus to Zarahemla and the subsequent reign of Mosiah₁. Given Mosiah₁ and his successors’ prophetic ability to interpret sacred writings, there would have been no need for Aminadi to interpret the writing on the temple wall during their reigns.

Second, Amulek’s personal and genealogical self-revelations imply a chronology that would put his ancestor Aminadi in the land of Nephi before Mosiah’s exodus. When he describes himself as having children (Alma 10:11) and as “a man of no small reputation,” with “many kindreds and friends,” and having “acquired much riches by the hand of my industry” (v. 4), Amulek implies his age. A family, an extensive social network, and acquired wealth are products of time, and Amulek’s possession of all these make him likely not less than forty at the time of his preaching (around year 508 from Lehi’s exodus, or 82 BC), placing his likely time of birth before year 479.

2. George Reynolds, *A Dictionary of the Book of Mormon, Comprising its Biographical, Geographical and other Proper Names*, 54.

3. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 4:164

4. Verneil Simmons, *Peoples, Places and Prophecies: A Study of the Book of Mormon*, 161

The next chronological clue Amulek provides is that Aminadi is a paternal-line ancestor four or more generations distant. After stating that he is the son of Gidanah,⁵ who was the son of Ishmael, Amulek reports that Ishmael was a “descendant” of Aminadi, placing Aminadi at least two generations prior to Ishmael and at least four generations prior to Amulek. Without a specific number for the length of each of these generations, the best proxy is the *average* length of a paternal generation, which several recent studies in anthropology and population genetics have put at about thirty-five years.⁶

Taking the average as our guide, an Aminadi living four or more generations before Amulek would have been born before the mid-300s in the Nephite calendar and thus prior to Mosiah’s exodus from Nephi to Zarahemla at about Nephite year 400 (ca. 200 BC). Thus, George Reynolds was correct when estimating that Aminadi’s generational distance from Amulek placed his ministry “in the land of Nephi before the migration to Zarahemla.

Aminadi as a Wisdom Figure

The prominence accorded to Aminadi for giving the interpretation of the writing on the wall marks it as an extraordinary achievement, one identifying him and establishing his reputation as a prophet. He interpreted the writing on the wall for the people of Nephi when others, like the priests in whose domain it appeared, could not. However, his revelatory act was not entirely unique and is part of a broader pattern of incidents in which Hebrew prophets, biblical and Nephite, acted as wisdom figures or as interpreters of the hidden meanings of divine manifestations. Identifying this pattern of wisdom figures and situating Aminadi in it will help flesh out his story.

We can discern this wisdom-figure pattern in the narratives of the biblical prophet Daniel, the patriarch Joseph, and of the Book of Mormon prophet Abinadi. While varying in their details, these narratives share a common core: a captive prophet displays divine wisdom before the king by interpreting what the king’s “wise” men cannot and accurately forewarning of calamity. Looking at the specific instances of prophetic interpretation allows us to draw connections between each of these three warning prophets and Aminadi.

The strongest and most obvious scriptural parallel to Aminadi’s interpretation of the writing on the wall of the temple is the story of Daniel interpreting the writing on the wall of the palace of Belshazzar, king of Babylon. During a great feast Belshazzar brought out the gold and silver vessels that his father Nebuchadnezzar had plundered from Solomon’s temple for his revelers

5. Although the name of Amulek’s father is given as “Giddonah” in printed editions of the Book of Mormon since 1830, it appears in manuscript as spelled here.

6. Donn Devine, “How Long Is a Generation?”

to drink wine from while they praised “gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone” (Dan. 5:1–4). In an untimely crashing of the sacrilegious merriment, there “came forth fingers of a man’s hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaister of the wall of the king’s palace: and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote” (v. 5). At the appearance of the hand, the king cried out for “the wise men of Babylon.” “But,” the author tells us, “they could not read the writing, nor make known to the king the interpretation thereof” (vv. 6–8). The king sent for Daniel, a Jew taken captive from Jerusalem during the Babylonian conquest who had established his reputation with Nebuchadnezzar for the “interpreting of dreams, and shewing of hard sentences, and dissolving of doubts” (v. 12). Daniel then interpreted the writing to portend Belshazzar’s death and the fall of his kingdom, both of which occurred immediately “in that night” (vv. 13–31).⁷ This successful prophecy, along with his previous interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, established Daniel as a prophet of God and the “revealer of secrets,” resulting in him receiving a high political rank (2:47; 5:29).

The parallels between Daniel’s story and even the small amount we know of Aminadi’s are substantial. In each, a supernatural hand appears and writes on the wall with its finger or fingers. This writing cannot be understood by ordinary persons or even the learned wise men and priests but must be interpreted by the prophet. These two appearances of supernatural writing, despite their differing locations, also share a temple theme with one of them occurring in the temple and the other being prompted by the profaning of temple relics.

Although Aminadi’s reported New World experience as a wisdom figure strongly parallels Daniel’s experience in the Old World, both hark back to much earlier biblical precedent established by Aminadi’s patriarchal ancestor Joseph of Egypt.⁸ Joseph, who interpreted Pharaoh’s dream of seven fat cattle and seven lean cattle to predict seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine, provided the earliest model of the prophet-interpreter (Gen. 41). Aminadi’s story, even in the broad strokes with which it is sketched in our Book of Mormon, follows Joseph’s blueprint. In each, a prophet is interpreting for others a divine manifestation they could not interpret for themselves. This parallel may account for Amulek’s decision to emphasize Joseph among Aminadi’s ancestors, rather than patriarchs such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

7. The penalty of death follows naturally from the profaning of the temple relics. Under the Law of Moses the priests were told that none but they were to have contact with the temple vessels “that neither they, nor ye also, die” (Num. 18:3).

8. Although Daniel’s experience likely preceded Aminadi’s by some two and a half centuries, neither Aminadi nor the audience of his prophetic warnings would have been familiar with that earlier event, since it occurred after Lehi and his colony set out from Palestine for the New World.

Joseph's experience also established a model for Daniel's. Anticipating Daniel by well over a millennium, Joseph too was an exile from Palestine and a captive who was called upon to interpret a revelatory experience for the king that his wise men could not, who interpreted that experience as a harbinger of calamity, and whose reputation as a prophet and position as the king's advisor was established by this incident (Gen. 41:37–45).⁹

Finally, a Book of Mormon wisdom figure on the pattern of both Joseph and Daniel is Abinadi, who prophesied some generations after Aminadi. Abinadi, like Daniel, stood in opposition to a wicked king and in competition with his priests. He foretold the downfall and death of King Noah, who “did not keep the commandments of God, but . . . did walk after the desires of his own heart” (Mosiah 11:2). When captured, Abinadi was tried by the king and priests for prophesying against Noah and preaching of Christ.¹⁰ In the course of the trial, Noah's priests asked Abinadi to interpret prophecies of Isaiah (Isa. 52:7–10). He obliged but not without seizing the opportunity to contrast the learned priests' ignorance of spiritual things with his own divinely given wisdom:

Are you priests, and pretend to teach this people, and to understand the spirit of prophesying, and yet desire to know of me what these things mean? . . . Ye have not applied your hearts to understanding; therefore, ye have not been wise. (Mosiah 12:25, 27)

Abinadi also read and expounded other scripture to the priests—laying peculiar stress on the Ten Commandments. Throughout his trial, Abinadi preached, acted, and even displayed divine power in ways that evoke the writing of the commandments by the finger of God on Mount Sinai—a theme to which we will return in our discussion of Aminadi's message.

While demonstrating that the priests misunderstood the law of Moses rather than Christ to be the source of salvation, Abinadi nonetheless affirmed the necessity of keeping “the commandments which the Lord delivered unto Moses in the mount of Sinai,” and he rebuked them for neither keeping these commandments nor teaching them (Mosiah 12:33, 37). When the enraged priests tried to interrupt his reading of the Ten Commandments, he was transfigured before them so that “his face shone with exceeding luster, even as Moses' did while in the mount of Sinai, while speaking with the Lord” (13:5). Under divine protection, Abinadi announced that he would “read unto you the remainder of the commandments of God, for I perceive that

9. Paralleling Joseph, as an interpreter Daniel did not limit his work to walls but also read the meaning of dreams.

10. Abinadi's trial was likely held either in King Noah's palace or in the temple, both potential gathering places for the king and priests. (See Mosiah 11:9–11.)

they are not written in your hearts,” alluding again to God writing the Ten Commandments on the tablets of Sinai by his finger (v. 11).¹¹ Completing the commandments, Abinadi preached the redemptive work of Christ and predicted the king’s death. His burden of prophecy delivered, Abinadi was burned to death “because he would not deny the commandments of God” (17:20).

Though Abinadi diverged from the messages of the biblical wisdom figures Joseph and Daniel in that the divine manifestations he interpreted and expounded were in *scripture*—that is, the prophecies of Isaiah and the commandments given on Sinai—his story shares the structure of theirs. He, like them, is a captive prophet displaying his revelatory power before the king, interpreting what the king’s wise men cannot, and forewarning of catastrophe—including in this case, as in Daniel’s, the king’s death.

Abinadi also echoes his near-namesake predecessor among the Nephite prophets, Aminadi. As Aminadi had prophesied in the original city of Nephi before its destruction, Abinadi prophesied in the rebuilt city of Nephi (Mosiah 11:10–11). Also like Aminadi, Abinadi acts as a wisdom figure and a prophetic interpreter. But the strongest links between Aminadi and Abinadi—how their prophetic messages build on the giving of the Ten Commandments on Sinai—will have to await full development later in this chapter.

That Aminadi strongly parallels each of these three other wisdom figures individually suggests that he also fits their shared narrative template. The core narrative of all these other instances of interpretation by divine wisdom would also be the narrative in which his interpretation of the writing on the wall belongs: Aminadi was a captive who interpreted a divine manifestation that the king’s wise men could not, and from this he forewarned of calamity.

Noting that Daniel’s writing on the wall “spelled doom and destruction to the king of Babylon and his kingdom,” Book of Mormon commentator Verneil Simmons perceptively asked, “Did the Lord warn the Nephites at the temple in the City of Nephi by a similar method, that destruction was imminent?”¹² The unique parallel between the Aminadi and Daniel incidents suggests that their warning experiences were given in similar circumstances and for similar purposes; that is, Aminadi’s interpretation of the writing on the wall gave a final warning of imminent doom to his king regarding both the king’s fate and that of his kingdom.¹³

11. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide*, 157–60.

12. Simmons, *Peoples, Places and Prophecies*, 161.

13. An even more forceful warning of destruction, in this case complete annihilation, is given in the story of Amulek’s preaching in Ammonihah, where the surviving reference to Aminadi is introduced. Alan C. Miner notes the parallel “between the *sudden* destruction of the kingdom of Babylon” warned of by Daniel’s interpretation of the writing on the wall “and the prophecies of Alma and Amulek

Interpreting the Writing on the Wall

The repeated prophetic narrative that Aminadi appears to share and his particular parallel with Daniel’s warning prophecy to Belshazzar suggest that the writing Aminadi interpreted from the wall of the temple warned his king and people of imminent destruction. But this does not tell us the reasons behind this rebuke and threatened destruction. What provoked God to set his hand to write on the wall of Nephi’s temple? To put flesh on our skeletal story of Aminadi, we, like him, must discern the meaning of the writing on the wall.

Thus far we have identified how Aminadi’s experience, encapsulated by his descendant Amulek, parallels that of Daniel and other prophets. But to accurately “read” the import of the writing on the wall, we must also examine how Aminadi’s experience *diverges* from the other instances of prophetic interpretation. These differences are as instructive as the similarities and reveal in broad strokes the divine message Aminadi read from the wall of the temple.

The fundamental differences between Aminadi’s incident of reading the writing on the wall and Daniel’s are in where the writing appears and to whom it is attributed. In Daniel’s case, the writing appears on the wall of Belshazzar’s palace, while in Aminadi’s it appears on the wall of the temple of Nephi. In the Daniel event, the profaning of temple sacredness (through the sanctuary relics) had been the impetus and implicit subject for the writing on the wall of Belshazzar’s palace. There, temple sacredness was (again) profaned as a result of the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, from which these relics had been plundered. In the Aminadi event, one natural subject for writing appearing on the temple would be the temple itself. God’s writing would affirm the temple’s sacredness and might warn of the consequences that were to follow for profaning it—judgments on the wicked and the withdrawal of his presence—leading to the temple’s destruction (Hel. 4:24–25; cf. 1 Cor. 3:16–17), and the ultimate destruction of the people of the land of Nephi with their temple. Rather than condemning the people for past actions, in Aminadi’s case the writing on the wall could *forewarn* that such destruction was coming if the people, who have ignored God’s commandments and begun to pollute his temple, continued to do so.¹⁴

concerning the sudden destruction of the city of Ammonihah (Alma 10:20–27; 16:1–11),” drawing the implication that Aminadi’s writing on the wall also warned of imminent destruction. Alan C. Miner, “The Lord Redeems His Covenant Children: Alma 1 -- Alma 44”; emphasis in original.

14. A message about the reverencing or pollution of the temple would most naturally be addressed to the very audience we have posited for Aminadi—the king and priests. Priests are the functionaries of the temple, and in the Book of Mormon kings are the caretakers and high priests over the temples. (See Chapter 11.)

A message *about* the temple in the writing read by Aminadi would account for the place of its appearance (the temple wall) but not for its reported source (the finger of God). This is the other significant difference between Daniel's interpreted text and Aminadi's: what is said of the supernatural scribe. In the Daniel incident, the writer's identity is indefinite: the writing was done by the miraculously appearing "fingers of a man's hand," with no indication whether the hand belonged to God, an angel, another supernatural being, or perhaps something more illusory. For the author of Daniel, it did not matter to whom the hand belonged, only what it wrote. In the Aminadi incident, however, the owner of the hand was unequivocally identified. The writing on the wall was not made merely by "the fingers of a man's hand" but "by the finger of *God*."

Why was the message interpreted by Aminadi given in such a distinctive way, written on the wall of the temple, and specifically by God's finger? There are numerous modes of revelation that could have been employed, such as dreams, tongues, visionary symbolism, by one of the many gifts of the Spirit, or by *speaking* God's words: "Thus saith the Lord." Instead it was delivered through a visual message that Aminadi had to interpret and read out. Such an unusual medium of prophecy might be resorted to when other methods (like the spoken word) have not succeeded in getting the people's attention before the destroying armies or angels begin their work. This would account for the *drama* of the experience but still not for its specific form. Why employ writing by God's finger instead of giving a sign in the heavens, speaking out of a whirlwind (as God did to Job), sending an angel with a drawn sword (as God did to Balaam), or any other distinctive medium?

The reason for using one medium over another is often that the medium chosen to communicate a message can become part of the message itself that sharpens, reinforces, and carries part of its content. In the case of God speaking to Job out of a whirlwind, the form through which the message is presented is tailored to the message itself. God demands to know of Job by what right he questions God's understanding and will as nature's creator and master, demonstrating the power of nature of which he speaks—and his own mastery of it—by clothing himself in the whirlwind. In the case of the Lord's message to Balaam also, the medium—an angel with a drawn sword—reinforces the message that Balaam must act in the role of prophet only as the Lord commands or he will be destroyed (Num. 22:21–35). After later using his prophetic role to mislead the Midianites and Israelites into offering sacrifices to Baal at Peor (25:1–5; 31:8, 16) and thus ignoring the sword in the hand of the angel, Balaam dies by a sword in the hand of an Israelite (31:1–8).

As the medium was carefully tailored to the message in the cases of Job and Balaam, so it was also in that of Aminadi. Writing by the finger of God was not a neutral medium through which to communicate (if any ever is),

but it was one laden with symbolic meaning and historical connections that the audience would have recognized and that comprised part of the message itself. To a pious Israelite, or anyone familiar with the Bible, the medium of writing by the finger of God evokes the giving of the Ten Commandments, which God inscribed in this way on stone tablets (Ex. 31:18; Deut. 9:10). The use of the same medium to give this message as God had used to give the Ten Commandments on Sinai has several functions or effects. First, it confirms the story of the Ten Commandments having been given in that way, reinforcing their divine authority. Second, it imparts to the new message the same authority held by the Ten Commandments. Third, it connects the new revelation to the theme of commandments, implying that it almost certainly reiterated the perennial message of the prophets to the Nephites: keep the commandments, because your spiritual well-being, material prosperity, and ultimate survival depend on it.

The writing of this covenant on the temple wall by the finger of God would have demonstrated that it was as divine in origin and immutable as the God-inscribed commandments themselves. The temple of Nephi, which lacked the actual stone tablets inscribed by God's finger and held in the temple of Solomon, would now possess an equivalent reminder of the commandments' divine authorship and of God's presence in the temple—a presence granted conditionally, so long as his people did not pollute the temple and themselves to the point that He would have to withdraw his Spirit and thus leave them to destruction. Removing all room for doubt, these and other consequences of breaking the commandments would have been literally spelled out and written in stone—God's word assuring that the Nephites could not prosper if they did not keep his commandments would have been mercifully verified by this miraculous message of warning before it was verified in their destruction.¹⁵

Aminadi, like Abinadi, delivered his message in a way that evoked (as strongly as any could) the inscribing of the commandments on the stone tablets of Sinai, because the purpose of Aminadi's prophetic mission was the same as Abinadi's—to demonstrate to the king, priests, and people of the land of Nephi the literal divine origin of the commandments and the necessity to salvation and survival of keeping them. The people comprising the original Nephite nation in the land of Nephi, however, did not heed this message, and they were eventually destroyed for continued disobedience to the commandments—except for those led away by Mosiah₁.

15. In the strongest reiteration of the Ten Commandments and God's covenant with the Nephites, his finger would have written *both* on the temple wall, along with a specific warning that without repentance destruction was imminent.

Aminadi and the Destruction of the Year 320

That Aminadi's interpretation of the writing on the wall warned of the destruction of "the more wicked part" in the year 320 is manifested by three distinct lines of evidence. First, Aminadi foretelling the catastrophe of 320 would account for his enduring cultural fame. Few events could be expected to produce such broad post-mortem fame as that enjoyed by Aminadi, and predicting the near-destruction of the nation is surely one of those few.

Second, what we know of the period and place of Aminadi's interpretive prophecy fits the context of the destruction in the year 320. As discussed earlier, when Amulek discusses his genealogy from Aminadi, he skips at least one generation. This requires Aminadi to have lived at least four generations prior to Amulek. However, if there was only one intervening generation between Amulek's grandfather Ishmael and Aminadi, it is difficult to see why Amulek described Ishmael as Aminadi's descendant rather than just naming that person. Amulek thus likely abbreviated his genealogy to avoid the cumbersome need to enumerate *multiple* intervening generations. Two omitted generations (five total generations) would push Aminadi's birth back to a range around the year 303, making him a young man at the time of the destruction; and a third (giving six in total) would make him middle-aged.

The third reason to associate Aminadi's prophecy with the 320 destruction is the way that the two events pair together so perfectly. Both events built on the pattern of repeated prophetic warning that the Nephites must keep the commandments or, in accordance with God's covenant, they would no longer prosper in the land and ultimately be destroyed. The catastrophe of 320, which verified this covenant oath of destruction, would have been heralded by a final prophetic repetition of the oath it was to verify—an ultimatum to repent and keep the commandments immediately or face present destruction. Aminadi's message written by the same divine finger that had written the Ten Commandments on the stone tablets on Sinai would reiterate that oath powerfully and make a fitting final warning before the onslaught of destruction.

A warning of this magnitude through Aminadi could have been fulfilled by only one of a handful of events in early Nephite history, and the only calamitous destructions in evidence for the period are the final destruction of the city of Nephi in about the year 400, warned of by Mosiah¹, and that of 320, doubtless also preceded by a final prophetic warning. Thus, Aminadi's prophetic warning and the destruction of "the more wicked part" belong together. As the destruction of 320 approached for the unrepentant people of Nephi, truly the writing was on the wall.

Aminadi in the Lost Manuscript

The story of Aminadi interpreting the writing on the wall and of the associated destruction of “the more wicked part” of the nation is a substantive part of Nephite political and religious history and, as Brant Gardner posits, would have been included in the comprehensive large plates of Nephi, of which the lost manuscript was an abridgment.¹⁶ For our purposes here we must also ask, did Mormon select this story for inclusion in his abridgment of them in the lost manuscript? The evidence of the text with regard to this narrative is that Mormon should have included it, would have included it, and in fact did include it.

Given the importance and prominence of the event, Mormon *should* have included it in his abridgment from the large plates. The incident of Aminadi interpreting the writing on the wall occurred in a central institution of Nephite society (the temple), was miraculously dramatic, and, as we have seen, evidently provided a warning on which the survival of Nephite nation hinged, enabling the righteous to escape the destruction of the year 320.

Furthermore, Mormon *would* have included it in his abridgment because of his demonstrated editorial purposes. The story of the 320 destruction in general, and of Aminadi’s warning in particular, fulfill one of the basic didactic purposes of Mormon’s record—to demonstrate that the people’s survival on the land depends on keeping God’s commandments. For Mormon to have omitted crucial material of Nephite history that so perfectly advanced his authorial purposes would be baffling.

Finally, given how Mormon deals with Amulek’s allusion to this story, it seems evident that Mormon *had* included it earlier in his record. Amulek’s account gives evidence that the story was extremely well known among the Nephites. Not only did Amulek himself know of his forebearer’s story despite having only recently begun to take an interest in religion (Alma 10:5), he could assume that the people of Ammonihah, better known to us as scriptural book *burners* than as scripture readers (14:8), would also know of Aminadi and the writing on the wall. Mormon, like Amulek, felt no need to explain

16. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 4:164. Commentator Daniel H. Ludlow has said of Amulek’s mention of Aminadi: “This is the only time Aminadi is mentioned, and our present Book of Mormon gives no further details concerning the writing upon the wall of the temple written by the finger of God. Evidently an account of this incident was recorded on the large plates of Nephi, but Mormon did not include it in his abridgment.” Daniel H. Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Book of Mormon*, 198. Ludlow’s conclusion that the story of Aminadi, although on the large plates of Nephi, must not have been included in Mormon’s abridgment since it is not in the extant text fails to take into account that much of Mormon’s abridgment is lost.

Aminadi's identity beyond this brief mention, apparently assuming his readers would know the significance of the writing on wall incident.¹⁷ Royal Skousen notes the “abruptness” with which this name, like the name Muloch (Mulek) in Mosiah 25:2, is introduced, and he posits that Aminadi therefore “may have been mentioned” in the lost manuscript. Anita Wells similarly reasons that Mormon had introduced Aminadi earlier in his abridgment, “otherwise one might suppose he would have either explained the reference or not included it.” I concur: given that Mormon was writing for an audience whose only knowledge of the Nephites would be through his book, he could only assume the reader's familiarity with the story if he had included it earlier in his record.¹⁸ Mormon's quotation of Amulek's cryptic allusion to Aminadi without further explanation thus attests that he had included the fuller story in the early, lost portion of his abridgment.

Aminadi and the Nephite Temple

The most striking thing about the story of Aminadi and the writing on the wall is what it reveals about the function of temples among the Nephites. The temple, as seen here, is much more than a house of sacrifice. For the Nephites, as it functions in the story of Aminadi, the temple is where God's presence resides and may be entered, where covenant relationship with God is established or reaffirmed, and where hidden knowledge can be acquired.

The writing on the wall by God's finger at the temple of Nephi demonstrated his presence there, the sacredness of the place, and that it was to be kept holy. In the temple manifestation for which Aminadi acted as divine interpreter, the Lord affirmed the oaths he had spoken to Lehi and Nephi blessing the land to those who keep the commandments and cursing it to those who break them, and He did so by writing this covenant with his finger just as He had Israel's covenant at Sinai. Here, the temple is also a place for inquiring after and receiving hidden knowledge. While a distinctive feature of the narrative is the medium employed to deliver the divine message—namely, the finger of God writing on the temple wall—the most distinctive aspect of this revelation is that while its message was delivered publicly, the content of the message remained hidden until interpreted by Aminadi. Thus, the revelation was unfolded in two stages: first a presentation of symbols, and only

17. Verneil W. Simmons similarly observed, “When Mormon wrote the words of Amulek he apparently felt no further need to explain them.” Simmons, *Peoples, Places and Prophecies*, 161.

18. Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, 3:1465. Anita Cramer Wells, “Lost—But Not Forgotten—116 Pages: What the Book of Mormon Might Have Included,” 8.

later, and upon inquiry, an interpretation of those symbols.¹⁹ If the medium is part of the message, then there is an implicit message to the two-stage process of revelation employed in this event that may tell something about both the Nephite temple and God's expectations of the people of Nephi.

The functions of the temple in the story of Aminadi come into sharper focus when that story is viewed in the context of the other sacred events in which God touches earthly objects with his finger. One such event that we have already encountered, in a sacred, temple-like context, is the translation through the interpreters of the Book of Mormon's lost pages. In that process Joseph use the sacred instrument to interpret words written on the veil or curtain in front of him, words the Lord later described as "that which I have written." (D&C 84:57), suggesting the scriptural motif of words being written by his finger (see Chapter 3). Other accounts of God touching objects with his finger appear in scripture. The Aminadi story is one of three narratives in Restoration scripture of God physically touching with his finger, the others being the story of the brother of Jared from the Book of Mormon and the familiar story of Moses at Mount Sinai. Significantly, each of the three "finger of God" stories in the body of Restoration scripture occurs in a temple context. The temple context of the Aminadi story is self-evident. Less evident, though still abundantly clear, is the temple context of the writing of the commandments on the tablets at Mount Sinai.

Sinai was the original and paradigmatic Israelite temple. God declared the sacredness of Sinai when he told Moses through the burning bush: "Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground" (Ex. 3:5). High places, like mountains, often have sacred significance in the scriptures that could both symbolically represent and serve as natural temples.²⁰ Joseph Smith would later teach that when God's people are unable to build temples, God uses mountains in place of temples:

The keys are certain signs & words by which false spirits & personages may be detected from true.— which cannot be revealed to the Elders till the Temple is completed.— The rich can only get them in the Temple . The poor may get them on the Mountain top as did moses.²¹

It was at Sinai that the Tabernacle, the portable temple the Israelites carried with them through the Exodus, was first constructed, enabling them to carry with them the mountain's sacred functions, and—in the form of the God-

19. A similar revelatory pattern may be found in the corresponding gifts of tongues and the interpretation of tongues, the two requiring each other, in sequence, to impart a full divine revelation (1 Cor. 12:10, 30; 14:5, 13–15, 26–28).

20. Donald W. Parry, "Sinai as Sanctuary and Mountain of God," 482–500.

21. "Discourse, 1 May 1842, as Reported by Willard Richards."

touched stone tablets—a portion of the divine presence manifested there, even when leaving it physically behind (Ex. 31–34). The Ark of the Covenant, created to house Sinai’s stone tablets and ultimately rest in Solomon’s temple, was constructed there (Ex.37; 2 Chr. 5:10). Indeed, the temple was built to a great extent to house the presence of God brought from Sinai and borne in the Ark (2 Sam. 7:1–6).

An event not known to Aminadi or his contemporaries but preceding the giving of the law on Sinai and sharing these themes occurred on Mount Shelem and is narrated in the Book of Ether. On this mountain, the cryptically named “brother of Jared,” while in exodus from the tower of Babel to the New World, spoke with God and saw his finger. As Moses went to Sinai to encounter God, so the brother of Jared went to Shelem—presumably because the cloud in which the Lord had been going before the Jaredites had rested on this mountain, just as the cloud of the biblical Exodus rested on Sinai (Ether 2:4–5, 14; 3:1; Ex. 14:19, 16:10, 24:15–16).

On Shelem, as on Sinai, the Lord appeared veiled in the cloud but then also appeared outside the cloud, unveiling his glory (Ether 3:13–20). And, just as the Lord touched two stone tablets with his fingers to engrave the Law upon them, on Shelem the Lord touched two sets of stones—one set provided by the prophet (v. 1), the other by the Lord (v. 23). The first of these sets of stones would shine physical light for the Jaredites on their journey, as the pillar of fire later would for the Israelites; the second set, the stones of the interpreters used by Nephite prophets and Joseph Smith to translate sacred texts, would shine spiritual light, revealing “secret things” and “hidden things” (Mosiah 8:17, Alma 37:23). Finally, Shelem’s temple function is visible in the interaction there between the brother of Jared and the Lord. As M. Catherine Thomas and P. Scott Ferguson have argued, the experience of the brother of Jared on Shelem—with its elements of divine testing, communication through the veil, the granting of greater light in return for obedience, and entering God’s presence—can readily be identified by Latter-day Saints as temple endowment worship.²²

The stories of the natural mountain temples, Sinai and Shelem, share the temple themes identified above from the Aminadi narrative—divine presence, covenant, and hidden knowledge. In the story of Moses on Mount Sinai, God was present on the mount; though Moses first encountered Him in the burning bush (Ex. 3) and later in a cloud (24:16), God eventually admitted Moses into his unveiled presence (33:20–23). The Lord and Moses then desired to similarly bring all the Israelites into His presence on the mountain, but to their

22. M. Catherine Thomas, “The Brother of Jared at the Veil,” 388–98; P. Scott Ferguson, “Mahonri’s Model for Temple Worship: Rending the Veil of Unbelief,” 37–45.

displeasure the people would have none of it (Ex. 19:10, 20:18–21). Instead, the Lord touched the stone tablets, transmitting something of Himself—both a symbolic presence and an actual holiness—into them. These tablets then not only *represented* His presence, they *embodied* it, as if a portion of divinity inhered in the grooved stone so that He was understood to be near when the Ark of the Covenant bearing those tablets was at hand. The temple was built to be a house for God by housing the stone tablets of the Law that He had touched. It was this presence through the stone tablets that made the Ark the site of the mercy seat, God’s throne on earth (Ex. 25:22).

The giving of the commandments by the finger of God on Sinai was regarded as a binding covenant on the children of Israel (Deut. 5:2, 29:1; 1 Kgs. 8:9; 2 Chr. 5:10; Gal. 4:24). Before giving the commandments, the Lord pledged to them, “if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people . . . and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.” In response, “all the people answered together, and said, All that the Lord hath spoken we will do” (Ex. 19:5–8; Deut. 26:16–19). Contingent on their obedience to this covenant at Sinai to keep the Lord’s commandments was their prosperity and prolonged life on the land of their inheritance (Deut. 5:2, 30–33).

In the traditional biblical story of the Ten Commandments, Moses broke the tablets in his wrath over his people’s worship of the golden calf. God then provided a replacement, writing the same words again on new tablets (Ex. 34:1–2; Deut. 10:1–2). However, in Joseph Smith’s prophetic revision of Deuteronomy 10:2, the passage instead has God withholding from the second set of tablets things that had been written on the first but for which the Israelites had shown themselves unworthy: “And I will write on the tables the words that were in the first tables which thou brakest, *save the words of the everlasting covenant of the holy priesthood*” (JST Deut. 10:2).²³

These same themes that play out in the story of Aminadi at the temple of Nephi and that of Moses on Mount Sinai appear again in the story of the brother of Jared on Mount Shelem. Just as Moses took the second set of stone tablets that he had hewn to Mount Sinai for inscription by God’s touch, the brother of Jared took the stones he manufactured up Mount Shelem for illumination by his touch. At Shelem, as in the temple of Nephi in Aminadi’s day, the Lord reached His hand through the veil. He then touched the stones one by one with his finger, imparting holiness and power to them as he had to Moses’s stone tablets. In the process, the brother of Jared saw the Lord’s hand, provoking a dialogue with the Lord that tested the brother of Jared’s

23. The italicized words are those added in the Joseph Smith Translation.

knowledge and faith; he was then admitted into the Lord's presence and thus redeemed from the Fall.

Shelem is also associated with covenant in the brother of Jared story. The Jaredites are described as having a covenant similar to that of the Nephites, through which the Lord promises that they will prosper if they serve him but threatening their destruction if they take the opposite course (Ether 2:15).²⁴ It is unclear in the narrative when this covenant was made, though Moroni's abridgement of the Jaredite record first introduces the covenant in the passages immediately preceding the Jaredites' arrival at the place they called Moriancumer that adjoined Mount Shelem (v. 15).

One of the strongest themes of the story of the brother of Jared at Mount Shelem is that of hidden knowledge. There is a public portion of his revelation and a hidden one. Correspondingly, the Book of Ether tells of two records of his experience on the mountain: the one we read *in* the Book of Ether, and the one withheld from us and contained only in the sealed portion of the golden plates. The brother of Jared was told to write and seal up the panoramic vision he was given of the full story of humankind, past, present, and future (Ether 3:22, 27). Moroni, though granting his reader a particle of that world-encompassing revelation in his record, was similarly told to seal up the full account of this vision, which he had transcribed onto the golden plates (4:5).

Moroni's plates, containing the sealed record, were to be hidden up and withheld because of unbelief (Ether 4:3). If the sealed plates could be found today, they would still be in an unreadable script lost after the tower of Babel to all but the now extinct Jaredites, an esoteric language originally "given by the finger of God" (Moses 6:46) and comprehensible only to the few who can read it through the interpreters given to the brother of Jared (Ether 3:22). There are thus two types of plates, or tablets, containing material from the brother of Jared—unsealed and sealed, paralleling the two sets of tablets given at Sinai: one manifest, one hidden. The unsealed plates parallel the second, unbroken set of stone tablets, which contained only the lesser law. The sealed plates parallel the broken (and therefore perhaps unreadable) tablets containing the higher law, the texts of each unavailable because of the collective unrighteousness of their intended audiences.

Yet even for the reader who cannot read a sealed book, a book hid up and conveyed in an unknown tongue, Moroni promises that its content can someday be made available through repentance and faith like that demonstrated by the brother of Jared (4:6–7, 13–15). Until then the reader must

24. On the Jaredite covenant, see Lee L. Donaldson, "The Plates of Ether and the Covenant of the Book of Mormon," 69–79.

abide the lesser portion of the revelation, in hope of obtaining those “greater things” (4:4–14; 3 Ne. 26:9–10).

With this review of these temple-related narratives of the finger of God, we can better discern the temple’s functions in the story of Aminadi and other Restoration scriptures as a place of entering the divine presence, making covenants, and acquiring hidden knowledge. The writing on the wall of the temple in the Aminadi story by the finger of God symbolizes and actualizes his presence in the temple and further imbues it with divinity. By this writing he signifies that he had been there, was there yet, and would remain unless or until forced by the sanctuary’s pollution to withdraw his presence. It further demonstrates that the temple was to be kept holy in how it was treated and by those who entered there keeping themselves holy by keeping his commandments and thus abiding their end of the covenant.

God’s intention for Israel, as revealed at Sinai, was to bring all his people into his presence. This did not happen to them collectively, but in the parallel story of the brother of Jared we see it happen to him *individually* through a temple ordeal or test by which he obtained a sure knowledge of God and was redeemed out of the human condition of separation from God. By the light of the Sinai story, the writing by the finger of God on the wall of the temple of Nephi can be seen to recreate the covenant context in which the Law was given and to reaffirm both the Lord’s covenant with Lehi and Nephi and also his original covenant with Israel that if they kept the commandments, they would prosper and see their days prolonged on the promised land (Deut. 5:30–33).

Placing the Aminadi temple incident in the context of the other events in which the finger of God plays a role, we can see that it involved both lower and higher levels of revelation. The lower-level (but vital) message to all was essentially that God was present—that the temple of Nephi, like Sinai, was a sacred place and must be treated as such, giving implicit warning against anything or anyone impure entering the temple. The higher-level message was the specific content of God’s word as revealed through Aminadi’s interpretation thereof—his affirmation of his covenant with their fathers and whatever other meaning he chose to convey.

In *each* of the three incidents in Latter-day Saint scripture involving the finger of God, there is a temple context and revelatory knowledge given in lower and higher levels or degrees, the lesser things, which are available to all, and the greater things, which are esoteric— withheld from those, including the mass of the people, who are unprepared for them. The lesser portions of these revelations point to and require further revelation, either inspired interpretation plumbing their deep or hidden, meanings, or additional revelation supplementing and completing them. Such deeper meanings and higher truths, though hidden from world, are potentially available to those who pu-

rify themselves and inquire—like Lehi, the brother of Jared, and Aminadi—at a temple and in faith.

Sadly, the example of Aminadi was lost on the generations that followed after him. These did not grow in spiritual light, but ripened in iniquity. But before the harvest, the Lord would send another messenger into the vineyard, one who like Aminadi would warn, like Moses would deliver, and the like the brother of Jared would attain to the presence of God: Mosiah₁.