Traditions of the Fathers

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The Book of Mormon as History

Brant A. Gardner

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For John L. Sorenson, who opened the door.

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Preface

atter-day Saints have a paradoxical relationship with the Book of Mormon. Joseph said that it was the keystone of our religion, but his contemporaries preferred to preach from the Bible. We sing Primary songs about it but rarely sacrament meeting hymns. We affirm that it arrived through an angel but want to see evidence of its divinity in the dirt of history. Much of it is as old as the Old Testament but we claim that it was written for our day.²

Like the Old Testament, the Book of Mormon revolves around stories.³ Both scriptures represent the work of editors telling stories from history to teach current readers how to live in the present.⁴ When we read those stories, we create a personal story as our own lives reflect and intertwine with the actors in the text. We end up with stories about stories.

Even though the stories are set in history, we can tell our Book of Mormon stories without any concern for history. There are moral stories, inspiring stories, and stories that springboard us into a discussion of our doctrine. Parley P. Pratt told perhaps the model inspirational story of his first experience with the Book of Mormon:

¹ Joseph Smith, et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 4:461. "I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book." For early missionary avoidance of the Book of Mormon, see Grant Underwood, "Book of Mormon Usage in Early LDS Theology," 49–50.

² Ezra Taft Benson, *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson*, 58: "We must make the Book of Mormon a center focus of study because it was written for our day. The Nephites never had the book, neither did the Lamanites of ancient times. It was meant for us."

³ Grant Hardy, "Introduction," *The Book of Mormon, The Earliest Text*, vii: "Most recent holy books consist of doctrinal expositions, ritual instructions, moral codes, scriptural commentary, or devotional poetry. The Book of Mormon, by contrast, is narrative—a much rarer genre of religious writing."

Norman F. Cantor, *In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the World It Made*, 17. "The scientific method had not yet been invented. When faced with a problem, people in the Middle Ages found the solution through diachronic (as opposed to synchronic) analysis. The diachronic is the historical narrative, horizontally developing through time: 'Tell me a story.'"

⁴ There is a voluminous literature discussing the development of the present form of the various books in the Old Testament. One of the important assumptions about the editorial process is referred to as the Documentary Hypothesis, or the idea that there are four different editorial strands discernible in the Pentateuch. For an overview of LDS reactions to this theory, see Kevin L. Barney, "Reflections on the Documentary Hypothesis," 57–99. David Bokovoy, Authoring the Old Testament: Genesis–Deuteronomy, provides an introduction to the Documentary Hypothesis for an LDS audience.

Although most of the Book of Mormon is the result of the way that Mormon told the stories, Moroni is responsible for telling the story of the Jaredites. Nephi, Jacob, and Enos tell stories from their own histories that have meaning greater than recounting history.

I opened it with eagerness, and read its title page. I then read the testimony of several witnesses in relation to the manner of its being found and translated. After this I commenced its contents by course. I read all day; eating was a burden, I had no desire for food; sleep was a burden when the night came, for I preferred reading to sleep.

As I read, the spirit of the Lord was upon me, and I knew and comprehended that the book was true, as plainly and manifestly as a man comprehends and knows that he exists. My joy was now full, as it were, and I rejoiced sufficiently to more than pay me for all the sorrows, sacrifices and toils of my life.⁵

For Pratt, reading the book was sufficient. He read it and it was *true*. It wasn't true because he researched the origins of the Native Americans. It wasn't true because he understood the complexities of Hebrew religion prior to the exile. It was simply true because it spoke that trueness to his heart and soul. Some modern Saints have that same kind of testimony, but many hope for a different foundation for their faith.

The physical book that the early Latter-day Saints held in their hands described an ancient people who were in some way the ancestors of the Native Americans. Those same peoples were frequently on the mind of the young nation as it less than gently pushed them out of its way. The early saints' Book of Mormon stories incorporated the Native Americans not just as descendants of the book, but also as proof of the book. For many then, and many now, a spiritual witness yearned to have a more temporal witness to lean on.

This book is a historical story. Much of this Book of Mormon story I have told before. I attempted to cover both history and religion in Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon. That comprehensive approach makes it more difficult to see the flow of history apart from the larger number of themes addressed. Only the persistent reader will piece together the history that is interwoven with other topics. Hence this book—and hence the reason this book borrows, and sometimes directly copies, material from Second Witness. However, even for those who might have read some of this material before, this story is told more directly, more concisely, and with what insights have become available since the commentary was published. This book contains my stories about the Book of Mormon—the stories as best I understand them and as best I can explain them.

I would like to thank Neal Rappleye and my son-in-law, Ezery Beauchamp, who read earlier versions of this book and provided useful suggestions. Grant and Heather Hardy read a version of this manuscript. Grant provided a thoughtful critique that required rethinking or strengthening many of my ideas. Stephen Smoot performed some much appreciated footwork in chasing down a particular reference. Mark Alan Wright and Lawrence Poulsen have both served as able sounding boards for various ideas. Where they triggered ideas that have found their way into the text, I have so noted. Mark Wright is also the co-author of Chapter 10. Mark's wife Traci provided the graphics included with the text. Curtis L. Sorenson graciously revised the maps he created for *Mormon's Codex*, changing the base map to grayscale and adding

⁵ Parley P. Pratt, Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt, 20.

⁶ Brant A. Gardner, Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon.

indicators for the directions in chapter 5. Lavina Fielding Anderson has become much more than an editor of text. Her voice sits in my head often enough that she may have co-written some of this book without knowing it.

In the interests of internal stylistic consistency and clarity for the reader, I have standardized abbreviations of books of scriptures in parenthetical citations, including in quotations. I have made lowercased words of those that are in all capitals in the King James Version (e.g., LORD becomes Lord), and removed the italics that appear in the King James Version passages. Italics or bolding in scriptures indicate my emphasis.

The organization that was known as FAIR (Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research has changed its name to FairMormon. I have not changed references to FAIR when that was the legal name. Readers should be aware that FAIR and FairMormon are the same organization. Links to FAIR currently redirect to FairMormon.

I have differentiated Book of Mormon men with the same name by a subscript when there is the possibility of confusing them. Thus Alma₁ is Alma₂'s father and Mosiah₁ is grandfather to Mosiah₂. I have elected not to use the subscript to mark the first Nephi, though I have added it for clarity for his much later descendants with the same name. Similarly, the time and context are typically sufficient to distinguish Chief Captain Moroni from his later namesake, Mormon's son.

I have also intentionally used the divine name Yahweh to describe the Nephites' God. In so doing I am attempting to represent Nephite understanding without the added baggage of terms that modern readers might interpret differently without even knowing they had done so. Yahweh was God to the Nephites. Yahweh was their Messiah. Understanding that the name and title to refer to the same being is essential to understanding the Nephite descriptions of their God.⁷

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⁷ I first laid out this argument in Brant A. Gardner, "Monotheism, Messiah, and Mormon's Book," presented at the 2003 FAIR Conference. That presentation was updated in Gardner, Second Witness, 1:214–22.

Introduction

And it came to pass that the Lord commanded me, wherefore *I* did make plates of ore that *I* might engraven upon them the record of my people. And upon the plates which *I* made *I* did engraven the record of my father, and also our journeyings in the wilderness, and the prophecies of my father; and also many of mine own prophecies have *I* engraven upon them. (1 Ne. 19:1)

ephi's description of the plates is dramatically and repetitively physical. The words on the plates are important, but those words required intense human labor to produce them. Nephi *made* the plates. Upon those metal plates, Nephi *engraved* the words. He did not paint, but employed a more laborious physical means of preserving those words. Plates that Nephi made and engraved, along with those Mormon engraved, were delivered to Joseph Smith in September of 1827.¹

Joseph did not begin translating until Martin Harris returned from New York in February 1828. For five months the physical plates represented sacred hope, but for Emma they were often just part of her day. In her 1879 account she recounted: "The plates often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen tablecloth, which I had given him to fold them in. . . . I moved them from place to place on the table, as it was necessary in doing my work."

From Nephi to Joseph and Emma, the Book of Mormon was intensely physical, intensely tangible.³ The tie to the physicality of the plates was broken when the Angel

¹ 1 Ne. 19:1 refers to the creation of what we know as the large plates of Nephi. This chapter introduces Nephi's record of the creation of the second set of plates, which we call the small plates of Nephi. Although the specific reference to making and engraving are for a different set of plates, the small plates were made and engraved in the same way. They too demonstrate the physical presence and labor associated with the record. There is no indication that Mormon made the plates upon which he made his account, but he too engraved his account on metal.

King Benjamin similarly speaks of the physicality of Nephi's plates: "And behold, also the plates of Nephi, which contain the records and the sayings of our fathers from the time they left Jerusalem until now, and they are true; and we can know of their surety because we have them before our eyes" (Mosiah 1:6).

² Emma Smith, "As Interviewed by Joseph Smith III, 1879," in Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 130–31. Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon, 15 records that Katherine Smith, Joseph's sister, had a similar experience interacting with the covered plates on a table while she was cleaning and dusting.

³ Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, *the Making of a Prophet*, 98, provides an interesting highlight to the physicality of the plates. Not accepting them as ancient, Vogel nonetheless accepts them as physical:

The construction of such a book would have been relatively easy, There were scraps of tin available on the Smith property and elsewhere in the vicinity, and during the several hours Joseph was separated from Emma the night they went to the hill and on other Moroni removed the plates in June of 1828 after the loss of the first 116 pages of the translation. According to David Whitmer's 1885 testimony they were never returned.⁴ although Lucy Mack Smith's recollection suggests that they were. In her first manuscript she recounts Joseph's experience with a divine being:

An Angel stood before me and answered me saying that I had sinned in that he [sic] had delivered the manuscript into the hands of a wicked man and as he had ventured to become responsible for this man's faithfulness he would of necessity suffer the consequence's [sic] of his indiscretion that he must now give back the plates into the hands of the angel from he had received them [sic]

But said he[,] it may be if you are sufficiently humble and penitent that you will receive them again on the 22 september.⁵

Whether the plates were present during translation or not, they definitely became a physical presence a year later. In June of 1829, three witnesses saw them. A few days later, eight more men testified that they had seen and handled the plates.⁶ John Whitmer testified in 1839: "I handled those plates; there were fine engravings on both sides. I handled them."7

After the testimony of these men, there were no more experiences with the physical plates. For all who have come after, there is only the text of the Book of Mormon, not the tangible physical presence of the plates from which that text was translated. For those few for whom the Book of Mormon was as tangible as it was for Nephi and Mormon, none denied that physical experience even if they might have questioned later religious experiences.8

For those contemporaries who did not experience the physicality of the plates, the Book of Mormon was often seen as the product of imagination. Matthew Roper notes:

occasions, he could have easily set up shop in the cave on the other side of the hill or in some corner of the forest. Using a pair of metal shears, it would have been easy to cut a number of 6 x 8-inch sheets. A hole punch, nail, or some similar instrument could have been used to make three holes along one edge of each plate. Then it would have been a matter of passing three wires or rods through the holes and bending them into rings.

⁴ David Whitmer, "As Interviewed by the Chicago Tribune (1885)," 154.

⁵ Lucy Mack Smith, Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir, 424–25.

⁶ John W. Welch, "The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon," 97.

⁷ Whitmer, "As Interviewed by the Chicago Tribune," 159.

⁸ Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 181–82: "[The several witnesses] occasionally witnessed to other spiritual experiences supplementing [their testimonies of the Book of Mormon], but at no known time did any Book of Mormon witness retract his printed testimony. The first Mormons knew the witnesses and kept track of them through reliable reports—and always insisted that none modified his testimony."

An excellent compilation of materials providing background on the witnesses' testimonies of the plates and later relationship with the church may be found in the FairMormon wiki, "Book of Mormon witnesses."

⁹ An interesting recounting of early newspaper accounts of the Book of Mormon is Donald Q. Cannon, "In the Press: Early Newspaper Reports on the Initial Publication of the Book of Mormon," 4–15.

On 26 March 1830, the *Wayne Sentinel* reported that the Book of Mormon had been published and was available for sale. Early reactions in the press to its publication varied from charges of blasphemy or contempt to amusement. On 2 April 1830, the *Rochester Daily Advertiser* wrote, "The 'Book of Mormon' has been placed in our hands. A viler imposition was never practised. It is an evidence of fraud, blasphemy and credulity, shocking to the Christian and moralist". . . [The editor of the *Cleveland Herald*] considered it "one of the veriest impositions of the day." ¹⁰

It was impossible to immediately reconcile the conflict between the faithful declaration that the Book of Mormon was *real* and that of the rest of the world that it was a "vile imposition." At the time when the Book of Mormon was first published, there was no assembly of evidence to support faith in its historicity, although the early Saints quickly adapted popular speculations. The idea that Native Americans descended from the lost ten tribes had been circulating in books and community lore by that time. Those ideas worked themselves into the stories the Saints told as evidence to support faith.

The Book of Mormon declares itself to be "an abridgment of the record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites" (Title Page). Whatever else it may contain, if there were no physical "record of the people of Nephi" there is little compelling reason to see the Book of Mormon as more than a novel or theological treatise—more interesting for its own history than the history it proclaims. ¹² The historicity of the Book of Mormon makes tangible the revealed restoration. Even now, when the tangible is long distant from the physical plates upon which it was originally written, the keystone of our religion depends upon that original physicality.

The Book of Mormon can be read apart from history—discussions of the principles it teaches are most often written from the perspective of the relationship to the

¹⁰ Matthew Roper, "Early Publications on the Book of Mormon," 44.

As "inspired fiction," the argument runs, there is still much spiritual profit to be found in the volume, even if its origins are mired in fraud or delusion rather than grounded in pre-Columbian prophets inspired of God. For a variety of reasons, such efforts at a kind of religious détente may be well intentioned, but they are untenable. The book's unambiguous account of its own construction, as well as the historically defined reciprocity between Joseph Smith's own moral authority as a religious leader and the sacred status of the book inseparably wedded to his claims and career, admits of no simple divorce.

¹¹ Richard E. Bennett, "A Nation Now Extinct,' American Indian Origin theories as of 1820," 31: "Professor Mitchill, on meeting with Martin Harris in February 1828 and after studying carefully his so-called Anthon transcript set it down as a genuine linguistic record of an ancient American people which was 'now extinct' and 'which he named.' A delicate people he called 'Australasians' were ultimately destroyed by a hardier, more warlike Asiatic people in a protracted series of ferocious wars culminating in one final battle of extermination, which both Mitchill and Governor Clinton traced to the Boughton Hill region near Palmyra, New York." See also Dan Vogel, *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon*, chap. 3.

¹² Terryl L. Givens, "Foreword," xiv makes a similar point:

modern reader. This is a perfectly appropriate way to use a religious text.¹³ Grant Hardy's *Understanding the Book of Mormon* and Joseph M. Spencer's An *Other Testament* provide excellent discussions of the text that do not require history as a background to the analysis.¹⁴ In spite of the ability of readers to interact with the text as though it never existed in history, believers nevertheless accept that it did, even when they understand little of that history.

Conflicts over the Book of Mormon have not been of history, but of historicity. History studies the past and historicity studies the authenticity of the events recorded in a text from that past.¹⁵ The question of the Book of Mormon's historicity is both simple and paramount: If it has historicity, it is a translation of an ancient document, just as it claims. If it has no historicity, then it is a modern document making deceptive claims about history (even if it could be seen as inspirational).¹⁶

This dilemma places the Book of Mormon in a tenuous position among texts declared to be scripture. It has no historical provenance. Unlike the Old Testament, it isn't *old*. Although the manuscript tradition of the Old Testament is solid only as early as about 200 B.C. (based on some of the Dead Sea Scrolls), it is still certain that the majority of the Hebrew Bible was established before 200 B.C. In contrast, there is no manuscript and indeed no information about the Book of Mormon prior to 1823.¹⁷

For the Bible, one may argue whether a particular event had historicity, but one cannot argue that the text itself has no historicity. The Bible can have a history and not be a history. The Book of Mormon, on the other hand, cannot. The English text of the Book of Mormon has a known production date that begins in 1827. The Book of Mormon therefore presents a very simple either/or case. Because the English text is obviously modern, the text itself is either modern or, as it claims, ancient. If it is ancient, then its

¹³ Nephi indicates that "I did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning" (1 Ne. 19:24). This description provides the model for using scripture from a previous time as an exemplar for current living.

¹⁴ Grant Hardy, Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide. Joseph M. Spencer, An Other Testament: On Typology.

¹⁵ Paul Y. Hoskisson, "Introduction," in Historicity and the Latter-Day Saint Scriptures, vii.

¹⁶ Anthony A. Hutchinson, "The Word of God is Enough: The Book of Mormon as Nineteenth-Century Scripture," 1, suggests that "members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints should confess in faith that the Book of Mormon is the word of God but also abandon claims that it is a historical record of the ancient peoples of the Americas."

This position attempts to separate spiritual value from historicity. It is certainly true that many can extract value from a text whether it has any historicity. The spiritual value of the Book of Mormon lies in its theology, not its history.

¹⁷ Joseph Smith dates his first vision of Moroni to September 21, 1823 (Joseph Smith-History 1:27). This was the first indication of the existence of the Book of Mormon. It became much more widely known when the translation began in 1827. Of course the physical plates are the connection to antiquity, but they are no longer available and are not referenced in any ancient text yet discovered.

¹⁸ This is the argument of a number of modern writers on the Bible. See, for instance, Thomas L. Thompson, Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel.

presence has no reasonable explanation and one must carefully examine the "unreasonable" explanation of its divine revelation and inspired translation.¹⁹

The early Saints implicitly understood the Book of Mormon in this context. Terryl L. Givens describes the relationship those early Saints had to their special book: "Looking at the Book of Mormon in terms of its early uses and reception, it becomes clear that this American scripture has exerted influence within the church and reaction outside the church not primarily by virtue of its substance, but rather its manner of appearing, not on the merits of what it says, but what it enacts." ²⁰ The Book of Mormon stood and stands as a sign of a modern prophet. Its presence declares an open heaven with an interested and active God. It can do those things best as a translation of an ancient text. Only as a "record of the people of Nephi" does it have the power to declare its own extra-worldly connections and establish our extra-worldly hopes. As history it is a miracle. As not-history it might be called a "pious fraud." ²¹

Both the first affirmations and the first reactions to the Book of Mormon implicitly acknowledge the fundamentality of the text's claim to historicity. For the early believers the miracle of translation was a fact that declared a prophet. Early disbelievers avowed its modern origin and claimed Joseph Smith as the sole (and unimpressive) author.²² The battle lines of disagreement in early discussions of the historicity of the text had little to do with an examination of history. They were apologetics grounded in the faith-based assumptions of both sides of the issue. The two clear positions were either that one might accept new scripture or that the Bible

The age of this modern prophet is supposed to be about twenty-four years. In his person he is tall and slender—thin favored—having but little expression of countenance, other than that of dullness; his mental powers appear to be extremely limited, and from the small opportunity he has had at school, he made little or no proficiency, and it is asserted by one of his principle [sic] followers, (who also pretends to divine illuminations,) that Joe, even at this day is profoundly ignorant of the meaning of many of the words contained in the Book of Mormon.

¹⁹ Noel B. Reynolds, "Introduction," in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, 3: "One striking thing about the Book of Mormon is that if . . . tests confirm its antiquity, we have no plausible alternative to Joseph Smith's explanation of its existence. And that explanation asserts the existence of God directly." Daniel C. Peterson, "Introduction," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, vi, note 4: "It would be rather difficult to believe the Book to be ancient and authentic and *not* regard it as scripture."

²⁰ Terryl L. Givens, By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion, 63–64.

²¹ Vogel, *Joseph Smith*, the Making of a Prophet, xvii. The issue of "pious forgery" has also been applied to the Bible, although those who have done so have not used that term. See William G. Dever, What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It: What Archaeology Can Tell Us about the Reality of Ancient Israel, 273 note 49.

²² Daniel C. Peterson, "In the Hope That Something Will Stick': Changing Explanations for the Book of Mormon," xii–xiv.

Francis W. Kirkham, A New Witness for Christ in America, 267 quotes an article from the Palmyra Reflector, 21 January 1831 (date calculated from the information on page 262):

was sufficient. The text was historical if you believed in Joseph Smith as a prophet and modern if you believed Joseph Smith was a fraud.

Now approaching two hundred years later, we may point to a body of discoveries that can allow for a deeper understanding of the historical context that the faithful declare produced the Book of Mormon. Hugh Nibley was a pioneer of the modern scholarly approach to the Book of Mormon. Over half a century ago, he declared that "no one can know too much about the Book of Mormon." Both he and others he inspired have demonstrated that, not only can we not know too much, but that there is still much to know.

The Book of Mormon is no longer the intensely physical presence that it was for its writers or for Joseph and a select few. It becomes not physically but intellectually tangible through increased knowledge. For believers, understanding the historicity of the Book of Mormon provides an enriching background that can deepen our understanding of and experience with the text. For those who do not have that same faith, a sufficient goal is to create an argument that allows for an understanding of why we believe.²⁵

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²³ Hugh Nibley's writings on the Book of Mormon have opened this new era of scholarly convergences. Building on the foundation he established are various scholars who have written under the auspices of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship (including its previous incarnation as the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies). A single-volume discussion of some of their more important findings is *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon*, edited by Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch. *The Interpreter Foundation* is a more recent location for the publication of similar work. See www.mormoninterpreter.com.

²⁴ Hugh Nibley, An Approach to the Book of Mormon, 1.

²⁵ Givens, By the Hand of Mormon, Author's Note, unnumbered page: "My focus . . . has not been on whether the Book of Mormon or the account of it given by Joseph Smith is true. Rather, I have tried to examine why the Book of Mormon has been taken seriously—for very different reasons—by generations of devoted believers and confirmed skeptics."

2

Reading a Lost Book

The Book of Mormon can be a polarizing text. It claims to be a translation of an ancient text that had multiple authors, editors, and even translators. Many who have examined it suggest that it was created in the fertile imagination of a relatively uneducated frontier farmer. Many approach the text as a spiritual guide that does not necessarily have any relationship to ancient history. A discussion of how the Book of Mormon as history may only be of interest to those holding it to be a translation of an ancient text.

Nevertheless, a discussion of the Book of Mormon as history should not simply proceed from that faith-based assumption. Terryl L. Givens explains: "How do the particulars of Joseph's past worlds hold up? If his collapse of the sacred into the temporal is to succeed, if we are to see his project as truly historical rather than as simply mythic, then ultimately, the worlds of the Nephites and Jaredites and of Enoch, like the words of Adam and Abraham and Moses and John that he recovered, cannot resist examination as the historical records they purport to be." Understanding the Book of Mormon as history will come only examining it as a historical record finds the same kinds of evidence for historicity that might be expected of other historical records.

The fact that the Book of Mormon has no known textual history prior to Joseph Smith increases the difficulty in discovering whether the Book of Mormon represents history, but it does not necessarily disqualify it as a historical record. Scholars are not

¹ Joseph Smith is the declared thranslator of the text into English, but there is the slight possibility that Oliver Cowdery contributed something during his otherwise failed attempt (see D&C 9:1). It is more sure, however, that Mosiah translated the twenty-four plates of Ether and probable that Moroni edited the book of Ether from Mosiah's translation. See Brant A. Gardner, Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon, 6:159–60.

² For examinations of the range of explanations that opponents propose for the Book of Mormon's production, see Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, 120–28. Daniel C. Peterson, "In the Hope that Something Will Stick': Changing Explanations for the Book of Mormon," xi–xxxii. This 2004 article is a revision of his 2002 "The Protean Joseph Smith." See also Richard H. Cracroft, "Had for Good and Evil': 19th-Century Literary Treatments of the Book of Mormon," 4–19.

³ Terryl L. Givens, "Joseph Smith: Prophecy, Process, and Plenitude," 67.

unwilling to accept a text as historical if it exists only in a late copy and/or in a different language.⁴ The ultimate tests are in the text itself and how well it fits into its declared time period and cultural context. The Book of Mormon helps us fix its events in time, but understanding the cultural and historical context is part of the difficulty in understanding the Book of Mormon as history.

Reading the Book of Mormon

Steven Pinker wrote: "A thematic core of an argument structure is a specification of a conflation class defining a kind of possible verb meaning in a language, including a specification of which arguments are 'open arguments' or variables." Surely there are professionals who breeze through that sentence, mentally agreeing or nuancing its conclusion. I am not one of them. I understand each and every word, but I am missing the requisite background that turns that particular combination of words into something meaningful.

It is a problem we face in the Book of Mormon without even knowing it. The Book of Mormon seems to declare by theological imperative that it has a plain meaning. That assumed plainness sets the expectation that it should be simple to read, interpret, and understand. For example, in the context of a discussion of Book of Mormon geography, Phyllis Olive declared: "Because the Lord delights in plainness, and because the Book of Mormon was translated by divine means, this author feels we can trust that the scriptures, including any directional designation, were translated into language even the simplest of us could understand." The perception that the text has an obvious meaning also informs Earl M. Wunderli's geographical understanding: "We can examine. . . what the Book of Mormon itself says. One advantage of this approach is that this internal evidence is fixed, readily available, and easily verifiable."

⁴ One example from Mesoamerica is the *Histoyre du Mechique*, which exists only as a French document from the sixteenth century. Although the document is in the wrong language with no extant Spanish source, it is yet considered an important document representing Aztec culture and history. See Henry B. Nicholson, *Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl: The Once and Future Lord of the Toltecs*, 18–19.

Nevertheless, questionable provenance can still create an atmosphere of distrust. Michael D. Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code*, 229, discusses the Grolier Codex, which for years was considered a forgery:

The dénouement of the Grolier Codex affair was that it is now considered authentic by almost all those Mayanists who are either epigraphers or iconographers, or both. . . .

The irony of the whole business is that if Brasseur de Bourbourg had come across the Grolier while rummaging around in archives during the mid-nineteenth century, it would be accepted by even the most rock-ribbed scholar as the genuine article.

⁵ Steven Pinker, Learnability and Cognition: The Acquisition of Argument Structure, 74.

⁶ 2 Ne. 31:3 "My soul delighteth in plainness."

⁷ Phyllis Olive, "The Book of Mormon Lands of Western New York."

⁸ Earl M. Wunderli, "Critique of a Limited Geography for Book of Mormon Events," 162.

In spite of such "plainness" however, proponents of different geographies read the very same texts differently. Of them, Wunderli suggests that "what the book says seems to have been largely disregarded or misconstrued by the limited geography theorists." Unfortunately, the only thing that is plain is that if someone else's interpretation differs from yours, they have "disregarded or misconstrued" the text. Plainly, the Book of Mormon is read in the way the reader elects to reads it.

Perhaps the most fascinating demonstration of the problems inherent in reading the text comes from opposing interpretations of the very same word. John A. Tvedtnes criticized Brent Lee Metcalfe's reading: "One must also note that Metcalfe seems to be reading the term *land* as if it referred to the entire New World. But people like the Nephites, coming from a Hebrew-speaking environment, would have understood it quite differently [—as a limited region]" The word in the text is the same, but each scholar is applying a different meaning to the text. Each makes a very opposite case based on the very same word. At one point, Tvedtnes exclaims: "Can the same passages really be used as evidence for and against the Book of Mormon or the limited geography theory!" In short, yes.

The claim of "plain meaning" has also been asserted for the Bible, to which William G. Dever responds: "Believers who read only modern English translations of the Biblical text, often unaware of the long transmission process, speak of the 'plain meaning' of Scripture. If there were any such thing, we would have none of the violent controversies that have always surrounded the interpretation of the Bible—beginning already in antiquity and continuing through every popular and scholarly school, both Jewish and Christian, to this very moment." ¹²

As with Pinker's discussion of verb arguments above, meaning derives from a context that informs the words just as much as it does from the words themselves. Tvedtnes and Metcalfe can see very different meanings for the word *land* depending upon the context they associate with it. Adam S. Miller states it this way:

⁹ Ibid., 197.

¹⁰ John A. Tvedtnes, "Reinventing the Book of Mormon: Review of Brent Lee Metcalfe, 'Reinventing Lamanite Identity,'" 97; Brent Lee Metcalfe, "Reinventing Lamanite Identity," 20–25.

¹¹ Tvedtnes, "Reinventing the Book of Mormon," 95.

¹² William G. Dever, Recent Archaeological Discoveries and Biblical Research, 8. As an example, Thomas L. Thompson, Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel, 36, notes:

Debate and disagreement about how the Bible was to be used for history hardened the process of such selective affirmation and increased conviction that the theological meaning of a biblical tradition hung on an understanding of the stories as reports. Questions about the accuracy of what had become the imaginary equivalents of war correspondents, created burning issues for historical scholarship over two generations. The historical scenarios involved in the debate took on a life of their own. The nature and validity of the Bible was being defended in these debates, but the texts themselves were hardly seriously consulted. "Plain readings" were preferred. The presence or absence of collapsed fortifications and the nature of nomadism and its relationship to the villages of the South Levant were matched to harmonized readings of the Bible.

Texts are not static recordings but dynamic, meaning-making machines. The strings of letters, words and sentences on a page create meaning when we turn the machine on by reading it. As a machine with precisely positioned, interlocking parts, a text clearly cannot produce just any meaning whatsoever, but it is nonetheless true that it can produce a variety of meanings depending on the questions brought to bear by its reader. Texts, as meaning-making machines, are responsive to our engagement with them.

For example, if we read a text historically, then that text will produce information about the time and place that it describes or the context and setting in which it was produced. . . If we read a text doctrinally, then the history and specificity of the text will recede as the machine produces general information about what beliefs and principles may be normative and binding for members of the Church. ¹³

Reading the Book of Mormon historically is a separate enterprise from reading the text doctrinally. Even in doctrinal readings, approaching the text for the doctrine important to the read is different from reading the text to understand doctrine according to the declared writer. Both is secular and sacred history, reading the Book of Mormon as an ancient text will assume different contexts that determine meanings. As John L. Sorenson cautioned: "In general the 'religious' realm in the lives of ancient peoples cannot be equated with our current use of that term. Our civilization and language are so different form theirs that it is unthinkable that we could automatically translate concepts from their record to our minds without qualification."¹⁴

A text from history is an artifact. The most famous Mesoamerican text is the *Popol Vuh*, a sacred document from the Quiché Maya. ¹⁵ It combines mythology and history without obvious separation, other than the mythology speaks of much older history. It represents the culture that created it. It doesn't define and often doesn't explain that culture. It rather represents unconscious acceptance of the cultural assumptions and pressures relevant at the time of its creation. ¹⁶ Discovering the conditions and

¹³ Adam S. Miller, "An Experiment on the Word: Introduction," 3.

¹⁴ John L. Sorenson, "Religious Groups and Movements among the Nephites, 200–1 B.C.," 164.

¹⁵ Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya, translated by Allen J. Christenson. Popol Vuh, Volume II: Literal Poetic Version, Translation and Transcription, translated by Allen J. Christenson.

¹⁶ Bruce J. Malina, The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology, 2:

What do . . . Bible translations offer you? At most they let you, a foreigner, get to know what those first-century Greek-speaking folks are saying. But what someone says and what he means to say are often quite distinct. Should you tell your girlfriend that you love the gold of her hair, do you mean that her hair will make an excellent hedge against inflation? And why would you want a hedge against inflation rather than a fence, a wall, or a stand of trees? The words we use to say and speak do in fact embody meaning, but the meaning does not come from the words. Meaning derives from the general social system of the speakers of a language. This is why what one says and what one means to say can often be quite different, especially for persons not sharing the same social system. By translating the Gospel of Matthew into English, what we do is transplant our first-century Syrian Hellenists into our modes of saying, and all too often we presuppose that what they say embodies our modes of meaning as well.

culture that were relevant at the time of a text's creation should explicate the text in ways that the wrong production culture would not.¹⁷

The Book of Mormon isn't a text from history. It declares that it is the translation of a text from history. Thus the expectation that it should reflect an ancient culture that produced it will be mixed with the virtually inevitable presence of the world of the translator that presents the text in terms that make sense to the culture and time of the translator.

The complexities of understanding a text in translation require that we pay attention to these unconscious cultural assumptions. We may expect that regardless of the relationship of the translator to the text, the mindset of the original authors of a document should bleed through the translation. The ancient mind behind the text should show in the pressures to which Book of Mormon peoples responded, the history which influenced their actions, and the culture which governed the nature of their responses.

Reading through the Text's Analytical Layers

The Book of Mormon declares a dual creation. Only the plate text is ancient. The translation is inextricably associated with Joseph Smith. This means that our task is not only to discover the culture that produced the text, but to carefully unravel the threads that tie the ancient text to its more modern translation. This dual production complicates the issue, but the path to understanding can be illustrated by the long history of dealing with the text of the Bible and its relationship to history. The Bible, in English, is also a translation. The King James Version is an extremely popular English translation, but that translation clearly creates potential issues for historicity, such as the presence of dragons and unicorns. As does the Book of Mormon, the Bible faces possible differences between a known history and a textually asserted history. The Bible confronts similar issues about whether the textually asserted history might reflect actual events or only myth and literature.

¹⁷ From his perspective as a science fiction author, Orson Scott Card, "The Book of Mormon, Artifact or Artifice?" suggests that the problem of cultural assumptions would make it obvious if Joseph Smith had written the Book of Mormon according to his own time's unwritten rules: "[Joseph Smith's] work should proclaim itself to be a phony on every page today. This is because every storyteller, no matter how careful he is, will inadvertently confess his own character and the society he lives in. He can make every conscious effort, he can be the best educated scholar you could possibly find, but if he tries to write something that is not of his own culture he will give himself away with every unconscious choice he makes. Yet he'll never know he's doing it because it won't occur to him that it could be any other way."

¹⁸ Although this book simply accepts a particular definition of how the Book of Mormon was translated, I have elsewhere presented my evidence supporting that definition. See Gardner, *The Gift and Power*.

¹⁹ For dragons, see Deut. 32:33; Job 30:29; Psalms 44:19. For unicorns, Num. 24:8; Job 39:9-10.

²⁰ Certainly there are many who accept the Bible as authentic history, without acknowledging any issues when compared to external ancient histories. There are others, however, who suggest that there is much that the Bible asserts to be history that may not actually reflect events as they occurred. For example, Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher

Baruch Halpern provides an interesting analogy that he created to describe approaches to the Bible. It is appropriate to our discussion of the historicity of the Book of Mormon:

The image of the map clarifies [the various approaches to the Bible as history]. The map, say of Europe, includes cities and highways of the tenth century, of the eleventh century and so on, continuing into our own time. In effect the confessionalist maintains that all those cities were on the map from the start, that God created Europe, and the map, in the tenth century. Critical study divulges that this is not so, that some of the cities and highways appeared later, and it is the job of the historian to determine when each town, highway, and so on, was added. Negative fundamentalists, however, date the whole map by its latest elements. Because the map reflects a view from the twentieth century, they argue, it cannot be used to get at earlier times.²¹

Just like the Bible, the Book of Mormon has its confessionalists who accept the text uncritically. They are likely to assert that all aspects of the text, including the English translation, faithfully represent its ancient origin. The Book of Mormon is also susceptible to what Halpern calls "negative fundamentalists" precisely because it has a publishing history that is demonstrably related to the nineteenth-century American Northeast.²² As with the Bible, the negative fundamentalists will date the entire text from these most modern elements. As with the Bible, the historian's task

Silberman, The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of its Sacred Texts, 76, discuss the contrast between the Bible's story of the Israelite conquest of Canaan and the archaeological record: "Archaeology has uncovered a dramatic discrepancy between the Bible and the situation within Canaan at the suggested date of the conquest, between 1230 and 1220 bce. Although we know that a group named Israel was already present somewhere in Canaan by 1207 BCE, the evidence on the general political and military landscape of Canaan suggests that a lightning invasion by this group would have been impractical and unlikely in the extreme."

John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts, 25–26, provide an example of how the potential conflicts between text and archaeology might be resolved. Luke 4:16 says that when Jesus came to Nazareth, he went into the synagogue. No first century synagogue has (yet) been discovered anywhere in Galilee, let alone Nazareth. Nevertheless, Crossan and Reed note: "In the Jewish homeland at the time of Jesus, the term synagogue referred primarily to a gathering, and less to a building with an accompanying, well-defined liturgy" (p. 26, italics theirs).

²¹ Baruch Halpern, The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History, 4.

²² John E. Clark, "Archaeological Trends and Book of Mormon Origins," 85–86: "The rival hypotheses about the [Book of Mormon's] origins implicate four knowledge worlds of diverse content and undetermined relationship: the ancient world, the nineteenth-century world, the twenty-first-century world, and the Book of Mormon world. Environmental or naturalistic explanations see the book as a hoax tethered to its nineteenth-century background. Thus, all details mentioned in the book should conform to knowledge and speculations available to Joseph Smith before the book was written in 1829. Mormon explanations see the book as history and situate it in the ancient world."

is to sort out the middle way, to analyze the various roads in the Book of Mormon "map," and to discern the time period in which they were created.²³

John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed approach Halpern's map analogy by suggesting that working with the Bible and archaeology is a pursuit of "parallel layering, an interaction between the layers of an archaeological mound and the layers of a gospel text." Understanding the Book of Mormon similarly requires a parallel layering or interaction between the text and historical information. However, because we have the text only in translation, it also requires that we carefully attempt to separate at least the two obvious layers of information, the original plate text and the English translation. The declared production culture is different for each layer, and each of those two layers will and should display evidence of the cultural and temporal assumptions prevalent at the time of production. Our task would be infinitely easier if we had (and could read) the original plates of Mormon, but we do not. Lacking the plates makes our task more difficult, but not impossible.

There are ways that we can use the modern text to examine its possible relationship to a different and ancient culture. In archaeology, contextual clues can help date when the various roads of Halpern's map analogy were laid down. Textual archaeology requires contextual clues to determine the time and culture that created the text. We are looking for the production culture of each "road" in the text; that is, the conditions and assumptions prevalent when each layer of the text was produced. In this book, I will be most interested in the correlation of the plate text to the culture and time that produced it. The final complication of the stated production of the Book of Mormon is that it really consists of three layers of text, not two:

English translation: Occurs in the nineteenth century. Composed text: Occurs in the late fourth century.

The major weakness of such criticisms is the one-dimensional approach taken to problems which the Book of Mormon presents. The assumption that any parallels between the world of Joseph Smith and the world of the Book of Mormon, real or imagined . . . , are sufficient to discredit the Book of Mormon is naïve. The challenge of the Book of Mormon lies elsewhere. It claims to be an ancient book, and it must be examined and criticized in terms of this claim.

If, as Joseph Smith states, it is a translation, any modern language source material which the translator found useful or helpful in his translating efforts cannot be used *ipso facto* as evidence against the authenticity of his work.

Griggs is responding to suggestions that the appearance of certain phrases in a modern text necessarily suggest that the Book of Mormon is modern. If the Book of Mormon is ancient as claimed, then modern phrases may easily be ascribed to the translator rather than the original text. As Griggs also notes, one cannot take a one-dimensional approach to the text. Multiple approaches and types of data must be brought to bear to properly understand the text in an ancient context.

²³ C. Wilfred Griggs, "The Book of Mormon as an Ancient Book," 260:

²⁴ Crossan and Reed, Excavating Jesus, xvii.

Source materials for the composition: A collection of documents spanning a thousand years of Nephite history, combined with a record of the Jaredites produced perhaps around 200 B.C.²⁵

The success of any attempt to separate these layers will only be seen in the ability of the reconstruction to productively explain the features of the text.

Reading through an Ancient Document's Translation Layer

In the case of a translated text, the translation itself is an interpretive layer—adding yet another cultural interaction with the artifact. Avoiding the inherent interpretations behind the translation is the reason that serious study of any text originally written in a different language should be based on reading it in that original language.

The Italian adage "traduttore, traditore" (the translator is a traitor) recognizes that something is always lost in translation. Depending upon the expertise of the translator, sometimes we have less information than the original provided, or sometimes meanings have been added that were not in the original. Words in different languages may overlap in meaning, but typically not with precision. When the words are combined into idioms, comprehension becomes even more complicated.

The problem of inter-cultural translation is highlighted by Mary Miller and Karl Taube. They discuss the problems associated with using the word "god" or "gods" to describe Mesoamerican concepts of the supernatural:

There has been considerable debate concerning the concept of gods and divinity in ancient Mesoamerica. The 16th century Spanish chronicles make frequent and direct references to *dioses*, or "gods." However, it has been justly noted that European terminology may have grossly simplified complex concepts of sacredness and divinity. Among the 16th century Zapotecs, the term *pee*, signifying "breath, spirit, or wind," expressed the concept of divinity. This animistic force caused movement—all phenomena or maternal [*sic*] things that expressed motion were attributed a certain degree of sacredness. Among the Aztecs, the term for sacredness was *teotl* which, like the Zapotec *pee*, referred to an immaterial energy or force similar to the Polynesian concept of mana.²⁶

Because the Book of Mormon expressly states that it is a translation, normal procedure dictates that we read it and analyze it in its original language. In this case, it is impossible. We only have the text in translation. There is no option but to study it in—and therefore as—translation.²⁷ Analysis of the nature of the Book of Mormon

²⁵ I am reserving the analysis of how the plate text was created and what it might contain that differs from what is seen in the translation layer for a future work. A discussion of the source materials is well beyond what I intend to deal with in this book. I have outlined some of those sources in Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 1:16–20. See also John L. Sorenson, "Mormon's Sources," 2–15.

²⁶ Mary Miller and Karl Taube, An *Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya*, 89. Abbreviations for "century" silently expanded.

²⁷ That we have a text only in translation does not automatically disqualify the text as ancient. For example, *The Apocalypse of Abraham* exists only in Slavonic. Its translator and editor, G. H.

suggests that there are places where an argument can be made that it is not a perfect representation of the underlying plate text, just as all translations are related to—but not perfect representations of—an original. It is not only possible that some translation errors would exist in the Book of Mormon, but virtually certain that they do.²⁸ Of course, this understanding is easily acceptable for secular translations, or even scholarly translations of sacred texts. It is harder for some faithful to believe that the Book of Mormon should be understood in the same way because its translation is tied to divine influence.

A simple example will suffice to demonstrate the problem of over-reliance on the English translation layer to determine historicity. The Reverend M. T. Lamb published an influential critique of the Book of Mormon in 1887. One of his arguments highlighted what he felt was anomalous vocabulary: "If, therefore, upon a careful examination we find the Book of Mormon filled up with words and phrases and forms of expression that are known to be entirely *modern* . . . then 'counterfeit' must be written across its pages, and its author be held responsible for the sad results of a wicked imposture."²⁹ He declared: "There are many words used in the book that have a *Greek* or a *Latin* origin *later* than six hundred years before Christ, and many others wholly *modern*. The following are only a few: 'Faculties,' 'Popular,' 'Priestcraft,' 'State of dilemma,' 'Synagogue,' 'Bible,' 'Jews,' 'Gentiles,' 'Church,' 'Baptize,' 'Barges,' 'Immortal,' and others."³⁰

A modern version of this argument is found in Earl M. Wunderli, An Imperfect Book: What the Book of Mormon Tells Us About Itself, 105–9. In this section Wunderli describes sets of English words that appear in texts associated with different authors. After discussing words associated with Jesus in the King James Version and those associated with Jesus in the Book of Mormon, he concludes: "The Book of Mormon idiom differentiates the New World Jesus from the biblical one. The Book of Mormon Jesus is indistinguishable from the Nephite writers. The Book of Mormon Jesus uses ten of the fifteen idiomatic words, including the harsh term abomination and the meaningless expedient. The biblical Jesus begins no sentence with now, as the Book of Mormon Jesus does" (109).

Wunderli does not comment on the fact that neither the biblical Jesus nor the Book of Mormon Jesus ever used any of those words. Jesus didn't speak English. Even the New Testament Greek is probably a translation of what Jesus said. Even an Aramaic quotation would probably be a remembrance rather than an actual quotation. It would be more interesting to find disparate translators who agreed than to note their differences.

Box, The Apocalypse of Abraham: Edited with a Translation from the Slavonic Text and Notes, describes the book as "thoroughly Jewish" in character, a point from which he asserts with fairly strong assurance that it was "probably" composed in "Hebrew or Aramaic . . . at the end of the first or the beginning of the second century A.D." The apocalypse's next step was a translation into "Greek," and from which the Slavonic version was created. The earliest Slavonic text is from the first half of the fourteenth century. (PDF, p. 7).

²⁸ Gardner, The Gift and Power, 185–93.

²⁹ Martin Thomas Lamb, The Golden Bible; or The Book of Mormon. Is It From God? 218.

³⁰ Ibid., 219.

This criticism would be appropriate and devastating if the Book of Mormon declared English to be its original language. To course, that declaration alone would be sufficient to show it false as English itself postdates early Book of Mormon times. As a translation, however, the presence of modern words is simply a lexical choice on the part of the translator and has no bearing on the antiquity of the document being translated. 32

There are three concepts that might describe the possible relationship between the English Book of Mormon text and the language on the plates. It might be a literal translation, a functional translation, or a conceptual translation. Each of these describes a differing relationship between the translation text and the underlying source text. The strictest is the literal translation. Such a translation would attempt to retain as much of the original as possible, allowing for the fact that it is not always possible to have a precise correspondence between two languages. A functional translation attempts to adhere to the source text but may use different words or concepts to convey the meaning rather than concentrating on finding the equivalent of a specific word. Finally, a conceptual translation attempts to retain the sense of the original but permits itself to express that sense in a much more flexible way. After examining the data available that might tell us what kind of translation the Book of Mormon is, I have suggested that the majority of the text best represents a functionalist translation.33 That analysis informs my discussion of some of the historical issues in the text where I see what might be anachronism as one of translation rather than an issue in the original plate text.³⁴

When we read the Book of Mormon for evidence of the culture that produced it, we must therefore be very careful any time an argument is presented that depends on

³¹ Nibley An Approach to the Book of Mormon, 5–6, makes this point with his typical wit:

Today some critics are fond of pointing out that the Book of Mormon is written in the very language of Joseph Smith's own society That is as if a professor of French literature were to prove Champollion a fraud by showing after patient years of study that his translation of the Rosetta Stone was not in Egyptian at all but in the very type of French that Champollion and his friends were wont to use! The discovery is totally without significance, of course, because Champollion never claimed to be writing Egyptian, but to be rendering it into his own language.

³² L. Ara Norwood, "Ígnoratio Elenchi: The Dialogue that Never Was: Review of James R. White, *Letters to a Mormon Elder*," 336–37. Norwood discusses White's argument, which is very similar to M. T. Lamb's—that the Book of Mormon contains anachronistic words, including "adieu." Norwood replies: "Of course 'adieu' is originally French, as are a vast number of English words, but it entered the English vocabulary by the fourteenth century. Indeed, the word was part of Joseph Smith's personal vocabulary, with the basic meaning of 'Fare thee well' – a very poignant and sublime valedictory statement."

³³ Gardner, *The Gift and Power*, 241–47, presents the conclusions to the analysis. While the majority of the translation is functionalist, the other translation types appear on specific occasions. For example, the manuscript evidence shows that Joseph spelled out the first occurrence of unusual names. In addition to exercising specific control over the spelling, several find correspondences in ancient Near Eastern texts. That process suggests that where names were concerned, the translation process was literalist rather than functionalist. See chap. 15.

³⁴ See Chapter 12 "Horses, Chariots, and Other Anachronistic Nouns," for a more complete discussion of translation anachronisms.

vocabulary to make its case (either English vocabulary or a putative underlying Hebrew). It is precisely at the level of vocabulary that we have the most uncertain connection to the original plate text. None of this means that we can ignore the English text or construe it at will. It means we have to work harder.

Reading through an Ancient Document's Composition Layer

By definition, an ancient document comes from a time period long before our own. The passage of time alone assures a difference between how a modern reader understands the text and the way the writer believed it would be understood. The problem becomes more complex as we cross a cultural as well as a temporal gap. For example, we tend to read the Bible and the Book of Mormon as though people just like us wrote them. E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien elaborate:

By the Holy Spirit, God continues to speak to his people through the Scriptures. It is important that Christ's church retain this conviction, even as it poses certain challenges for interpretation. We can easily forget that Scripture is a foreign land and that reading the Bible is a crosscultural experience. To open the Word of God is to step into a strange world where things are very unlike our own. Most of us don't speak the languages. We don't know the geography or the customs or what behaviors are considered rude or polite. And yet we hardly notice. For many of us, the Bible is more familiar than any other book. We may have parts of it memorized. And because we believe that the Bible is God's Word to us, no matter where on the planet or when in history we read it, we tend to read Scripture in our own when and where, in a way that makes sense on our terms.³⁵

Reading ourselves into the text is possible because documents do not always encode all of the information we need to properly understand them. Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh explain:

Biblical authors, like most authors writing in the high-context ancient Mediterranean world, presume that readers have a broad and concrete knowledge of their common social context. By contrast, "low-context" societies are those that assume "low" knowledge of the context of any communication. They produce highly specific and detailed documents that leave little for the reader to fill in or supply. Since the United States and northern Europe are typical low-context societies, readers from these societies expect writers to give the necessary background when referring to something not shared by all in the society.

The obvious problem this creates for reading the biblical writings today is that low-context readers in the United States frequently mistake the biblical writings for low-context documents. They erroneously assume that the author has provided all of the contextual information needed to understand it.³⁶

³⁵ E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to better Understand the Bible, 11.

³⁶ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 16–17. Elizabeth Wayland Barber and Paul T. Barber, *When They Severed Earth From Sky: How the Human Mind Shapes Myth*, 17, call this phenomenon the "Silence Principle": "What everyone is expected to know already is not explained in so many words."

They continue: "Because the reader must interact with the text and 'complete' it if it is to make sense, every text invites immediate participation on the part of the reader. Texts thus provide what is necessary, but cannot provide everything." When the unstated context is supplied from our modern time and culture rather than the one that produced the text, Malina and Rohrbaugh note that "as a rule, nonunderstanding—or at best misunderstanding—will be the result." The disjunction between the cultural context for the writer and reader led William G. Dever to warn: "The Bible cannot simply be read at face value as history; nor, of course, can any other ancient text be so read."

It is therefore unsurprising that many Book of Mormon proponents and detractors have such a hard time agreeing on any interpretation of the Book of Mormon. At the extreme contrasting positions, they are reading two entirely different books, even though the actual text is the same. The believer's translated ancient document encodes assumptions and interpretations that are both unavailable and inapplicable to Joseph Smith's world. The non-believer's text contains only information that derives from a nineteenth-century context.⁴⁰ Richard L. Bushman cautions: "The preconceptions of the modern age led Mormons as well as critics to see things in the Book of Mormon that are not there."

Of course, reading the text against a cultural background necessarily requires that we define what that background might have been. For that reason, the initial assumption that the Book of Mormon might be historical requires that we resolve the question of Book of Mormon geography. Only by locating the Book of Mormon in space (the Book of Mormon declares the applicable timeframe), can it be located in a cultural context. No proper understanding of an ancient Book of Mormon is acceptable without correlating the way the ancient composition layer interacted with its environment. (See Chapter 5).

³⁷ Malina and Rohrbaugh, Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John, 9.

³⁸ Ibid., 14. See also Richards and O'Brien, Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes, 13–15.

³⁹ William G. Dever, Recent Archaeological Discoveries and Biblical Research, 5. William G. Dever, What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It? 19:

An apt metaphor for understanding literature may be to regard it as a form of "symbolically encoded thought and behavior," words being the specific symbols chosen and language the code. To the extent that we can "break the code"—difficult at best with ancient texts—we may be able to read the symbols and thus penetrate behind them to the reality that the author sought to express. To be sure, symbols (including verbal ones) are only "signs" pointing beyond themselves, and therefore will always remain somewhat enigmatic. Yet "reading" symbols is possible; and it is not mere guesswork unless it is ignorant of the language, vocabulary, grammar, or syntax of the symbols, in this case the texts. Texts, however encoded, are not "mute" but historians are sometimes deaf.

⁴⁰ Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide*, xvii: "[The Book of Mormon] can certainly be read as a product of the nineteenth century, but this requires treating it as an indirect or coded source; one must start with the assumption that it is something very different from what it professes to be."

⁴¹ Richard L. Bushman, Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays, 122.

Reading Archaeology against the Book of Mormon

Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe encapsulate a common critical opinion of the New World setting for Book of Mormon: "Had the Book of Mormon been what Joseph Smith said—not an allegory with spiritual import but a literal history of Hebrew immigrants to America—this should have been verified by now. Instead, the varied inhabitants and exotic locales in the Book of Mormon remain elusive; what some would term 'Book of Mormon archaeology' is non-existent."⁴²

In spite of their firm declaration that archaeology does not support the Book of Mormon, John E. Clark clearly sees the situation differently: "Archaeology and geography support the Book of Mormon to the same degree, and for the same reasons, that they support the Bible. Both books present the same challenges for empirical confirmation, and both are in good shape. Many things have been verified for each, but many have not." Of those "many things" that he suggests have found empirical confirmation, he notes: "The overall trend in the data over the past 175 years fits the expectations for the Book of Mormon as history rather than hoax." How do we have such different opinions on what archaeology has and has not done relative to the Book of Mormon?

On the one hand, it can be stated with great certainty that there is no artifact or location in the New World that can unambiguously be called Nephite. On the other hand is Clark's declaration: "Book of Mormon cities have been found, they are well known and their artifacts grace the finest museums." Clark intentionally made this stark contrast to expectations because he needed to emphasize an important point. Understanding how the Book of Mormon fits into archaeological evidence differs significantly from archaeology of the biblical region. Both the continuation of cultural memory and the abundance of ancient texts point us to locations and peoples and help in declaring the ethnic and cultural identities of the peoples living in the excavated sites. Neither the historical memory or extant texts assist us in understanding most New World sites from Book of Mormon times.

It is this problem of identification that led Clark to clarify his intentionally startling statement that we have indeed found Nephite remains: "They are merely masked by archaeological labels such as Maya, Olmec and so on. The problem then is not that Book of Mormon artifacts have not been found, only that they have not been recognized for what they are."

The simplest example is the Olmec that Clark mentioned. We have their remains, but no positive identification of the language they spoke. We do not know what they called themselves and the name we use, Olmec, is the result of an early

⁴² Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe, "Editor's Introduction," vii.

⁴³ John E. Clark, "Archaeology, Relics, and Book of Mormon Belief," 42.

⁴⁴ John E. Clark, "Archaeological Trends and Book of Mormon Origins," 95.

⁴⁵ Clark, "Archaeology, Relics and Book of Mormon Belief," 42.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

misidentification. They certainly called themselves something else. Suppose that they has actually called themselves *Hayaw.⁴⁷ We could accurately restate Clark's declaration about Nephite artifacts as "*Hayaw cities have been found, they are well known and their artifacts grace the finest museums." That would be a true statement even though there is no city and no artifact that is identified as *Hayaw. They are all called Olmec.

Even in the infinitely better understood Old World, archaeology continues to have questions and potential issues when compared to the very different types of evidence found in texts. Even in the Old World, problems of identification still arise. William H. Stiebing describes the problem for the Bible:

Correlating archaeological sites with places known from ancient texts is also not always a sure thing. Cities like Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome have remained occupied since antiquity, so their locations are not in question. But the sites of many other places must be determined from clues found in ancient written material, and sometimes there are two or three possible archaeological sites for a given town or city. Archaeological excavation occasionally solves such disputes by uncovering on a site written evidence of its ancient identity. But the locations of many ancient cities known from texts remain debatable.⁴⁸

A related issue is that a location with modern meaning may have no ancient significance. Nazareth is a well-known biblical location because it is associated with Jesus Christ. The site may even be located archaeologically, but it appears nowhere in nonbiblical history, as John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed observe:

Outside [of] the gospels and the early Christian texts that rely on them, there are no pre-Constantinian citations referring to Nazareth. It is never mentioned by any of the Jewish rabbis whose pronouncements are in the Mishnah or whose discussions are in the Talmud, even though they cite sixty-three other Galilean towns. Josephus, the Jewish historian and general over Galilea during the first Jewish revolt in 66–67 C.E., refers to forty-five named sites there, but never to Nazareth. It is unknown in the Christian Old Testament. Even though Zebulun's tribal allotment in the Bible catalogues some fifteen Lower Galilean sites in Nazareth's vicinity, it is not counted among them (Josh. 19:10–15). It was absolutely insignificant.⁴⁹

Complicating even Old World history are the times where there is an uneasy fit between texts and archaeology.⁵⁰ Ephraim Stern points out the limitations of the

⁴⁷ Søren Wichmann, *The Relationship Among the Mixe-Zoquean Languages of Mexico*, 566, lists *haya(w) as the proto-Mixe-Zoquean word for "man." Proto-Mixe-Zoquean is the leading candidate for the language of the Olmec.

It isn't unusual for peoples to use some form of human/man as their name. There is no evidence that this name was used, but there is some logic behind the choice.

⁴⁸ William H. Stiebing, Jr., Out of the Desert: Archaeology and the Exodus/Conquest Narratives, 34.

⁴⁹ Crossan and Reed, Excavating Jesus, 18.

⁵⁰ Dana M. Pike, "Israelite Inscriptions from the Time of Jeremiah and Lehi," 194–95:

Archaeological excavation produces two broad types of evidence: nontextual artifacts—ranging in size from beads and seeds to monumental architecture—and inscriptions or

archaeological record with respect to a text: "Herodotus mentions that in the third decade of [Psamtik's] rule, the Scythians arrived in the area. Even if this event really occurred, it left no distinguishable mark in the archaeological record."⁵¹

With such issues found in Old World archaeology, it is unsurprising that they are also present in New World archaeology. Kent V. Flannery found little archaeological evidence supporting the textual descriptions of Postclassic warfare in Oaxaca. Travis W. Stanton and M. Kathryn Brown note: "Ethnohistoric and ethnographic data, however, should not be taken at face value. Pre-Columbian cultures were transformed shortly after the first Spanish expedition set foot in Mesoamerica. Problems can arise when comparing textual and archaeological data from different periods. Furthermore, we must remain acutely aware that each ethnohistoric and ethnographic document we use was written from only one point of view and that for each view of reality there are many others. These same problems apply to iconography and hieroglyphic texts."

As a final complication, archaeological evidence may also flatly contradict a text, as in this example Crossan and Reed provide:

Luke also presumes that a tiny hamlet like Nazareth had both a synagogue building and scrolls of scripture. The first presumption is most unlikely and . . . no evidence for a first-century synagogue building was discovered at Nazareth. The second presupposition is questionable—scrolls were mostly an urban privilege and, most likely, lectionary readings came later. ⁵⁴

texts. Both types must be coordinated with each other in any serious effort to understand the life and times of ancient Israelites or any other people. While inscriptions may seem more readily accessible and understandable than many artifacts are, they, like artifacts, require careful interpretation in order to be employed productively. Authentic Israelite inscriptions (distinguished from forgeries, for which there is, sadly, a flourishing market) are available to us as they existed over twenty-five hundred years ago. They are valuable primary documents not susceptible to tampering or editing, having no transmission history (in contrast to the Bible). As such, ancient inscriptions are of great importance to any study of Israel's past.

However, all archaeological evidence must be coordinated with biblical data to effectively understand ancient Israel. On the one hand, because of its vast size and the great span of time it covers, the Bible preserves historical, cultural, and religious data that would otherwise be unknown if we had only the relatively small corpus of ancient Israelite inscriptions. On the other hand, the Bible has inherent limitations for students of ancient Israelite history and culture because of its focus on religious themes. For example, little if anything is recorded in the Bible about King Ahab's political or military activity during his twenty-year reign or about the plight of the agrarian class of Judahites who remained in the land after many from the upper and middle classes were deported to Babylonia in the 590s and 580s B.C. Thus biblical data must be carefully employed and coordinated with what is learned from inscriptions and artifacts.

⁵¹ Ephraim Stern, Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, 2:107.

⁵² Cited in Travis W. Stanton and M. Kathryn Brown, "Studying Warfare in Ancient Mesoamerica," 13–14.

⁵³ Ibid 14

⁵⁴ Crossan and Reed, Excavating Jesus, 30.

That Luke misses certain historical details does not disqualify his general witness of the Savior. It simply says that he was not an eyewitness to a particular episode and that he misunderstood or was misled by the sources he consulted or by the individuals whom he interviewed. Writers who create their works long after the events may make similar mistakes, yet still present a "true" history. This point is particularly important for the Book of Mormon because Mormon, writing over four hundred years after most of the events he describes, strongly edited and reshaped his material.

Part of the resolution of the conflicting statements from Vogel, Metcalfe, and Clark lies in the nature of the expectations of what evidence should support the Book of Mormon. Like Vogel and Metcalfe, Simon G. Southerton declared that there has been little archaeological support for the Book of Mormon. What he used to demonstrate that absence of support tells us more about his expectations than about archaeology:

Southerton's expectations, and therefore what he declares has not been found (that should have been) is a variation on the problem of Nephite artifacts. Although the absence of time-appropriate metallurgy continues to be an issue for Book of Mormon historicity (see Chapter 6), the rest of his list depends upon the assumptions brought to both the text and to archaeology. As with Nephite artifacts, the answers may easily be that we have found appropriate remains but not recognized them. Many of these will be discussed later in this book. ⁵⁶ The approach to Book of Mormon historicity depends heavily upon the way we approach the data in the text and its plausible relationship to what is known from history and archaeology.

Reading from a Solid Foundation

Michael D. Coe is one of the better known Mesoamerican archaeologists of the passing generation. Unlike most non-LDS archaeologists who dismiss the Book of Mormon, he at least read it before passing judgment.⁵⁷ He notes:

 $^{^{55}}$ Simon G. Southerton, Losing a Lost Tribe: Native Americans, DNA, and the Mormon Church, xv.

⁵⁶ The absence of ancient Christianity is discussed in Chapter 7. Questions about Old World domesticates may be as much a question of translation as archaeology. See Chapter 12.

⁵⁷ Michael D. Coe, "Mormons & Archaeology: An Outside View," 40, "Members of the faith have often accused outside critics of ignorance, and often rightly so, on the grounds that almost none of them has ever read the Book of Mormon, and are unacquainted with Mormon history,

In hundreds of motels scattered across the western United States the Gentile archaeologist can find a paperback Book of Mormon lavishly illustrated with the paintings of Arnold Friberg depicting such scenes as Samuel the Lamanite prophesying on top of what looks like the Temple of the Tigers in Chichen Itza, Yucatan.

Any curious archaeologist can hear guides in L.D.S. visitor centers from Sharon, Vermont, to Los Angeles confidently lecturing that the Nephites built the Maya "cities" and expounding on other subjects that are usually the preserve of experts in these matters. Small wonder that the outside archaeologist often feels bewilderment if not downright hostility when confronted with things he is sure cannot be true.⁵⁸

Unfortunately for LDS Book of Mormon enthusiasts, Coe's description of the archaeologist's "bewilderment if not downright hostility" is not hyperbole or simple ignorance of the Book of Mormon. In most cases, it is a legitimate conclusion based on much of what the enthusiastic faithful claim for the Book of Mormon. It is not an indictment of the Book of Mormon as much as it is a sad reflection of the state of our Book of Mormon apologetics. In many ways, the greatest obstacle to understanding Book of Mormon historicity has been our own amateur theories and theorists. ⁵⁹

Parallels as a Problematic Methodology

Thirty years ago, Martin Raish lamented: "I am discouraged by the poor research, misleading conclusions, and general lack of rigor far too often permeating the majority of the commentaries [on the Book of Mormon]. An indiscriminate mingling of fact with fiction often results from such methodological laziness and thus tends to discredit the whole endeavor." 60

He described one occasion where this methodological laziness nevertheless impressed the untrained audience to which it was presented:

values, and scholarship. While not myself a believer in the Mormon faith, I should warn readers that I have tried not to commit these sins of omission."

Michael D. Coe, "The Mormons: Interview [with] Michael Coe." Coe provided a response to the question "How would you describe the attitude of most professional historians to orthodox Mormon archaeology?" In part, he replied: "I think that for the Book of Mormon, even though they don't know much about the Book of Mormon or Mormonism, they take the whole thing as a complete fantasy, that this is a big waste of time."

⁵⁸ Coe, "Mormons & Archaeology," 40.

⁵⁹ Chris Heimerdinger, "A Lost Generation of Scholarship." "This phenomenon of non-LDS scholars lashing out against 'Mormon Mesoamericanists' is still very much ongoing. Really, it's merely a subset of the same struggle that Latter-day Saints have faced since the *Book of Mormon*'s initial publication. And if we are to be honest, some of the ridicule and/or criticism has been justified. Latter-day Saints, because we often have well-established testimonies of the *Book of Mormon* beforehand, are at times all-too eager to promote certain archeological findings before all of the 'research ducks' are lined up."

⁶⁰ Martin H. Raish, "All that Glitters: Uncovering Fool's Gold in Book of Mormon Archaeology," 10. More recently, Daniel Peterson remarked of John L. Sorenson: "While he is a committed proponent of the historicity of the Book of Mormon, Sorenson has also criticized the shoddy scholarship that some have used to defend it. This, too, has been a valuable contribution." Daniel C. Peterson, "Advancing Book of Mormon Scholarship."

Several years ago I attended a presentation that consisted of pairs of slides juxtaposing objects from the Old World with similar ones from the New. The point was to show so many Old/New World correspondences that those in attendance could see for themselves that people had sailed across the oceans in ancient times and had influenced the cultures of the Americas.

One pair of images that I especially remember matched the mask of Agamemnon from the royal tomb in Mycenae with an example of Mixtec jewelry from Oaxaca, Mexico. But while many in the audience were ohhing and ahhing at the apparent *resemblances*—both were, after all, gold faces—I was pondering their equally notable *differences*. For example, the first was nearly life-size, portrayed a real person, and was fashioned from a single lump of gold, while the latter was only three inches tall, was an image of the god Xipe Totec, and was made by the lost-wax casting process.

This sort of slipshod "scholarship"—that shines light on only those bits of information that support the argument at hand while ignoring everything else—has always annoyed me.⁶¹

Well-intentioned armchair scholars have infused their discussions of the Book of Mormon with just this kind of looks-better-than-it-is argumentation.⁶² Often the similarities between an Old World and a New World culture are assumed to indicate a New World borrowing of the Old World trait.⁶³ R. John Williams provides a wonderful example of the problems inherent in such assumptions:

Part of this paper deals with a unique and complex book whose authenticity and historicity we are asked to accept on "faith." The book claims to arrive as the secondary translation of some magnificent testimonies containing the story of a family whose intercontinental travel takes them beyond the lands known in the Bible. It speaks of "great wonders." It recounts the story of Adam and Eve (slightly revised, of course). There are bloodthirsty, brutal people who threaten the faith of believers with certain death, thwarted at the last minute by divine intervention. At one point the day actually turns dark. At

What is the harm from such publications? First, they train the reader that serious, critical thought is unnecessary and maybe even undesirable, that any source of information will serve no matter how unreliable, and that logical absurdity is as good as sound analysis. Second, the reader gets the false impression that all is well in Zion, that the outside world is being forced to the LDS point of view, and that the only role LDS scholars need play in Book of Mormon-related studies is to use scissors and paste effectively. Third, the underlying complexity and subtlety of the Book of Mormon are masked by a pseudo-scholarship to which everything is simple.

⁶³ Perhaps the most dramatic list of parallels is found in Thomas Stuart Ferguson, *One Fold*, *One Shepherd*, 57–72, which provides a thinly documented list of 311 items that are found in Mesoamerica (at various places and various time periods) and which also occur in the ancient Near East (at various places and various time periods, not necessarily correlated even in time with those listed for the New World).

A much more sophisticated use of the methodology is found in Diane E. Wirth, *Parallels: Mesoamerican and Ancient Middle Eastern Traditions*. Wirth does not argue an exclusive importation by Book of Mormon peoples but clearly implies some kind of causality implicit in the parallels. She does not, for instance, allow the possibility of independent invention, even when there is ample reason to look to a common model rather than an imported idea.

⁶¹ Martin H. Raish, "Review of Paul R. Cheesman and Millie F. Cheesman, Ancient American Indians: Their Origins, Civilizations and Old World Connections," 21.

⁶² John L. Sorenson, "Instant Expertise on Book of Mormon Archaeology," 431:

another, the land becomes "infested by robbers," and the more evil people even participate in cannibalism. It tells of great kings who offer to convert to Christianity. It demonstrates an uncanny knowledge of guerrilla warfare tactics. It has inspired stories of magical salamanders that turn white when placed in fire, and of course it speaks of wonders and magnificence "beyond description." It has even had an indirect influence on the manner in which we refer to Native Americans. But the original text, unfortunately, no longer exists on this earth, and we are left only with the assurances of a "translator" that the testimony contained in the record is "true," although we do not, in fact, have even the complete text as it left the hand of the translator/scribe.

I am speaking, of course, of *The Travels of Marco Polo*, written by one Rustichello of Pisa, a romance-writer who spent time in jail with Marco Polo in 1298 and claims to have recorded Polo's narrative as Polo told it to him....

But, more to the point, why have I introduced this complex medieval narrative in such a way that my readers are compelled to find parallels between Polo's Travels and the Book of Mormon? Of course, since I ask why "my readers" are "compelled" to find parallels between the Book of Mormon and the *Travels of Marco Polo*, I am speaking already of a certain horizon of expectations. To present that particular series of details, invoking key words like "faith," "miraculous," "scribe," and "guerilla warfare," while omitting other elements like "Marco Polo," "1298," "China," and "Emperor," I am playing a "trick" on "my readers" that works only because I am already intimately familiar with the discursive parameters of *Dialogue* [the journal] readership. I am forcing a particular interpretation, based on my objectives within a particular interpretive community.⁶⁴

It is simply too easy to manufacture impressive parallels by the descriptions that present the parallels. The problem of finding appropriate methodologies for making a case for Book of Mormon history leads us to Dever's suggestion that "in history-writing of any kind, the choice of method is fundamental, because to a large degree it determines the outcome of the inquiry. Where you arrive depends not only upon where you think you are going, but also upon how you decide to get there." 65

In critical literature, the abuse of comparisons is called parallelomania, a term Samuel Sandmel coined for a similar methodological issue in biblical studies: "We might for our purposes define parallelomania as that extravagance among scholars which first overdoes the supposed similarity in passages and then proceeds to describe source and derivation as if implying literary connection flowing in an inevitable or predetermined direction."

Douglas F. Salmon discussed the problems of the method:

For the purposes of this discussion, a "parallel" is the occurrence in a separate text of a key phrase, idea, or term that closely matches the same one found in the text under consideration. That parallels exist in a wide variety of texts—separated temporally, geographically, and culturally—is an undeniable fact. The challenge is to adequately explain what the existence of the parallel means. Does it mean that there is some type of

⁶⁴ R. John Williams, "A Marvelous Work and a Possession: Book of Mormon Historicity as Postcolonialism," 38–39.

 ⁶⁵ William G. Dever, Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel, 8.
 66 Samuel Sandmel, "Parallelomania," 1–13.

relationship between the two texts? Did one of the authors know the work of the other, either directly or through some intermediary text? If no relationship between the texts can be established, how do we explain the similarities in thought? Is it simply coincidence, or is there some other theory that can adequately explain the similarities?⁶⁷

Too often, the questions that must be asked of the parallels remain unasked. Without controls, comparisons are frequently simple parallelomania. John F. Hobbins discusses the overly exuberant use of the methodology:

Parallelomania is the practice of overdoing supposed similarities between texts. Very loose and even non-existent parallels are dressed up as stringent parallels with the result that the sense of a particular text is mis-specified or over-specified on the basis of another. It really doesn't matter if texts A and B derive from the same milieu (however defined) or from discrete milieu. The obsession with "parallels" overlooks the fact that wherever there are similarities, there are also differences. If a scholar notes similarities only between text A and text B, rite A and rite B, religion A and religion B, chances are, she is on a binge of parallelomania. Said scholar has a disease, but it is not incurable. It is treatable if the patient is willing to go through detox and remain within an accountability structure thereafter.⁶⁸

It is a caution that James R. Davila underscores: "In general, a parallel only has meaning when placed in an overall context of differences." ⁶⁹

A wonderful, tongue-in-cheek examination of parallels as proof of Book of Mormon plagiarism is Jeff Lindsay's essay "demonstrating" that the Book of Mormon was cribbed from Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass." Lindsay writes with irony:

While I will discuss examples in more detail below, please note that the parallels between Whitman and the Book of Mormon are not only strong in terms of themes and common elements, but strong and convincing right down to specific expressions from Whitman copied verbatim in the Book of Mormon. Normally a plagiarist will change a few words or modify their order to cover the crime to some degree, and Joseph often did this. But apparently sometimes he got so sloppy that entire phrases have been lifted verbatim from Whitman, and not just two- or three-word phrases, but sometimes entire FIVE-WORD PHRASES! Here are a few examples, some of which we shall treat more fully later:

⁶⁹ James R. Davila "The Perils of Parallels (lecture)." Benjamin L. McGuire, "Finding Parallels: Some Cautions and Criticisms, Part Two," 79–80 provides an extensive quotation from Alexander Lindey's book *Plagiarism and Originality* which expands on the problem of the importance of the differences. Lindey provides nine specific criticisms of the method ranging from the problem of ignoring differences to the distortion created by the selection of only certain elements.

Gordon C. Thomasson underlines this issue. "Daddy, What's a 'Frontier'?" 4–5: "Upon finding a possible parallel between the Book of Mormon and some bit of early American history, it is all too often assumed that the source for the idea has been found and further study is neglected or even ridiculed. Such an at best naïve, reductionist approach ignores the fact that where parallels occur they almost invariably related to what are perennial questions—themes which recur in countless religious histories—and which are by no means unique to the Burned-over District in space or time, and/or may correlate even more significantly with ancient evidence than it does with the more recent."

⁶⁷ Douglas F. Salmon, "Parallelomania and the Study of Latter-day Scripture: Confirmation, Coincidence, or the Collective Unconscious?" 130.

⁶⁸ John F. Hobbins, "A Contrastive Approach to the Study of Ancient Texts."

Five-word Phrases Common to Whitman and the Book of Mormon

- The meaning of all things. Whitman: "My knowledge my live parts, it keeping tally with the meaning of all things, . . ." 1 Nephi 11:17: ". . . nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things." (Tellingly, this passage is in a scene of prophecy, and the lifted passage from Whitman is associated with "prophetical screams.")
- Of the souls of men. Whitman: "Of the progress of the souls of men and women. . . ." Alma 40:7: "I would inquire what becometh of the souls of men. . . ." The same phrase is also in Alma 40:9 (a double blunder!).
- By day and by night. Whitman frequently uses the phrase "by day and by night," a five-word phrase found also in 3 Nephi 4:21: "safely by day or by night."
- The beginning and the end. Whitman uses this phrase more than once. One example: "But I do not talk of the beginning or the end." Given Whitman's emphasis of this term, it should be no surprise to find it also in the Book of Mormon, specifically in 3 Nephi 9:18, where we read that Christ is "the beginning and the end."
- The righteous and the wicked. Whitman speaks of "all the righteous and the wicked," which is parroted in 3 Nephi 24:18: "Then shall ye return and discern between the righteous and the wicked, . . ."
- The face of the earth. This tell-tale phrase is one of the most common phrases in the Book of Mormon, repeated an astonishing THIRTY-EIGHT (38) TIMES! Examples include 1 Nephi 1:11, 1 Nephi 10:12, 13; 1 Nephi 12:5, 1 Nephi 14:12; Alma 13:22; etc. It's source is a classic Whitman passage about the prophecies of seers and other spiritual topics, which we'll discuss in more detail below. (Thanks to Dr. Walter Reade for pointing this one out to me.) In fact, this actually should count as a SIX-WORD PHRASE, for Whitman speaks of things that are "on the face of the earth," and many of the 38 plagiarized Book of Mormon passages have "upon the face of the earth." The minor change of "on" to "upon" hardly conceals the crime of plagiarism. Thus, in all fairness, we have a SIX-WORD parallel—absolutely fatal to the cause of defenders of the Book of Mormon!
- The Son of God shall come. Actually, this should also be counted as a six-word parallel, for Joseph Smith directly plagiarizes six words from Whitman's phrase, "The true son of God shall come singing his songs," vainly trying to disguise his crime by dropping the word "true." But with almost insane abandon, Joseph then repeats Whitman's phrase THREE TIMES in the Book of Mormon (Alma 9:26, Alma 11:35, and Alma 21:7). (Thanks also to Dr. Walter Reade for this one!)⁷⁰

Of course, the problem is that the Book of Mormon would be copying from a work published about twenty-five years later. Parallels between the Book of Mormon language and words or very short phrases found in contemporary texts are no stronger than those Lindsay describes for *Leaves of Grass*. The Even when the lists of such

 $^{^{70}}$ Jeff Lindsay, "Was the Book of Mormon Plagiarized from Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass?"

⁷¹ The most recent phrase comparison suggests that the 1819 *The Late War Between the United States and Great Britain From June*, 1812, to February 1815, is a significant source for the Book of Mormon. Chris Johnson and Duane Johnson, "How the Book of Mormon Destroyed Mormonism."

similarities are extensive, they do not rise above coincidence or the common vocabulary for common religious themes.⁷² Parallels are a problematic methodology no matter who uses them or whether one agrees with the thesis they are used to support.⁷³ Although much historical work, particularly in the New World's dearth of pre-Conquest documents, requires comparisons to fill in gaps, the potential for false parallels is sufficiently strong that parallels should be used only with the greatest caution and control.

For responses, see Benjamin L. McGuire, "The Late War against the Book of Mormon," 323–55, and G. Bruce Schaalje, "A Bayesian Cease-Fire in the Late War on the Book of Mormon." Schaalje, a statistician, examines the statistical model necessary to make such a distinction.

BOM Mosiah 28:4. And thus did the Spirit of the lord work upon them, for they were the very *vilest of sinners*, And the Lord saw fit *in his infinite mercy* to spare them; nevertheless they suffered much *anguish of soul* because of their iniquities, suffering much and fearing that they should be **cast off forever**.

COM[mentary] Gill: Heb 12:3 "some of them are the vilest of sinners, (Henry, Clarke)

COM Clarke: Jam 5:20 "him back to God, who, in his infinite mercy" (Henry)

COM Gill: Job 7:121 "but great anguish of soul;" (Henry, Clarke)

KJV Lamentations 3:31 For the Lord will not **cast off forever**;

Bold and italics in original. I have silently removed some internal notations and underlining of the scripture references. I believe that Henline does conclusively demonstrate that Joseph Smith used the religious language common to his day. I disagree that the nature of that vocabulary in a translation indicates that the Book of Mormon is a pastiche of phrases excerpted from commentaries.

⁷³ Even the best of us have, at times, succumbed to the method of evidence by lists. John L. Sorenson, "Ancient America and the Book of Mormon Revisited," 85–92 presents classified correspondence lists of cultural items that are in the New World and the Old World. They are presented only in a list and provide no information on the nature of the similarities, the comparative dating, and whether the information might be seen as independent invention.

John L. Sorenson, "Reading Mormon's Codex," is a paper he gave at the 2012 FAIR Conference. In that paper he discusses "420 correspondences that tie the Book of Mormon to the picture of ancient Mesoamerican civilization constructed by archaeologists and other researchers." His list of correspondences in the paper is not qualitatively different from his 1969 list. A major difference is that, instead of listing parallels to the Old World, these are "correspondences" to the New World.

John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex* is the book that fleshes out the correspondences he summarized in the 2012 FAIR Conference paper. The simple correspondence list does not appear in the book, though the type of comparisons he makes often leans more to parallels than to a more rigorous comparison of convincing trait complexes.

An important addition to the literature on the problems of parallels is McGuire, "Finding Parallels: Some Cautions and Criticisms" (in two parts). In this essay McGuire analyzes a work claiming a modern origin for all of the major themes in Mormonism by comparisons/parallels to the information environment surrounding Joseph Smith. McGuire's essay is an important caution for anyone attempting to use parallels as a methodology.

⁷² A fascinating example is Timothy W. Henline, *Absolute Proof that the Book of Mormon Is Fake*. The entire book is a compilation of similarities in vocabulary. An example selected at random (88):

Convergences as a Methodological Foundation

Some form of comparison between text and history is always required to discern historicity. Texts are always compared to archaeology and/or other texts. Sometimes even artifacts require explanation by comparison or analogy to similar artifacts from another culture. Comparisons must be made. The problem cannot, therefore, reside in an absolute deficit in any methodology that makes comparisons, but rather in the way the comparisons are made and made to be significant. One important type of controlled parallel is ethnographic analogy. Dever explains his version of this method:

One aspect shared by both biblical scholarship and archaeology is a dependence on analogy as a fundamental method of argument. . . .

The challenge is to find appropriate analogues, those offering the most promise yet capable of being tested in some way. Ethnoarchaeology is useful in this regard, particularly in places where unsophisticated modern cultures are still found superimposed, as it were, upon the remains of the ancient world, as in parts of the Middle East. Analogies drawn from life of modern Arab villages or Bedouin society can, with proper controls, be used to illuminate both artifacts and texts, as many studies have shown.⁷⁴

Sorenson's *Mormon's Codex* and this book were both in preparation for a few years prior to publications. During that time, Sorenson and I had some limited communication. When I saw an early table of contents for what would become *Mormon's Codex* I was struck at how much the two books appeared to be developing along similar lines even though we had not communicated. Now that *Mormon's Codex* has been published and my own book's focus and argument have clarified, the two have fewer similarities than suggested by that much earlier table of contents.

However, one of the similarities that struck me was that both Sorenson and I had read Dever's What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It? Both of us had been impressed with Dever's concept of "convergences" and both of us had leaned heavily on both that term and our understanding of the subtle difference in methodology that Dever suggested it represented.

As with the general outlines of the two books, our two different perceptions of a methodology built upon convergences has also diverged. Sorenson explains his evolved concept:

Dever's term convergences has many synonyms—correspondences, parallels, analogies, similarities, agreements, conformities, counterparts, and congruencies. Each has a slightly different shade of meaning. Convergence may suggest distinct processes that end up with similar results; parallel connotes a general or unfocused degree of similarity; analogy points to likeness in form without any particular historical connection implied between the features compared. The comparisons upon which this book relies will usually be called correspondences, in the dictionary sense of "a particular similarity." Occasionally, synonymous terms will be employed to avoid excessive repetition, but no variation in meaning is intended when that is done. (Mormon's Codex, 16)

⁷⁴ Dever, What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It? 77–78.

In my book, the shades of meaning that Sorenson spells out might apply to a term used as simply a lexical choice. However, I am suggesting that a methodology may be attached to some of these terms, and those methodologies are much more distinct than are the dictionary definitions. Therefore, while Sorenson shifted his vocabulary (and implicit methodology) to a more open correspondence, I have elected to use "convergence" as a more rigorous requirement for linking a text to the historical and archaeological record.

The pragmatic result is a dramatic difference in the way we present our arguments. Where I have elected to build a chronological argument, Sorenson uses a thematic approach in much of the book. That leads him to use correlations from multiple time periods and perhaps different locations to establish a parallel, or correspondence between something in the Book of Mormon and something similar in Mesoamerica. As has always been the case, Sorenson has important insights. I believe that the chronological presentation of the material will not only aid the reader in understanding how the Book of Mormon fits into a generalized picture of Mesoamerica, but how it fits into the particular picture of Mesoamerica at particular times and places.

As a result of my orientation, I suggest that we will be best served by an approach applied with great success in the field of historical linguistics. Bruce L. Pearson describes both the problem and the solution:

Sets of words exhibiting similarities in both form and meaning may be presumed to be cognates, given that the languages involved are assumed to be related. This of course is quite circular. We need a list of cognates to show that languages are related, but we first need to know that the languages are related before we may safely look for cognates. In actual practice, therefore, the hypothesis builds slowly, and there may be a number of false starts along the way. But gradually certain correspondence patterns begin to emerge. These patterns point to unsuspected cognates that reveal additional correspondences until eventually a tightly woven web of interlocking evidence is developed.⁷⁵

Pearson's linguistic methodology describes quite nicely the problem we have in attempting to place the Book of Mormon in history. We cannot adequately compare the text to history unless we know that it is history. We cannot know that it is history unless we compare the text to history. We cannot avoid the necessity of examining parallels between the text and history.

The problem with the fallacy of parallels is that it doesn't protect against false positives. What is required is a methodology that is more recursive than simple parallels. We need a methodology that generates the "tightly woven web of interlocking evidence" that Pearson indicates resolves the similar issue for historical linguists.⁷⁶

The process of recognizing parallels. . . is first and foremost the assembly of a data set on and from which new analysis will need to be based. On first sight, the similarities must evoke some appropriate theoretical explanation. But upon reflection and with the

⁷⁵ Bruce L. Pearson, Introduction to Linguistic Concepts, 51.

⁷⁶ McGuire, "Finding Parallels: . . . Part 2," 62.

History is not a hard science, and there is no way to construct a repeatable experiment with the data. History is a construction based upon data which interact with the way the historian perceives the data. Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff remind us that "only a divine being would have a perfect and complete knowledge of the event—'as it really happened.' Outside our imperfect knowledge, the event has no independent existence; it is not hidden in some 'repository of the real' where we can find it."⁷⁷⁷ Although biblical historian Thomas L. Thompson draws some controversial conclusions, ⁷⁸ I nevertheless agree with his basic definition of the nature of writing history: "History is by definition anachronistic. It is not objective—something that exists in the past, waiting to be uncovered—for the past is in ruins and exists no longer. If, when we write our history of ancient Israel, we write a history that is reasonable and makes sense, it is a history that makes sense to *ourselves*."⁷⁹

When we examine data from antiquity, we are recasting information that made sense in another cultural world into something that makes sense in ours. In the case of the Book of Mormon, we are recasting their written experience to make sense against a very different (and very modern) way of seeing the world. Nevertheless, Dever promises us that "it is possible to learn about the past, not simply by amassing more bits and pieces of disjointed 'evidence,' but rather by coordinating the pieces of evidence and situating them within a context relating knowledge to a deliberate quest." This is a process he has called a "convergence"—when the evidence from the ground corresponds in time, place, and meaning with the descriptions of the text.

The idea that one may understand history by making comparisons of similarities is dangerously close to the fallacy of parallels, as Dever recognizes: "Of course one may object at this point that seeking such 'convergences' was just what the now-discredited older 'biblical archaeology' sought to do. The critical difference between that and what I propose here has to do with the independent but parallel investigation of the two sources of data for history-writing, and the subsequent critical dialogue between them that scholars must undertake."⁸¹ Although we may lay parallel arguments, they converge only under more tightly controlled conditions and often require specific argumentation to demonstrate the convergence.

This may be one of the most important methodological processes for the Book of Mormon. Reminiscent of Pearson's discussion of historical linguistics above, the problem is not that parallels are inherently useless, but that they must be used

collection of each new data set, one will begin to evaluate and analyze not only the data but also the previous theories themselves. . . . The process of comparison in the light of new data sets must also cause us to reformulate . . . the theories themselves.

⁷⁷ Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, The Modern Researcher, 179.

⁷⁸ Thompson is one of the revisionists who see little or no "history" in the Bible and is therefore one of the scholars against whom Dever pointed his arguments in *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?*, 23–52.

⁷⁹ Thomas L. Thompson, Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel, 68. Emphasis Thompson's.

⁸⁰ Dever, What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It? 70.

⁸¹ Ibid., 106.

carefully and critically and must be woven into a web of interrelated evidence. In the case of the Book of Mormon, the inability to positively anchor any New World location to the Book of Mormon means that we do not have the luxury of accepting single convergences as Dever might. The Book of Mormon will require sterner stuff. We will require a larger number of convergences, and even then, we will require more than simple convergences.

What the Book of Mormon will require is a number of complex correspondences that are interrelated between text, time, and place. Martin Raish contrasts the typical parallel lists with the more interconnected requirements that I am suggesting must form the basis for understanding Book of Mormon historicity: "Many LDS writers provide what I call shopping lists to prove their points. They assemble rather impressive-looking lists of words, customs, and architectural features which are found both in the Old World and the New. The longer the list, of course, the greater the 'proof.' Unfortunately such an approach is rarely of any real value. . . . To be meaningful, such a list must cite a *complex* system. . . or a *unique* manner. . . which is found *only* in the two cultures in question."

The concept of convergences provides for the complex system that Raish indicates. It is reminiscent of a dictum from the United States Supreme Court John W. Welch quoted: "Circumstantial evidence is often as convincing to the mind as direct testimony, and often more so. A number of concurrent facts, like rays of light, all converging to the same center, may throw not only a clear light but a burning conviction; a conviction of truth more infallible than the testimony even of two witnesses directly to a fact."⁸³

Multiple aspects of the culture must converge in time and space in non-random ways for us to understand that there is a real convergence between the text and the evidence from archaeology. They must be unique to that setting and not items that simply mirror natural independent invention based on similar human experience. ⁸⁴ However, once there is a basic structure of complex correspondences in place, the reiterative process suggests that we may then find place for some correspondences that are insufficient in themselves to establish the pattern, but are useful to elaborate the pattern, just in the way that creating cognates in historical linguistics can find additional data following the discovered relationship between two languages.

⁸² Raish, "All that Glitters," 13.

⁸³ John W. Welch, "The Power of Evidence in the Nurturing of Faith," 36.

⁸⁴ Wirth, *Parallels*, provides a number of fascinating connections between the Old World and the New. However, some that appear most arbitrary also have a natural explanation. For example, she describes what appears to be a unique and fascinating correspondence between fish and birth that occurs in both Egypt and Mesoamerica. However, she also notes: "A fish was used to represent a human embryo due to the natural habitat of a fetus in a watery embryonic fluid before birth" (79). That naturalistic context is the same in Egypt and Mesoamerica. It is certainly possible that both cultures had discovered an embryo at a stage where it has gills, thus leading to the comparison to a fish. A connection to a biological datum available to both cultures is as plausible as cultural contact—in fact, is more likely.

The iterative process is perhaps even more important in a Mesoamerican context than for much of the rest of world history. While we do have the advantage of a literate people, we don't have the luxury of many texts. Much of the details that we have about religion must be reconstructed by used late descriptions, even post-Conquest descriptions, and using those to see if similar concepts can be discerned for earlier periods. Fortunately for the methodology, this appears to be the case. Perhaps the best example is the great Maya work called the Popol Vuh. Gabrielle Vail and Christine Hernandez explain:

The stories told (or retold) in the Popol Vuh are of great antiquity, as indicate by comparing particular episodes to iconography represented in Preclassic contexts, including a series of stelae at Pacific coastal site of Izapa (not necessarily inhabited by Maya speakers) and from depictions on the San Bartolo murals. . . .

The San Bartolo murals and Classic period ceramic vessel scenes provide clear evidence that different regions elaborated on the events that are later described in the Popol Vuh as occurring in primordial time. A number of specific episodes are included in these sources—the most important referring to the resurrection of the maize god and his overcoming of the Underworld lords—that are not part of the Popol Vuh. This supports our interpretation that the story recorded in the Pop Vuh during the sixteenth century is regional variant of a narrative that can be traced back a millennium and a half prior to that.⁸⁵

Nevertheless, there are also identifiable later influences in the Popol Vuh, so comparisons must always be made with caution. Resonance was home to multiple different peoples with distinct languages, but it is known as a cultural area because there are overarching similarities that cross ethnic, political, and linguistic boundaries. Vail and Hernandez indicate "that this is the case can be seen by comparing the principal themes in the Popol Vuh with the mythic traditions from elsewhere in Mesoamerica. Commonalities include a focus on twins/brothers, a journey to the Underworld to create the present race of humans, the formation of the earth from a crocodilian's body, the existence of previous eras (before the creation of humans), the planning and carrying forth of a destructive flood to initiate a new world era, and the importance of foundational rituals. Each of these themes forms a core element of creation narratives related in indigenous texts written during the colonial period by Yucatec Maya speakers, as well as Nahuatl speakers from highland central Mexico."

Telling the Book of Mormon history against known events for the time and place hypothesized for the Book of Mormon should display those underlying convergences. At times, the overall outline of the convergences in both time and space will open the opportunity for convergences of ideas or practices that might be inferred based on information from a different time that appear to retain continuity with earlier practices. The essentially conservative nature of Mesoamerican religion and culture allows us to use this information with care.

⁸⁵ Gabrielle Vail and Christine Hernandez, Re-Creating Primordial Time: Foundaton Rituals and Mythology in the Postclassic Maya Codices, xxi.

⁸⁶ Ibid., xxii.

⁸⁷ Ibid., xxi.

Ultimately, the convergences cannot prove the Book of Mormon, but should allow us a richer understanding of it. As we find ways in which the Book of Mormon reflects a particular culture at a particular place and time, we may then expect that such a culture may also aid in understanding potentially problematic aspects of the text.

As Donald Harmon Akenson put it: "Heuristic fictions, unlike hypotheses, are evaluated not by whether they are proved or disproved, but by their fecundity." When the underlying convergences produce an improved understanding of the text, we may begin to assert that we have found the location (and time) which produced the plate text. The descriptions in the text must converge with the data for the target place and time. The data for the place and time must then converge with the text's descriptions to enrich those descriptions. It is a recursive process that builds its case from multiple examples rather than depending upon a single definitive connection.

This Reading

Of the myriad possible ways to read the Book of Mormon, I choose to read and tell it both *in* history and *as* history. Methodological considerations for establishing the historicity inform my choices in the particular stories I have chosen to tell—but intentionally do not structure it. I am interested in the story of the Book of Mormon as part of the historical and cultural changes that have occurred in a limited region of Mesoamerica appropriate to the times covered in the Book of Mormon.

The vast majority of Mesoamerican archaeology deals with peoples and cultures that were probably not directly involved with the Book of Mormon. The geography I follow in constructing this story is only tangential to the locations where the better—known Mesoamerican peoples lived. Nevertheless, there are many similarities across Mesoamerican cultures even when there were specific differences. Those cultural similarities allow us to understand certain aspects of Book of Mormon history by ethnographic analogy to the better-known peoples. Ethnographic analogy differs from a parallel in that what is being demonstrated is human similarity, not specific connections. When we see similar peoples acting in similar ways, we are not suggesting causality, but human commonality. The Book of Mormon, as a book produced by people living in the region influenced by larger social, political, and cultural trends, we can see those same aspects of history reflected in the Book of Mormon, many times during the same time periods in the text as they are found in archaeology or linguistic reconstructions.

Nevertheless, what is known from the reconstruction of the history of those peoples provides the cultural and historical setting that we can also see mirrored in the actions and motivations of those who are the subjects of the Book of Mormon.

⁸⁸ Donald Harmon Akenson, Surpassing Wonder: The Invention of the Bible and the Talmuds, 33. Karl J. Weintraub, Reference Answers, "Heuristic," defines "heuristic fiction": "Of or relating to a usually speculative formulation serving as a guide in the investigation or solution of a problem: The historian discovers the past by the judicious use of such a heuristic device as the 'ideal type.'"

The most important result of understanding the Book of Mormon in history should be better understanding the Book of Mormon. However, I also value the ability to provide a strong argument for the Book of Mormon's historicity. Establishing a firm foundation for its historicity will improve the position of the Book of Mormon as seen from the position of both believers and non-believers. Elder Neal A. Maxwell admonished: "Let us minimize our personal errors which enemies could exploit. Let us conquer the weaknesses which critics could work upon. . . . Let us be articulate, for while our defense of the kingdom may not stir all hearers, the absence of thoughtful response may cause fledglings among the faithful to falter. What we assert may not be accepted, but unasserted convictions soon become deserted convictions." He also believed that one of the results of such a rigorous defense of the Book of Mormon would create the conditions where "there will be a convergence of discoveries (never enough, mind you, to remove the need for faith) to make plain and plausible what the modern prophets have been saying all along." To be plain and plausible means that we will be able to see how the Book of Mormon fits into the ancient world. 91

Various LDS artists have attempted to help us "see" the Book of Mormon through their visual depictions. Drawing upon histories with which they were more familiar, artists have depicted Book of Mormon peoples as though they continued the dress and customs of pre-Exilic Israel, or perhaps some interesting combination of visual clues from multiple lands and times. Palthough such illustrations provide a powerful visual addition to the Book of Mormon text, they do not relate to any actual culture in which the Book of Mormon peoples would have lived.

A similar perceptual mismatch often colors the way many see the Book of Mormon. Perhaps cued by LDS artists, they find it difficult to "see" the Book of Mormon against what is known of Mesoamerican peoples. Metcalfe and Vogel declare: "The more we learn, the more inconceivable the Book of Mormon version of

⁸⁹ Neal A. Maxwell, "All Hell is Moved," BYU Devotional address, November 8, 1977.

⁹⁰ Neal A. Maxwell, *Deposition of a Disciple*, 49. This comment was made in the context of a question about whether to fear secular scholarship. Remarkably, his response presumed that faithful scholarship would be armed with the same critical tools as the secular scholars. He urged: "Latter-day Saint scholars will show the way by being able to read firsthand such ancient texts rather than relying on secondary scholarship, as was the case earlier in this dispensation. We will be able to read such texts through a Latter-day Saint lens rather than relying solely upon able Protestant and Catholic scholars, of whom it is unfair to expect full sensitivity to the fulness of the gospel's doctrines and ordinances."

⁹¹ Sorenson, An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon, xx: "This model is plausible. That means that the setting described could reasonably have been as I represent it. Like a small replica of an airplane or steam engine, this model works, in the sense that the parts fit together to explain point after point in the Book of Mormon that seem inexplicable otherwise."

⁹² One need only view Renaissance artists' representations of the life of Christ to see how common it has been to interpret history in terms of anachronistic clothing and settings.

⁹³ Anthony Sweat, "By the Gift and Power of Art," 229–35 discusses the issue of art and verisimilitude, noting the typical emphasis on the emotive power of art over historical accuracy.

ancient America becomes."94 What they find inconceivable, I cannot conceive in any other way. Therefore, in this reading of the Book of Mormon I will tell its story as I have come to see it. It is a story of the complex interactions with peoples, places, and concerns that mark the larger flow of Mesoamerican history. Lacking the artistic talent to depict Book of Mormon life visually, I must use text to illustrate text.95 Sometimes the story will manifest the multiple interrelated convergences that can tie the text to a time and place. Sometimes, the iterative use of those convergences will support other descriptions that can enrich our understanding of the text based upon the times and cultures more tightly determined.

Perhaps because the Book of Mormon is a religious text, it is most frequently read ahistorically. Reading without any grounding in a real history, we do not think about why events occur. They simply happened—perhaps for some divinely didactic purpose. We may extract the divine lesson when we perceive God's pattern in quotidian chaos, but it was the quotidian that engendered the chaos, not God. Understanding better the way the lives of these ancient people interacted with their natural and social environment, we may perhaps better see patterns of divine interaction in our own chaotic lives. Very much as do we, the people depicted in scripture led lives that more often dealt with daily problems than divine realities. Perhaps if we may learn to see them more clearly, we may more clearly see ourselves in their mirror.

⁹⁴ Vogel and Metcalfe, "Editor's Introduction," vii.

 $^{^{95}}$ The best visual interpretation of the Book of Mormon against Mesoamerica is John L. Sorenson, *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life*.

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