



Gathered in One

How the Book of Mormon Counters
Anti-Semitism in the New Testament

Bradley J. Kramer

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GREG KOFFORD BOOKS
SALT LAKE CITY, 2019

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Published in the USA.

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-58958-709-0

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-58958-710-6

Also available in ebook.

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

Library of Congress Control Number:2019948722

To Elder Rosenbaum

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Preface

Few words are as elusive or as explosive as “anti-Semitism.”¹ Technically “anti-Semitism” (or, as it is sometime rendered, “antisemitism”) is limited to ideas and practices that encourage hostility, prejudice, or discrimination towards Jews as a race or people. Consequently, many of the ideas and practices discussed in this book could be more accurately labeled “anti-Judaic” since they seem to condemn Judaism and its adherents without censuring—or attacking—all Jews regardless of their religious affiliation. However, because several of the sources I quote use the term “anti-Semitism” to encompass both anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism proper and because in practice these two approaches are often intertwined, I have opted to use “anti-Semitic” as the more inclusive and commonly used term. Unfortunately, there is no elegant antonym for “anti-Semitism.” Therefore, I have enlisted “pro-Judaic” and “pro-Jewish” for this purpose.

Nonetheless, despite this explanation, some readers may conclude, especially after reading Chapter 2, that by using the word “anti-Semitism” in connection with the New Testament my real goal in writing *Gathered in One* is to build up the Book of Mormon by tearing down the New Testament. This, however, is not so. Even for a non-traditional Christian such as myself, the New Testament is essential, even irreplaceable. The Book of Mormon may testify of Jesus’s miraculous birth, but it does not relate the stories that bring that birth to life. The Book of Mormon may also speak generally of Jesus’s marvelous earthly ministry, but it lacks many of the particulars that make that ministry marvelous: the parables of the lost sheep and of the prodigal son, the call to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, the invitation to those who are sinless to cast the first stone, the observation that those who live by the sword will perish by

1. For an understanding of the issues surrounding this term, see John G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity*, 7–10.

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the sword. The Book of Mormon may even testify of Jesus's Atonement and resurrection and ratify the reality of these achievements with an appearance by the risen Jesus in the New World after his death in the Old. However, as affirming as this account is, it does not recount the details of these achievements: Jesus's prayers at Gethsemane, his suffering at Golgotha, his burial in a borrowed sepulcher, or his unexpected appearance to Mary in the garden. And without these details, playing quietly in the background as it were, unspoken but not unremembered, the power of this appearance would be greatly diminished. Indeed without the New Testament, Latter-day Saint Christianity—*my* Christianity—would seem meager, anemic, threadbare, hardly Christian at all.

And yet, there are problems with the way the New Testament presents Jews and Judaism, which even traditional Christians find disturbing. Consequently, in my second chapter I rely mainly on the writings of committed Christian scholars, teachers, and ministers as I attempt to show—as gently as I can—how the New Testament encourages an anti-Semitic point of view despite their best efforts to discourage it. To be clear, I do not blame Jesus or his apostles for this situation. Undoubtedly, they had issues with some Jews, contemporaries of theirs, people living and working around them. However, I do not believe they hated all Jews everywhere, nor do I think that they considered Jews inherently evil or corrupt. After all, Jesus and his apostles were Jews themselves—as were their closest neighbors, followers, family members, and friends. Neither do I condemn the original writers of the New Testament. As I see them, they were simply attempting to spread the “good news” of Jesus as best they could during a time when “Christianity” (the term had not yet been coined) was still working out its relationship with what would become mainstream Judaism. These writers did not know how their works would eventually be arranged, nor did they foresee what effect their words would have cumulatively on their readers. Nonetheless, there can be no doubt that many readers of the New Testament, past and present, have found within its pages support for anti-Semitic agendas.

Consequently, in the chapters that follow my second chapter, I attempt to show how the Book of Mormon refutes such agendas: first, by expanding the Christian canon and, second, by adding to it pro-Jewish statements, portrayals, settings, and structure. In this way, the Book of Mormon counters anti-Semitism the same way the New Testament supports it—*literarily*, using artistic devices common to novels, short stories, and tales, and it does so *respectfully*, without challenging the New

Testament's text or undermining its religious authority, reliability, or credibility. As a result, the elements in the New Testament that foster anti-Semitic attitudes and behaviors are not deleted or destroyed; they are instead detoxified, their poison either diluted or eliminated entirely by a flood of similar elements from the Book of Mormon, elements that promote a more positive view of Jews, Judaism, and the Mosaic Law. It is my hope, consequently, that this book will bring about a deeper appreciation for the New Testament as well as for the Book of Mormon and will, in the end, foster a closer, more informed, more respectful relationship between Christians and Jews that will help dispel the dark shadow of anti-Semitism that hovers over Christianity still.

My readers may notice that in *Gathered in One* I rely almost entirely on the King James Version of the Bible for my biblical quotations. I do so not because I believe this version is the most accurate, most clear, or most popular translation (especially for modern Jews), but because the Book of Mormon was originally translated into a style very similar to King James English, and therefore the ties between its text and that of the New Testament are most evident when used in connection with this version. When I divert from this practice or when my sources use other versions, I make this plain either in the text or in a footnote. All emphases or italicized words within scriptural quotations are my own.

Acknowledgements

Since the bulk of this book was first drafted at the same time as *Beholding the Tree of Life*, I must thank many of the same people I thanked in that book: President Von R. Nielsen; Rabbis John Friedman and Leah Berkowitz, as well as the other members of the Judea Reform Congregation; Bishop Matthew Nelson, the Chapel Hill 1st Ward, and the Durham Stake Relief Society; Professors Matt Grey and Dana Pike; as well as Jim Maxwell, Artha Lubeck, Anson and M'Liss Dorrance, C.L. Kendell, and Loyd Ericson.

In addition, I want to thank others who contributed to this book: Bishop Michael Kosorok; Rabbis Darryl Crystal, Larry Bach, and John Franken; my patient friends of the Durham Area Jewish History Book Club, who eagerly answered my many questions about them and their faith; my extremely tolerant Institute students, who allowed me to try out many of my ideas on them; and Ryan Webb, who provided me with this unique teaching opportunity. I also must make special mention of Richard D. Rust, Terryl L. Givens, Jason A. Kerr, Abby Parcell, Jason R. Combs, Sarah Street, and Amy-Jill Levine, who, although they contributed significantly to my previous book, reviewed several chapters of this book and made major contributions to it as well. Thank you, my dear friends.

Also, since this book is fundamentally about appreciating religious diversity, I must thank in particular my parents for rearing me in a bireligious home in several multireligious areas. For it was in Cincinnati, Los Altos, and Dayton that I was taught the value of listening before speaking, of thinking before reacting, and of postponing judgment until I understood better why people do what they do, say what they say, and believe what they believe. I am also grateful to my parents for moving me around so much as a child and for teaching me through that experience to be sensitive to people who are new or different or simply shy. My parents felt

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guilty about these many moves and worried about their effect on me, but in the end, I think the effect was helpful, even healthy.

In addition, I am grateful for the Baptist, Baha'i, Catholic, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, New Age, Wiccan, and agnostic women and men I have worked with over the years, caring colleagues and friends who forced me, sometimes against my will, to confront my own faith and to engage it in dialogue with theirs. I must also thank my children, my grandchildren, and especially my wife, who went with me to countless Jewish services, musical events, lectures, movies, museums, get-togethers, and parties. For it was through her eyes that I gained my most moving insights into the joys Latter-day Saints have in store for them as they learn more about Judaism and the Jewish people. Thank you, Nance.

Chapter One

Gathered in One

And it shall come to pass that the Jews shall have the words of the Nephites, and the Nephites shall have the words of the Jews; and the Nephites and the Jews shall have the words of the lost tribes of Israel; and the lost tribes of Israel shall have the words of the Nephites and the Jews. And it shall come to pass that my people, which are of the house of Israel, shall be gathered home unto the lands of their possessions; and my word also shall be gathered in one. And I will show unto them that fight against my word and against my people, who are of the house of Israel, that I am God, and that I covenanted with Abraham that I would remember his seed forever. (2 Ne. 29:13–14)

The Book of Mormon is unique. Simply as literature, it stands alone. No book leads up to it, and no book follows it. Although published in an influential time and place in American literature (1830, upstate New York), the Book of Mormon is entirely without a contemporary literary context. Its epic setting, transoceanic sweep, larger-than-life heroes, and universal themes hearken back more to *The Odyssey* and to *Beowulf* than to *Edgar Huntley* and *Rip Van Winkle*.¹ Its intricately arranged poetic expressions, complex forms based on the rhythm of ideas and images, resonate more with the words of the King James Bible than with the works of Bryant, Whittier, or Longfellow. And its overall narrative structure, a tapestry woven together from several sources, each with its own voice and personality, arises no more from Poe or Cooper than it is built upon by Hawthorne or Melville. Put simply, the Book of Mormon is an anomaly, an aberration, a book-length oddity that bursts upon the nineteenth-century American literary scene fully formed, neither reflecting what has come before nor projecting what will come afterwards.

1. To read an extended discussion of the literary elements present in the Book of Mormon, see Richard Dilworth Rust, *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon*.

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The Book of Mormon is also singular as a volume of scripture. Unlike the Hebrew Scriptures, the Book of Mormon does not present itself as an ancient work written to an ancient audience nor, like the Doctrine and Covenants, does it style itself a modern creation composed for modern readers. Instead it claims to be an *ancient* book written purposefully and prophetically for *modern* readers in a *modern* setting. In this way, for believers, the Book of Mormon is a blend of the timeless and the timely, the eternal and the immediate, the long view and the short. It is a “bridge scripture” that links biblical events with current concerns. Present-day relevance is consequently built into the Book of Mormon; it does not need to be added or imaginatively inserted.

Given the Book of Mormon’s unique qualities as literature and as scripture, it is not surprising that it approaches contemporary Christian-Jewish relations in a way markedly dissimilar from anything previously undertaken. Written explicitly and unabashedly for “the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God” (title page), the Book of Mormon would seem to be just another salvo in the seemingly never-ending war of words between Christians and Jews—a war historically characterized by ignorance, insensitivity, prejudice, and, all too often, violence. However, nothing could be further from the truth. Rather than perpetuating this centuries-old conflict, the Book of Mormon seeks to end it, once and for all, *not* by forcing Jewish readers to capitulate, at last, to supposedly superior Christian logic or authority but instead by using its unique qualities to persuade Christians to cease contending with Jews and join with them in a kind of alliance, a mutually beneficial and deeply respectful relationship where the problems of the past are at last resolved and both parties can finally come together in peace.

Certainly, the Book of Mormon is not the only attempt to end this “war.” The Roman Catholic Church, for instance, horrified by the Holocaust and stung by the prospect that it may have played a significant role in setting the stage for this unspeakable tragedy, began soon after World War II to cast aside many of its most anti-Semitically suspect practices and doctrines. In 1958, for example, it removed all references to Jewish “perfidy” and to the “perfidious” Jews from its Good Friday liturgy,² and in 1965 it issued an official declaration that deplored “displays of antisemitism directed against Jews at whatever time and by whomever.” This declaration, called *Nostra Aetate* or “In Our Times,” also addressed some

2. Jeremy Cohen, *Christ Killers: The Jews and the Passion from the Bible to the Big Screen*, 171.

of the causes of these displays, stating explicitly that the death of Jesus “cannot be ascribed indiscriminately to all the Jews living at the time nor to the Jews of today” and that “although the church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be represented as rejected by God or accursed, as if this followed from holy scripture.”³ The effect of *Nostra Aetate* was immense. Not only was it followed by additional efforts within the Catholic Church to change the way Jews were portrayed in its preaching, textbooks, and passion plays, but it also led the way for similar declarations from most mainline Protestant churches.⁴ For example, in 1972 the Southern Baptist Convention formally adopted a resolution encouraging its members “to combat anti-Semitism in every honorable, Christian way”⁵; in 1994 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America similarly vowed to oppose “the deadly working of [anti-Semitic] bigotry, both within [their] own circles and in the society around [them]”⁶; and beginning in 1979 the World Council of Churches—a religious body representing three hundred and forty-eight Christian churches, denominations, and fellowships⁷—has repeatedly called upon its member organizations to denounce anti-Semitism, “no matter what its origin, as absolutely irreconcilable with the profession and practice of the Christian faith.”⁸

Not all of these declarations have been put into practice as thoroughly as they could, or should, have been.⁹ However, because of them and other similar efforts, overt anti-Semitic sentiments by Christians have decreased dramatically, especially in the United States. For example, Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish New Testament scholar, cites polls indicating that by the end of the twentieth century the number of Americans who blamed the Jews for the death of Jesus went down to between 2 and 8 percent.¹⁰ Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, the founder of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, goes so far as to write that because of *Nostra Aetate* and other such efforts,

3. Norman Tanner, ed., *Vatican II: The Essential Texts*, 327.

4. Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, 101.

5. Southern Baptist Convention, “Resolution On Anti-Semitism.”

6. Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “Declaration of ELCA to Jewish Community.”

7. World Council of Churches, “What is the World Council of Churches?”

8. World Council of Churches, “Ecumenical Considerations on Jewish-Christian Dialogue.”

9. Levine, *Misunderstood Jew*, 169–171.

10. Levine, 101.

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today, virtually all of the negative, classical stereotypes of Jews, which at one time were pervasive among Christians and central to the church's teachings, have been eliminated from official church doctrine and, increasingly, from practice.¹¹

Nonetheless, this does not mean that Christian anti-Semitism has completely disappeared in the United States or elsewhere. As several Jewish scholars are quick to point out, it still lurks on the sides of a deceptively quiet battlefield, poised, ready to pounce in the form of the New Testament. Trude Weiss-Rosmarin, for instance, calls the New Testament a "virtual armory of anti-Jewish statements and utterances" and wonders, in the end, how helpful "the purging of Christian textbooks can be as long as the New Testament, sacred to all of Christianity," retains such statements and utterances.¹² Rabbi Irving Greenberg similarly states that "since the teaching of contempt [for the Jews] goes straight back to the Gospel accounts, . . . it is questionable whether anything less than full confession and direct confrontation with [the New Testament] can overcome it."¹³ And Lillian C. Freudmann, after describing in detail how "nearly every book in the New Testament expresses slander and contempt for the Jews," likewise calls for the New Testament to be reevaluated by Christians in such a way as to "reduce and neutralize the pejorative portrayal of Jews" within it.¹⁴

Here is where the Book of Mormon comes in. Rather than simply denouncing Christian anti-Semitism with official church pronouncements or ecclesiastical resolutions, the Book of Mormon *engages* it at its New Testament source. Both literarily and scripturally, the Book of Mormon counters the New Testament's anti-Semitic suggestions without undermining its religious authority or spiritual reliability. Just as the Gospel of John (as a peer of the synoptic Gospels) adds information to the New Testament relative to Jesus without challenging the accounts of Matthew, Mark, or Luke, so the Book of Mormon (as a peer of the New Testament) adds information to the Christian canon relative to Jews without challenging the New Testament. Coming as they do from a scripture of seemingly equal stature and status, the Book of Mormon's many pro-Jewish statements, portrayals, settings, and structuring elements mix in with their anti-Semitic counterparts in the New Testament, overwhelming them with

11. Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, *What You Should Know About Jews and Judaism*, 281.

12. Trude Weiss-Rosmarin, *Judaism and Christianity: The Differences*, 95.

13. Irving Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity*, 130.

14. Lillian C. Freudmann, *Antisemitism in the New Testament*, xi, 323.

their greater power, broader context, wider sweep, and closer connections to Judaism as it is practiced today. In this way, the Book of Mormon effectively “detoxifies” the New Testament, negating its anti-Jewish negativity, assaulting its supersessionist assaults, and attacking its anti-Mosaic attacks. And it does so respectfully, without altering the New Testament’s words, interfering with the New Testament’s ability to convey divine meaning, or casting doubt upon the New Testament’s overall message of love, forgiveness, and peace. In fact, the Book of Mormon actually expands the New Testament’s embrace messianically. By beating its anti-Semitic “swords” into more pro-Jewish “plowshares,” the Book of Mormon paves the way for an Isaianic era of peace, a time when Christians are indeed gathered with Jews—as Jews—and both groups figuratively go “up to the mountain of the Lord” as one, to learn of his ways and to “walk in his paths” together (Isa. 2: 3–4).

Chapter Two

A Book Proceeded Forth

And the angel of the Lord said unto me: Thou hast beheld that the book proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew; and when it proceeded forth from the mouth of a Jew it contained the fulness of the gospel of the Lord, of whom the twelve apostles bear record; and they bear record according to the truth which is in the Lamb of God. Wherefore, these things go forth from the Jews in purity unto the Gentiles, according to the truth which is in God. And after they go forth by the hand of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, from the Jews unto the Gentiles, thou seest the formation of that great and abominable church, which is most abominable above all other churches; for behold, they have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious; and also many covenants of the Lord have they taken away. (1 Ne. 13:24–26)

It may shock some Christians to hear the New Testament referred to as a “virtual armory of anti-Jewish statements and utterances.”¹ After all, as many followers of Jesus see it, the New Testament not only affirms the Mosaic commandment to love one’s neighbor as one’s self but expands this injunction to include enemies as well (Matt. 5:44; 22:39; Mark 12:31, 33; Luke 6:27, 35; 10:29–37; Lev. 19:18). Surely, a book that contains such magnanimous sentiments would not advocate hating anyone, much less the people Jesus walked among, talked to, and associated with during his mortal life. Nevertheless, there *are* many anti-Semitic statements, anti-Semitic portrayals, anti-Semitic settings, and anti-Semitic structures within the New Testament, and the problems these elements present are not easily solved, even by committed Christians equipped with time-tested historical, literary, and theological tools.

1. Trude Weiss-Rosmarin, *Judaism and Christianity: The Differences*, 95.

Anti-Semitic Statements

For instance, Matthew's infamous blood curse—"His blood be on us, and on our children" (Matt. 27:25)—has been described by at least one Jewish scholar as "the most glaring of New Testament anti-Semitic passages,"² and several Christian scholars are inclined to agree. George M. Smiga, Professor of Sacred Scripture at Saint Mary Seminary and a Catholic priest, calls this curse "notorious"³; Scot McKnight, Professor of New Testament at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary and an Anglican deacon, denounces it as "an embarrassment to modern Christian sensitivities"⁴; and Raymond E. Brown, professor emeritus at Union Theological Seminary and another Catholic priest, laments that it "has been used to support horrendous antiJudaism."⁵ Again, to some Christians, such assessments may seem excessive, even overblown. However, the way this curse is portrayed in the New Testament, extending it to all Jews everywhere throughout time, makes them appear almost understated.

The Problem of the Blood Curse

In chapter 27 of the Gospel of Matthew, Pilate presents Jesus to the Jewish multitude (v. 24). It is Passover, and, according to this Gospel, "at that feast the governor was wont to release unto the people a prisoner" of their choosing (v. 15). Pilate consequently asks those assembled whom he should set free, Barabbas or Jesus, and they, the Jewish multitude, having been persuaded by the "chief priests and elders" (v. 20), choose Barabbas. Pilate then asks this group what should be done with Jesus, and "they *all* say unto him, Let him be crucified" (v. 22). The Roman governor has received his answer. However, he is not satisfied. He protests and asks the Jewish crowd what evil Jesus has done to merit such a death. Again "they cried out the more, saying, Let him be crucified" (v. 23). The increasing specificity and intensity of the crowd's responses seem to exceed what the priests and elders required and suggests that Jesus's death was indeed their true desire. In fact, when Pilate finally acquiesces to the multitude seemingly against his own wishes, "*all the people*" once again demand that Jesus

2. Samuel Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?*, 66.

3. George M. Smiga, *Pain and Polemic: Anti-Judaism in the Gospels*, 86.

4. Scot McKnight, "A Loyal Critic: Matthew's Polemic with Judaism in Theological Perspective," 58.

5. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 202n71.

be crucified, adding, “his blood be on *us*, and on *our children*” apparently on their own, without coaching or coercion (vv. 23–25).

Reread and reenacted as it has been for centuries as a traditional part of Good Friday services, this curse, according to the noted Jewish scholar Samuel Sandmel, has been “responsible for oceans of human blood and a ceaseless stream of misery and desolation.”⁶ The intent of these yearly renditions may have been to encourage increased love for and devotion to the suffering Jesus. However, the result has too often been to incite hatred against the Jews—not just for supposedly causing the death of Jesus long ago but for continually murdering him in their hearts. In this way, this New Testament scene helped to keep the cross of Jesus continually “going on before,” but it also enlisted countless Christian “soldiers”—from crusaders to Cossacks, Nazis to next-door neighbors—and marched them as to war, not against sin, intolerance, and pride, but against the Jews. As Levine writes, “From this verse, generations of Christians over hundreds of years concluded that all Jews for all times . . . bore special responsibility for the death of Jesus. The guilt is inherited; it is a stain on Jewish identity; all Jews are ‘Christ killers.’”⁷

Although this curse is ostensibly the culminating scene in the trial of Jesus, the innocence of Jesus is never in doubt. What is really being determined is the extent of Jewish guilt, and here the verdict could hardly be more harsh. It is the Jews, after all, who are the “sinners” into whose hands Jesus is being betrayed (Matt. 26:45). It is they who make up the “great multitude” who come “as a thief with swords and staves” to take him (vv. 47, 55). And it is they who lay “hold on Jesus” and lead him “away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled” (v. 57). Literarily, it is the Jews then, not Jesus, who have been brought before Pilate, charged with blasphemy, and confronted with their own complicity in his death. And now, before all of its readers, the Gospel of Matthew passes judgment on the Jews, not only pronouncing them guilty but, in a sense, inviting its readers to scourge and mock and ultimately execute them, just as these ancient Jews allegedly did Jesus.

6. Samuel Sandmel, *A Jewish Understanding of the New Testament*, 164. Rabbi Sandmel, now deceased, was Professor of Bible and Hellenistic literature at Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, and the author of many books on Jewish and Bible studies.

7. Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, 99.

A Possible Solution

In the spirit of *Nostra Aetate* and other such efforts, several committed Christian scholars have begun, in recent decades, to do just as Rabbi Greenberg suggests and confront the anti-Semitic elements present in the New Testament, beginning with the blood curse. Eugene Fisher, for example, a Catholic official, doubts that this curse was ever uttered. According to him, it is noteworthy that it is found only in Matthew's Gospel and that the author of this Gospel includes a number of additions to the Gospel of Mark that, according to Fisher, were "dictated by the pressure of [the author's times]."⁸

Following Father Brown and what he approvingly calls "the common scholarly view,"⁹ Fisher sees the Gospel of Matthew as an expansion of the Gospel of Mark, a work composed a decade or so earlier from oral sources sometime in the late 60s or early 70s.¹⁰ This means that the Gospel of Matthew was compiled some "forty to fifty years" after the events it describes,¹¹ at a time when, according to Fisher, "the survival of the Church depended on Roman tolerance."¹² Then, the teachings of Jesus were beginning to spread throughout the Roman Empire, and some believers were already being persecuted and killed by Roman authorities in certain isolated locales.¹³ Consequently, Fisher is not surprised that several of the Matthean additions to Mark served "to improve the image of Pilate," which was already somewhat mitigated in the Gospel of Mark.¹⁴ As he points out, the Gospel of Matthew is the only Gospel that includes the scene where Pilate's wife warns him to have nothing to do with Jesus—"that *just* man"—as well as the scene where Pilate washes his hands and proclaims himself "innocent of the blood of this *just* person"

8. Eugene J. Fisher, *Faith without Prejudice: Rebuilding Christian Attitudes toward Judaism*, 78. Eugene Fisher was the Director of the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops from 1977 until 2007.

9. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 7.

10. Fisher, *Faith without Prejudice*, 29.

11. For a complete description of the generally accepted scholarly view of the sources and composition of the three Synoptic Gospels, see Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 84–90.

12. Fisher, *Faith without Prejudice*, 77.

13. Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 430.

14. Fisher, *Faith without Prejudice*, 78.

(27:19, 24).¹⁵ Here, Pilate appears to recognize Jesus's goodness and to distance himself from the man, personally and officially. As Fisher notes, in this way the author of Matthew adds "small but significant phrases" to Mark's account that seem to absolve Pilate of any guilt concerning Jesus's execution.

As an example, Fisher contrasts the two descriptions of the Barabbas scene as they appear in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew:

- Mark 15:15. "So, Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released to them Barabbas; but Jesus he scourged and delivered to be crucified."
- Matthew 27:26. "Then he (Pilate) released to them Barabbas; but Jesus he scourged and delivered *to them* to be crucified."¹⁶

As Fisher concludes, the seemingly small addition of "to them" in the last part of this verse in Matthew shifts all responsibility for Jesus's death away from Pilate to the Jews, something Fisher calls historically "doubtful."¹⁷ In summary, rather than "pure history," Fisher sees the blood curse as something the writer of Matthew added in order to appease Roman sensitivity. For him, the historical answer to the question "Who killed Jesus?" is uncertain. As he writes, "while individual Jews may have played a part, it is far from clear whether they played that role because they were Jewish or because they were under the control of the Roman governor."¹⁸

Marilyn Salmon, an Episcopal priest, concurs with Fisher's assessment and expands upon it. According to her, the entire Barabbas scene is improbable—especially the portrayal of Pilate as weak, indecisive, and merciful. She writes, "There is no extra-biblical evidence that there existed a custom of releasing a prisoner during the Passover feast."¹⁹ On the contrary, "primary sources consistently witness to Pilate's ruthlessness and cruelty toward his subjects." As Salmon explains,

Pontius Pilate, procurator from 26 to 36 C.E., antagonized Jewish sensibilities by bringing military standards with Roman images into Jerusalem, thus violating the commandment against graven images. Pilate ignored the Jews'

15. Fisher, 78–79 (bullet points added).

16. Fisher, 78.

17. Fisher, 78.

18. Fisher, 73.

19. Marilyn J. Salmon, *Preaching without Contempt: Overcoming Unintended Anti-Judaism*, 133. Marilyn Salmon is an Associate Priest at St. Clement's Episcopal Church in St. Paul, as well as professor of New Testament at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, also in St. Paul.

request that the standards be removed, threatening to kill the resisters, until the people demonstrated that they were prepared to die rather than allow the presence of Caesar's images. Pilate's confiscation of funds from the Temple treasury further infuriated the people; he infiltrated the angry crowd of protestors with disguised troops to kill them. Pilate was removed from his office and recalled to Rome after he ordered an attack on unarmed Samaritans on a pilgrimage.²⁰

As to why the Gospel of Matthew is so generous regarding Pilate, Salmon notes that shifting the blame from Pilate to the Jews was something extremely prudent for Christians to do in the late first century CE. As she explains, "in the light of the recent [Jewish] revolt and considering the dominant culture, it is not surprising the Gospel writers downplay Roman involvement and emphasize instead religious motives for Jesus' death."²¹

Salmon's coreligionist John Shelby Spong agrees with her. Although writing with "the passion of a believer," he calls the Barabbas scene a "gospel invention, a literary device created to help exonerate the Roman governor" and to acquit the entire Roman Empire of any guilt with respect to Jesus's death.²² Spong continues,

So bitter was [the Roman war against the Jews, 66 to 73 CE] that the Jews . . . became anathema to the Romans for the next few generations. The Christian Church, already alienated from the rigid orthodoxy of Judaism and becoming less Jewish and more gentile during these years, thus attempted to gain for its members the favor of the ruling Roman authorities.

Consequently, "Christians busied themselves with the political task of shifting the blame for Jesus's death from the Romans to the Jerusalem Jews in any way they could."²³ The blood curse therefore was simply one of their more successful efforts to accomplish this task.

John Dominic Crossan, a former Catholic priest, calls the blood curse and the scene that surrounds it something much more serious:

Knowing, on one hand, what I do about Pilate as an ordinary second-class governor, of his ten-year tenure and his eventual removal, of his attitude toward Jewish religious sensitivities and his tactics toward unarmed but demanding crowds, and on the other hand, of Christian reasons for increasing

20. Salmon, 136.

21. Salmon, 145.

22. John Shelby Spong, *Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes*, 20, 272. John Shelby Spong was bishop of the Episcopal Diocese Newark, New Jersey before he retired in 2000.

23. Spong, 274.

the responsibility of Jewish and decreasing that of Roman participants in the crucifixion, there can be only one *relatively plausible* conclusion. That reiterated juxtaposition of Jewish demands for Jesus' crucifixion and Roman declarations of Jesus' innocence is not prophecy, and neither is it history. It is Christian propaganda.²⁴

Crossan explains that such propaganda can be both "inspired" as well as "innocent"—at least initially. The blood curse and the scenes that surround it had little outside effect as long as "Christians were the marginalized and disenfranchised ones." However, "once the Roman Empire became Christian, that fiction turned lethal" and therefore was rendered indefensible. As Crossan eloquently concludes,

In the light of later Christian anti-Judaism and eventually of genocidal anti-Semitism, it is no longer possible in retrospect to think of that passion fiction as relatively benign propaganda. However explicable its origins, defensible its invectives, and understandable its motives among Christians fighting for survival, its repetition has now become the longest lie, and, for our own integrity, we Christians must at last name it as such.²⁵

Anti-Semitic Portrayals

However, rejecting the blood curse and the scene that surrounds it as ahistorical, although helpful, does not, by itself, solve the larger problem of an anti-Semitic reading of the Gospel of Matthew as a whole. Such a reading is not based on a single statement or on one particular scene. Anti-Semitic rhetoric pervades this Gospel, especially in its portrayal of the Pharisees, the ancestors of rabbinic Jews.²⁶ According to the Gospel of Matthew, the Pharisees are beneath contempt. They are hypocritical (Matt. 16:3), judgmental (9:11), rule-bound (12:2), scheming (v.14), stupid (v. 24), sign-seeking (v. 38), superficial (15:1), easily offended (v.12), spiritually blind (v. 14), corrupt (12:33), petty (23:23), tricky (22:15), prideful (16:6), and murderous (12:14). The rhetoric is relentless and merciless.

24. John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?: Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus*, 152. John Dominic Crossan taught at St. Mary of the Lake Seminary and at Catholic Theological before resigning his priesthood. Afterwards he taught comparative religion at DePaul University from 1969 until 1995.

25. Crossan 152.

26. Sandmel, *A Jewish Understanding of the New Testament*, 26.

The Problem of Matthew

Perhaps, as some Christian scholars have suggested, the original intent here was to pit Jesus's Judaism against Pharisaic Judaism and not to blast away at all Jews in general.²⁷ However, the number of anti-Pharisaic accusations as well as the power and extent of their insinuations make it difficult for many readers to see them as precision strikes. By the time the blood curse is uttered, near the end of the Gospel of Matthew, corrupt Sadducees, duplicitous scribes, prideful elders, and scheming priests have merged with hypocritical Pharisees to form a single mass of anti-Christian murderers—all Jewish. It is therefore not surprising, given this merging, to hear “all the people” cry out for the blood of Jesus (Matt. 27:25). At this point, *all Jews* have become Christ killers, if not in fact at least by inference. When Jesus is nailed to the cross, “they”—generic Jews, not Pharisees or Sadducees—pass him by, “wagging their heads” and saying, “Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself” (vv. 39–40). As he hangs there, “some of them,” members of this nonspecific group of Jews, hear him cry out “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” “One of them” gives him vinegar to drink but “the rest” taunt him, saying, “Let be, let us see whether Elias will come to save him” (vv. 46–49). Furthermore, when Jesus finally dies and “the graves were opened,” it is a Roman centurion who testifies that Jesus is “the Son of God” (vv. 52–54)—compared to what “is commonly reported among *the Jews*” that Jesus's resurrection was fabricated by “his disciples [who] came by night, and stole [his body] away” (28:15).

In other words, it is not Jesus who is ultimately on trial in the Gospel of Matthew. It is the Jews, and their sentence is handed down long before the blood curse is uttered. Several chapters earlier, Jesus, as the supreme judge, foreshadows Matthew's final verdict by pronouncing the scribes and Pharisees guilty of “all righteous blood shed upon the earth” (23:35) and by stating that they will continue to “kill and crucify” prophets and wise men, persecuting them “from city to city” presumably until the end of time (v. 34). In other words, the main message of the Gospel of Matthew then may indeed be, as Sandmel suggests, that Jesus is a “new and greater Moses.”²⁸ However, in presenting this message, this Gospel also portrays the Jews just as clearly and just as powerfully as the new and

27. Robert A. Spivey, D. Moody Smith, and C. Clifton Black, *Anatomy of the New Testament*, 111.

28. Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament*, 51.

lesser Egyptians, a people so hard-hearted that they seek to enslave and murder those who attempt to follow Jesus (19:8). Consequently, if the Red Sea or some other catastrophe were to engulf them, so be it. They deserve such treatment. As the Gospel of Matthew presents them, Jews are not meant to be mourned.

A Possible Solution

Recognizing the pervasive problem with anti-Semitism present in the Gospel of Matthew, several modern Christian scholars have broadened their historical approach. Fisher, for instance, very much affirms that the Gospel of Matthew is “the inspired word of God.” However, he explains that this Gospel, along with the Gospel of John, has been “historically conditioned”—meaning that “the passions and crises of the times in which [it was] written are reflected in the way their human authors retold the story of Jesus.”²⁹ As Fisher writes, these two Gospels were composed not long after the fall of the Second Temple—Matthew in the 80s and John in the 90s—at a time when the Church had become dominated by Gentile converts and had consequently “begun to lose its original, close identification with Judaism.”³⁰ This situation caused a great deal of tension between Christians and Jews, tension which most certainly included inflammatory accusations as well as reasoned debates—all of which are reflected in these Gospels. Fisher writes,

These later Gospel writers are relying on long oral traditions for their reconstruction of the story of Jesus, and neither is writing “history” in our modern sense of newspaper reporting. Rather, they are seeking to make the message of their Gospels meaningful for the readers of their own time. Each

Chapter Three

A Record to Establish the Truth of the First

And after it had come forth unto them I beheld other books, which came forth by the power of the Lamb, from the Gentiles unto them, unto the convincing of the Gentiles and the remnant of the seed of my brethren, and also the Jews who were scattered upon all the face of the earth, that the records of the prophets and of the twelve apostles of the Lamb are true. And the angel spake unto me, saying: These last records, which thou hast seen among the Gentiles, shall establish the truth of the first, which are of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, and shall make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away from them. (1 Ne. 13:39-40)

As stated in Chapter 1, the Book of Mormon, like *Nostra Aetate* and other similar efforts, counters the anti-Semitism present in the New Testament with statements condemning Christian persecution of the Jews as well as doctrines that promote such behavior. However, unlike *Nostra Aetate*, the Book of Mormon does not do so simply as an official church declaration or as a matter of ecclesiastical policy but as scripture—*Christian* scripture—that reinforces its pro-Judaic statements literarily, employing many of the same mechanisms as the New Testament but for the opposite effect. In this way, the Book of Mormon confronts the New Testament on its own turf and on its own terms and does so respectfully, even reverentially, modifying how the New Testament is understood without altering its words or undermining its authority.

Countering Anti-Semitic Statements

For instance, in the Book of Mormon both 2 Nephi 29:5 and 3 Nephi 29:8 clearly condemn the Christian “war” against the Jews. However, they

do so not as communiques from fellow humans—“Christian soldiers,” as it were—but as orders from God, the Supreme Commander:

O ye Gentiles, have ye remembered the Jews, mine ancient covenant people? Nay; but ye have cursed them, and have hated them, and have not sought to recover them. But behold, I will return all these things upon your own heads; for I the Lord have not forgotten my people. (1 Ne. 29:5)

Yea, and ye need not any longer hiss, nor spurn, nor make game of the Jews, nor any of the remnant of the house of Israel; for behold, the Lord remembereth his covenant unto them, and he will do unto them according to that which he hath sworn. (3 Ne. 29:8)

In the former, it is God Himself who condemns Christians for persecuting Jews, and in the latter, it is Mormon, one of God’s prophets, who commands these same Gentile Christians to cease oppressing them. Notice that these statements do not comment upon any particular passage in the New Testament, nor do they challenge the veracity of any specific New Testament event. However, given their source and their clarity of expression, they make it very difficult for Christians to interpret the New Testament anti-Semitically.

And that is the point. Again, the Book of Mormon does not change the New Testament’s words or call into question what might be called their “scripturality”—that is, their ability to convey divine messages to their readers directly, without an intermediary—but, for believers, it alters how the New Testament’s words are understood. In many ways, the Book of Mormon functions in relation to the New Testament much as the Gospel of Matthew functions in relation to the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and John. According to Brevard Childs, “The theological implications of the canonical shaping [of the New Testament] are highly significant. The unity of the one Gospel lies within its fourfold witness.”¹ In other words, the Gospels work together, despite their differences, to provide Christians with a more complete and more religiously accurate picture of Jesus and his teachings. Similarly, the Book of Mormon joins with the New Testament in order to clarify its message with respect to Jews. In this way, the Book of Mormon “balances out” the New Testament just as Fisher hoped the other Gospels would balance out Matthew, by adding pro-Judaic material to the Christian canon without undermining or displacing the New Testament.

In addition to supplying statements condemning anti-Semitic ideas and behavior, prophets in the Book of Mormon also offer other state-

1. Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction*, 156.

ments that promote a positive view of Jews. Nephi, for instance, claims to have “charity for the Jew” (2 Ne. 33:8), and Jacob praises those who “still wait for the coming of the Messiah” (6:13). Nonetheless, despite the power of these statements, statements by themselves cannot turn the tide of anti-Semitism in the New Testament. The sheer number and variety of the literary elements in the New Testament that support such a reading are just too numerous and too compelling to be repelled by statements alone. Anti-Semitic portrayals, settings, and structures wash over them, like so much surf over a sandbar, eroding them, engulfing them, effectively drowning them under their cumulative mass. Something else is needed to reverse this flow, something more pervasive, more persuasive, something that affects believing readers deeply, altering their “gut reaction” to the New Testament as a whole.

Fortunately, explicit scriptural statements are not the only or even the most effective way the Book of Mormon works against an anti-Semitic reading of the New Testament. Just as wave after wave of different literary elements come together in the New Testament to encourage an anti-Semitic understanding of its words, so too does a continual stream of similar elements in the Book of Mormon unite to sweep away such an understanding. In particular, the many hopeful portrayals of Jews in the Book of Mormon counter and eventually overwhelm their nearly hopeless depiction in the Gospels. Simply by adding these portrayals to the Christian canon and by placing them in larger contexts, the Book of Mormon effectively affirms the overall goodness of Jews, confirms their ongoing place in God’s covenant, and does so despite charges of Christ-killing and the addition of believing Gentiles into that covenant.

Redeeming “the Jews”

As discussed in Chapter 2, the Gospel of John is often viewed as the most anti-Semitic of the canonized Gospels chiefly because of the way it uses the term “the Jews,” pitting it against everything Jesus does and stands for. In this Gospel, it is “the Jews” who “abide in darkness” (John 12:46) while Jesus shines as the “true Light” (1:9); it is “the Jews” who are the wicked “masters of Israel” (3:10) while Jesus is the righteous servant of all (13:14–16); it is “the Jews” who are blind to all things spiritual (9:39–41) while Jesus invites all to “come and see” (1:39, 46); and it is “the Jews” who are children of the devil while Jesus is the Son of God (8:16, 44). In short, the Gospel of John presents “the Jews” as so thoroughly and consis-

tently insensitive to all things good and true and right that it is unthinkable that they could continue as God's covenant people. Jesus may have come unto the Jews as "his own," but in this Gospel it seems clear that it is the Gentiles—those who "were born, not of blood . . . but of God"—to whom his power is given (1:11–13).

The Book of Mormon, however, counters such supersessionist ideas, first by supplying descriptions of Jews that show them to be continuously connected to God, both by covenant and by deep feeling. For example, in addition to referring to the Jews early on as the Lord's "ancient covenant people" (2 Ne. 29:4–5), the Book of Mormon, as if to emphasize the ongoing nature of this relationship, later on drops the word *ancient* and describes them simply as the "covenant people of the Lord" (Morm. 3:21). Furthermore, Book of Mormon prophets as temporally diverse as Nephi's brother Jacob, Nephi himself, and Moroni claim that despite being scattered "upon all the face of the earth," the Jews will one day be "armed with righteousness and with the power of God in great glory" (1 Ne. 14:14), that they will be delivered from their enemies (2 Ne. 6:17), and that pure people everywhere will seek "the welfare of the ancient and long dispersed covenant people of the Lord" (Morm. 8:15).

Secondly, the Book of Mormon depicts many, if not most, Jews as being inherently sensitive to spiritual matters, especially in relation to the scriptures. According to the Book of Mormon, Jews are responsible for completing the scriptures, both the Greek scriptures as well as the Hebrew (1 Ne.13:23), and for sending these sacred books forth "in purity unto the Gentiles," a people who, incidentally, waste no time in corrupting these books after they have received them (vv. 25–26). The Book of Mormon also describes Jews as being so naturally adept at perceiving what is truly going on in the scriptures that it claims that "there is none other people that understand the things which were spoken unto the Jews like unto them" (2 Ne. 25:5).

Thirdly, the Book of Mormon shows that sins like those the Gospel of John attributes to the Jews of Jesus's time—even if they were true—do not merit divine rejection. After all, the Book of Mormon begins just before the Babylonian Captivity, at a time when the sins of the Jews in general were so severe "there came many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed" (1 Ne. 1:4). According to Jeremiah, one of the most prominent of those prophets, many of the Jews at that time were vain (Jer. 2:5), treacherous (3:10), foolish, drunken, ignorant, (4:22), adulterous (5:7), deceitful

(5:27), and covetous (6:13). He claims that they oppressed “the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow”; that they spilled “innocent blood”; that they walked “after other gods” (7:6); and, perhaps most tellingly, that they “[had] eyes, and [saw] not” (5:21). In other words, like the Jews in the Gospel of John, these pre-Captivity Jews were not only extremely wicked, but they were spiritually blind as well, and as a result, Jeremiah, much like Jesus, used parables, not parables of words alone but visual parables—wearing yokes and breaking jugs—so that his people might somehow overcome their ocular affliction and “*see . . . the word of the Lord*” (2:31).

Lehi too, Nephi’s father and the first prophet in the Book of Mormon, similarly focuses on the John-like blindness of these pre-Captivity Jews, and he does so for similar reasons. However, unlike Jeremiah, he uses not visual aids but visions to highlight his contemporaries’ situation. He prays, for instance, “in behalf of his people” and receives a transcendent experience where he “*saw and heard much*” (1 Ne. 1:5–6). He is so overwhelmed by the “the things which he had *seen*” that he returns home to rest, but he receives no reprieve (v. 7). He is again “carried away in a *vision*,” much like Ezekiel’s, in which “he *saw* the heavens open, and he thought he *saw* God sitting upon his throne” (v. 8). Lehi then “*saw* One descending out of the midst of heaven” who gives him a book to read that proclaims to Jerusalem that God has “*seen* thine abominations!” and that many of its inhabitants “should perish by the sword, and many should be carried away captive into Babylon” (v. 13). In this way, Lehi’s ability to see and understand spiritual matters stands in stark contrast with that of his fellow Jerusalemites. They, unlike Lehi, did not perceive the danger and instead mocked him and plotted to kill him. However, Lehi is warned of their murderous plot by another vision where their scheme is shown to him, and he takes his family and departs into the wilderness to safety (2:2).

Given Lehi’s very visual description of his experience, it is not surprising then that Nephi and Jacob, decades after their father’s experience, would use similar terms to describe the wickedness of pre-Captivity Jews—and employ the past tense to distinguish between them and Jews who lived during and after the time that they wrote.² According to both Nephi and Jacob, the works of these pre-Captivity Jews “*were* works of *darkness*, and their doings *were* doings of abominations” (2 Ne. 25:2); they

2. For more information on how the Book of Mormon differentiates between pre-captivity Jews and post-captivity Jews, condemning the former while lauding the latter, see Bradley J. Kramer, *Beholding the Tree of Life: A Rabbinic Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 89–90.

“were a stiffnecked people; and they *despised* the words of plainness, and *killed* the prophets, and *sought* for things that they *could* not understand.” Unlike later Jews, who understand the things that are written to them, these pre-Captivity Jews, like the Jews in the Gospel of John, are depicted as being totally blind to spiritual matters, an affliction that “*came* by looking beyond the mark” (Jacob 4:14). Indeed, the sins of these Jews were so extreme that they were cast out of their God-given homeland and sent, like Eve and Adam, into a lone and dreary world where their sorrow was multiplied and their ground cursed (Gen. 3:16–17). So completely had they disobeyed “all [of God’s] commandments and his statutes” (Deut. 28:15) that the curses Moses pronounced upon them in Deuteronomy 28 were realized, and they were “removed into all the kingdoms of the earth,” became “oppressed and spoiled,” and were transformed into “an astonishment, a proverb, and a byword, among all nations” (vv. 25, 29, 37).

Nevertheless, despite the severity of the sins of these pre-Captivity Jews, Jews in general were not cast out of God’s covenant. Jeremiah, the same prophet who catalogued their many sins also prophesied of a time, after their dispersion, when God would renew his covenant with them and would put his “law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts” (Jer. 31:31, 33). Jeremiah further quotes God as promising to “gather the remnant of my flock out of all countries whither I have driven them” (23:3), to call them “from the north country, and . . . from the coasts of the earth,” (31:8), and to “bring them again unto [Jerusalem]” (32:37). This general return of Israel is also emphasized in the Book of Mormon. Nephi, for instance, quotes Isaiah saying that God will yet “set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth” (2 Ne. 21:12). He also quotes a revelation by the non-biblical prophet Zenos, which has God affirming his commitment to the Jews: “I remember the isles of the sea; yea, and all the people who are of the house of Israel, will I gather in . . . from the four quarters of the earth” (19:16).³ Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that the restoration of Israel, whatever that “restoration” entails, is one of the major themes of the Book of Mormon. Certainly, this theme is not unique to the Book of Mormon. However, the Book of Mormon’s emphasis on it, particularly in connection with the

3. According to the Book of Mormon, Zenos, Zenoch, and Neum were ancient Israelite prophets whose writings were preserved in the brass plates Nephi acquired from Laban. These writings, however, are not part of the standard Hebrew scriptures, nor are they known outside of this canon.

Gospel of John, is—and this emphasis revolutionizes how the Gospel of John is interpreted.

Again, according to most scholars it seems clear that the Jews living during Jesus's earthly ministry were nowhere near as evil as the Gospel of John portrays them. The spiritual blindness this Gospel attributes to them is a theological exaggeration (possibly based on the Johannine community's experience with Jews living around them at the time⁴) and was created to set off the light and clarity of sight that Jesus brought. However, even if some Jews were as evil as the Gospel of John describes them, this does not mean that all Jews everywhere were rejected by God. After all, their First Temple ancestors performed “works of darkness” and were blind to matters of the spirit, and yet they were not kicked out of God's covenant. Why then would the possibility that some Second Temple Jews may have committed similar sins cause all Jews to be expelled from that same covenant? It makes no sense, especially since the Book of Mormon so frequently affirms the Jews' ongoing connection to God, presents them as being spiritually sensitive to the scriptures, and confirms that “the Lord will set his hand again the second time to restore *his people*,” the Jews (25:15–17).

Challenging “Pharisaism”

In addition to contesting the way Jews are portrayed in the Gospel of John, the Book of Mormon also challenges the way they are portrayed in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. These synoptic Gospels similarly promote supersessionist ideas by describing Jews in condemnatory terms. However, these Gospels do so not directly, by blaming “the Jews” explicitly. Instead, they do so implicitly, through the Pharisees. Such a portrayal is neither fair nor historically accurate. As discussed in Chapter 2, the Pharisees in general were not nearly as evil as these Gospels portray them, and those few who might have been do not represent all Jews then or later. However, the fact that they are portrayed in consistently negative terms without being balanced by more positive presentations of other Jewish groups serves to taint all Jews by implication. In other words, in the synoptic Gospels Jews by any other name—be they elders, chief priests, scribes, Sadducees, Herodians, Zealots, or even “the multitude” (Matt. 16:21; 22:23; 26:47; 27:20)—smell just as rotten. Like the Gospels, the Book of Mormon also describes several subgroups of Jews. However, it

4. Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 172.

presents them in much more appealing terms. In this way, the Book of Mormon undermines the seeming universality of “Pharisaism” and tips the overall canonical assessment of Jews away from a supersessionist position to one that is more favorable.

It may sound strange to some readers to call the people described in the Book of Mormon Jews. However, that is exactly what they are. Certainly, Lehi and his family are descendants of Jacob’s son Joseph (1 Ne. 5:14) and therefore not Jews in the sense that they came from the tribe of Judah. However, they are very much Jews in a more general, political, and cultural sense. Nephi, Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and others of the first generation grew up in in the Kingdom of Judah, in Jerusalem. They consequently “know concerning the regions round about” (2 Ne. 25:6) and have a thorough understanding of “the learning of the Jews” (1 Ne. 1:2) as well as of the “manner of prophesying among the Jews” (2 Ne. 25:1). In this way, as Nephi states, it is clear that all of Lehi’s progeny are indeed “descendants of the Jews” (30:4).⁵ He and other Book of Mormon writers may therefore occasionally use the term “Jews” to distinguish themselves from the people “from whence [they] came” (33:8), but the Lehites are still Jews, a “remnant of the house of Israel” (1 Ne. 13:33–34; 19:24).

This term “Jew” is particularly applicable to Nephi and his brother Sam. In addition to being ethnic Jews, these two sons of Lehi and Sariah are, in a broadly biblical way, religious Jews as well. Following the example of Moses and Aaron (Ex. 7:6, 10, 20), they attempt to “go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded” (1 Ne. 3:7). They therefore eagerly embark on whatever assigned task their prophet-father gives them—be it leaving their home in Jerusalem, living in tents in the wilderness, or returning to Jerusalem for the plates of brass, a metallic book containing “the five books of Moses” (5:11). After all, having such a book is vital to all observant Jews because, as Nephi so Jewishly puts it, he and his people “could not keep the commandments of the Lord according to the law of Moses, save they should have the law” (4:15). Nephi’s oldest brothers, however, are not nearly so observant—or obedient—and yet their behavior connects them with other Jews. Like the pre-Captivity Jews they leave behind, Laman and Lemuel mock their father and “murmur in many things against [him].” They call him a “visionary man” and complain about leaving “the land of their inheritance, and their gold, and their silver, and their precious things to perish in the wilderness”—all because

5. The Doctrine and Covenants similarly states that “the Lamanites are a remnant” of the Jews (D&C 19:27).

of what they call “the foolish imaginations” of their father’s (2:11). Nephi even states that Laman and Lemuel “were like unto the Jews who were at Jerusalem, who sought to take away the life of my father” (v. 13)—a similarity these two brothers affirm by plotting to kill their father (16:37) and by attempting to kill Nephi as well (7:16; 17:48; 2 Ne. 5:2). Like these pre-Captivity Jews, Laman and Lemuel simply do not “believe that Jerusalem, that great city, could be destroyed” (1 Ne. 2:13). They therefore rebel against those who say otherwise and frequently seek to rejoin like-minded Jews back in Jerusalem (7:7; 16:36).

In this way, the Book of Mormon, right from the beginning, sets up two subgroups of Jews: one extremely “good,” the other extremely “bad.” Nonetheless, despite their different behaviors, both factions remain connected to God. Soon after Lehi’s family reaches the promised land, Lehi dies, and the simmering divisions within his family boil over. From this feud two distinct peoples emerge. Nephi and Sam, along with Zoram, their younger brothers Jacob and Joseph, and their families, leave the main group and “journey in the wilderness for the space of many days” (2 Ne. 5:7). There, in a land to the north, they become *Nephites*—Jews who, like their namesake Nephi, “observe to keep the judgments, and the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord in all things, according to the law of Moses” (v. 10). In fact, so Mosaically observant are these Nephites that their laws are later described as “exceedingly strict.” They are said to not only keep the Sabbath day holy, but they “profaned not; neither did they blaspheme” (Jarom 1:5).

Laman and Lemuel, on the other hand, as well as their families remain in the place where their parents first landed and become “Lamanites; an idle, dissipated, and cruel people” (2 Ne. 5:24). These Lamanites