

How the Book of Mormon Reads Ancient Religious Texts

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The Book of Mormon turned the Latter-day Saints purposefully toward ancient religious texts. Early converts connected the Book of Mormon with lost texts recorded in the Bible.¹ The space left by these lost books could be filled by the Book of Mormon. But not by the Book of Mormon alone. There was room to spare, and with it, a growing desire not only to find lost scriptures that were known but also to restore lost scriptures that were until then unknown (see D&C 9:2). This fervor was centrifugal, compelling Joseph Smith and others to seek out and reveal ancient texts at every opportunity, exemplified by the purchase of expensive Egyptian artifacts at a time of great financial difficulty.² The coming forth of the Book of Mormon seemed to mark the commencement of a great age of discovery and gathering of ancient texts intimately connected to the Restoration project. Some texts were accepted as scripture; others, like the Apocrypha, contained valuable insights that could be obtained with the aid of the Spirit (see D&C 91).

The discovery has continued unabated. We live in a world awash with ancient religious texts. Among the most famous discoveries made since the publication of the Book of Mormon are (in order of discovery) the Royal Library of Ashurbanipal, the Cairo Genizah, the Oxyrhynchus Papyri, the Ras Shamra tablets, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Nag Hammadi library. What is our responsibility as Latter-day Saints

1. See, for example, John Corroll's statement in the prologue below.

2. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 286.

toward these other texts? How are we to read them? To answer these questions, we go back to the beginning, to the first and grandest ancient text of the Restoration, to the Book of Mormon. We look to the Book of Mormon to help determine four fundamental strategies that can guide our future engagement with ancient texts as a community of Saints. The Book of Mormon explains and enacts an ethic of reading that promises not only to enlighten but to redeem us from a misguided sense of sufficiency and to direct us to attend to the outpouring of light that followed in its wake. As we recognize this prompting, we begin to understand that God has spoken, does speak, and will continue to speak to his children through ancient religious texts.

Prologue

When John Corrill (1794–1842) first encountered the Book of Mormon, he “searched the Scriptures again to see if God had ever concealed or hid up his word, or commanded his servants to do so for a wise purpose.” His 1839 *Brief History of the Church of Christ of Latter Day Saints* recounts this investigation and its results:

I always thought before, that we had all the Scripture that we ever should have, and that the Bible was complete; but on searching the Scriptures, I found to my surprise, that they, in many instances, refer to books for information that they do not contain; nor are they any where to be found,—such as the Book of Jasher, of the wars of the Lord—of Nathan the Prophet—of Shemaiah the Prophet, of Goed [Gad] the Seer, and of Iddo the Seer, &c.—(1 Chron. xxix. 29; 2 Chron. ix. 29, and xii. 15,) and many others which I need not mention at this time. This satisfied me at once, that there was much of the word of God that we had not got, and still are referred to it for further information: therefore, the Scriptures are not complete without it.³

For Corrill, then, the narrative of biblical sufficiency was disrupted by the Bible’s own account. The canon had once been bigger, so why not again? The Book of Mormon prompted a discovery that is in fact enacted by the Book of Mormon: it is the recovery of the Bible in the book’s opening chapters (1 Ne. 3–5), a Bible that included lost scripture (1 Ne. 13:23), that laid the foundation for the writing of an entirely new volume of scripture. Corrill’s is one of many examples of how, as Janiece Johnson has observed,

3. Karen L. Davidson, Richard L. Jensen, and David A. Whittaker, eds., *Histories, Volume 2: Assigned Histories, 1831–1847*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 139.

“the Bible played an essential role in leading [people] to accept the Book of Mormon as scripture.”⁴ However, in this case, it was the Bible’s witness to lost scripture that provided for the possibility of the Book of Mormon to a potential convert.

Corrill was not alone in making the connection between the Bible’s lost books and the Book of Mormon. Fredrick G. Williams (1787–1842) ends his handwritten index to his first edition of the Book of Mormon with a list of twenty books not mentioned in the Bible.⁵ Such handwritten notes became published study aids when, in 1842, Benjamin Winchester included a list of “books mentioned in the Bible that are not to be found among the sacred writings” in his *Synopsis of the Holy Scriptures*.⁶ Lost scripture was not, however, simply a compelling idea or a useful rhetorical strategy for introducing the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon presaged a new age of discovery and a vigorous interest among the Saints in ancient texts and the restoration of lost scripture. As Joseph’s history of the Church for 1830 puts it, “Much conjecture and conversation frequently occurred among the saints, concerning the

4. Janiece Johnson, “Becoming a People of the Books: Toward an Understanding of Early Mormon Converts and the New Word of the Lord,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 27 (2018): 42.

5. As an extension of this interest, William E. McLellin (1806–1883) has an extensive hand-produced index in the back of his first edition that includes a category, “Books or Records,” mentioned in the Book of Mormon. On McLellin and Bible paratexts and tools, see Seth Perry, *Bible Culture and Authority in the Early United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 54. We are grateful to Janiece Johnson for sharing these two notes from her important research on early readers of the Book of Mormon. The details of these annotated copies of the Book of Mormon will be included in Dr. Johnson’s future publications.

6. Benjamin Winchester, *Synopsis of the Holy Scriptures and Concordance, in which the Synonymous Passages are Arranged Together.—Chiefly Designed to Illustrate the Doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Philadelphia: United States Book and Job Printing Office, 1842), 23. The list includes the Book of the Wars of the Lord (Num. 21:14); the Book of Jasher (Josh. 10:13, 2 Sam. 1:18); the Book of the Statutes of the Kingdom of Israel (1 Sam. 10:25); the Book of the Acts of Solomon (1 Kgs. 11:41); the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel (1 Kgs. 14:19); the Book of Nathan the Prophet (1 Chr. 29:29); the Book of Gad the Seer (1 Chr. 29:29); the Book of Ahijah the Prophet (2 Chr. 9:29); the Book of the Visions of Iddo the Seer (2 Chr. 9:29); the Book of Shemaiah the Prophet (2 Chr. 12:15); the Book of the Story of the Prophet Iddo (2 Chr. 13:22); the Book of Jehu (2 Chr. 20:34); the Book of the Sayings of the Seers (2 Chr. 33:19); the Book of the Story of the Kings (2 Chr. 24:27); Paul’s Epistle to the Corinthians, which is not in the New Testament (1 Cor. 5:9); Paul’s Epistle to the Colossians written from Laodicea (Col. 4:16); Jude’s Epistle on the Gospel or Common Salvation (Jude 1:3); the Prophecy of Enoch (Jude 1:14); and the many different authors upon the biography of Christ, written before the Gospel of St. Luke (Luke 1:1).

books mentioned and referred to, in various <places> in the old and new testaments, which were now no where to be found.”⁷ Moreover, Joseph Smith’s 1833 statement that “we have not found the book of Jasher nor any of the othe[r] lost books mentioned in the bible *as yet* nor will we obtain them at present” suggests a culture of inquiry into these lost records and an expectation that more records would emerge.⁸ Thus, the recovery of lost scripture was fully absorbed into the Restoration project, and it soon became a source of encouragement and strength to “the faith of his little flock” that the Lord would “giv[e] some more extended information upon the Scriptures; a tran[s]lation of which had already commenced.”⁹ As Robin Jensen and Brian Hauglid put it, “Joseph Smith looked to ancient cultures in search not only of the language of the divine but also of promised records.”¹⁰

For some scholars, these same references to lost scripture provide a compelling context for the acquisition of the Egyptian mummies and papyri and the production of the Book of Abraham.¹¹ This seems an entirely reasonable conclusion. However, another response to this culture of interest in ancient texts is to trace it back to the Book of Mormon text itself. The Book of Mormon seems aware that ancient texts would create space for it and that they would follow in its wake (see 1 Ne. 13:39). It therefore seems reasonable to ask about ancient texts within the Book of Mormon. How does the Book of Mormon read ancient religious texts?

7. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” 80, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed June 11, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/86>.

8. “Letter to Church Leaders in Jackson County, Missouri, 25 June 1833,” in *Documents, Volume 3: February 1833–March 1834*, ed. Gerritt J. Dirkmaat and others, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2014), 149, emphasis added.

9. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1,” 80.

10. Robin Scott Jensen and Brian M. Hauglid, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 4: Book of Abraham and Related Manuscripts*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2018), xxii. The continued eagerness to acquire additional records is evident in a passage from an 1840 letter sent by Brigham Young and Willard Richards to the First Presidency: “We have lately visited a museum, where we saw an E[gyptian] Mummy, on the head stone &c are many ancient <& curious> characters, & we asked the privilege of copyi[n]g them for translation but have not receivd an answer, yet, Shall we copy them & send them to you for translation?” “Letter from Brigham Young and Willard Richards, 5 Sept. 1840,” 11, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed August 25, 2022, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-from-brigham-young-and-willard-richards-5-september-1840/11>. We are grateful to Christopher Blythe for this reference.

11. Jensen and Hauglid, *Book of Abraham and Related Manuscripts*, xxii.

How does it teach us to engage with them? Can we find in the Book of Mormon a theological ethic of reading ancient religious texts?

What we find when we carefully consider the Book of Mormon's engagement with and self-conscious inclusion of ancient texts is not just a key to understanding the Book of Mormon's composition history but also the presentation of a model for reading ancient texts. To put this another way, we believe the Book of Mormon is interested in enacting and instructing its readers on how to read ancient religious texts ethically, productively, and constructively. We want to suggest that ancient texts also provide a different vantage point for reading the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon stumbles upon ancient texts, describes their translation, sees their transmission into the future, and turns them into scripture. It also anticipates its own coming forth amid a proliferation of ancient texts and seems to offer itself as a hermeneutical key to reading them. We propose to examine the Book of Mormon's statements, actions, and enactments in order to expose an ethic of reading ancient texts. This paper will consider the ethic of reading under four headings.

1. Production, Preservation, and Transmission

Through both description and enactment, the Book of Mormon teaches us to recognize and honor the production history of ancient texts.¹² The Book of Mormon demands that we read the Bible this way. Toward the end of 2 Nephi, we are given a multichapter prophecy of the cultural environment within which the Book of Mormon would come forth. Famously, this passage includes the prediction that Gentiles would reject the book because they already have a text that satisfies all of their scriptural needs: "A Bible, a Bible! We have got a Bible, and there cannot be any more Bible." Usually, this response is labeled as problematic because it presumes to limit God's ability to speak to his children. However, the verses that follow this imagined response go further and question the Gentiles' right to claim ownership of the Bible without acknowledging those who produced it: "Yea, what do the Gentiles mean? Do they remember the travails,

12. By enact, we mean the process of acting out or demonstrating something. This is what we normally think of as teaching by example. Citing its inclusion of the Lehite, Mulekite, and Jaredite civilizations, Terryl Givens argues that the Book of Mormon describes and enacts the "doubling and redoubling of providential history." Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 50. Drawing on similar scriptural references, we argue that the Book of Mormon also prescribes and enacts careful attention to a text's production history.

and the labors, and the pains of the Jews, and their diligence unto me, in bringing forth salvation unto the Gentiles?” (2 Ne. 29:3–4). The message is clear: the Gentiles cannot claim to own the Bible, let alone claim to read it correctly, without recognizing and reverencing the work of the Jews who created it.¹³

This message resonates with John Witherspoon’s essay “To the Reader,” which was first printed in the 1791 edition of the King James Bible prepared by Isaac Collins and republished in two bibles known to have been in Joseph Smith’s possession. Witherspoon notes:

To the Jews were first committed the care of the sacred Writings, and for many ages they were in a manner confined to that chosen people. There was then no need of translations into other languages; yet was the providence of God particularly manifest in their preservation and purity. The Jews were so faithful to their important trust, that, when copies of the law or the prophets were transcribed, they observed the most scrupulous exactness: they not only diligently compared the one with the other, but even counted the number of letters in each book, and compared and recorded the numbers.¹⁴

What is a mere historical observation about the role of the Jews in the transmission of the Bible in Witherspoon becomes a God-spoken rebuke and an admonition in the Book of Mormon: “O fools, they shall have a Bible; and it shall proceed forth from the Jews, mine ancient covenant people. And what thank they the Jews for the Bible which they receive from them” (2 Ne. 29:4).¹⁵ The implication is that one natural result of reading an ancient text with gratitude is an increased desire to understand the otherwise-hidden history of the text’s production and transmission.

13. This emphasis on the Jewishness of the Bible would seem to confirm Joseph Spencer’s contention that in his apocalyptic vision, Nephi is taught to understand the Bible as “a Jewish book aimed at clarifying for non-Jews the heart of Judaism’s historical encounter with God.” Joseph Spencer, *The Vision of All: Twenty-Five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi’s Record* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016), 5.

14. John Witherspoon, “To the Reader.” On Witherspoon’s introduction, see Perry, *Bible Culture and Authority*, 18 and 121, where Perry notes, “Two bibles which Smith is known for certain to have personally owned feature John Witherspoon’s ‘To the Reader’ essay.” On Isaac Collins and the publication of this American edition of the King James version, see Richard F. Hixson, *Isaac Collins: A Quaker Printer in 18th Century America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1968), esp. 137–57.

15. A recent treatment of the important themes found in this chapter is found in Nicholas J. Frederick and Joseph M. Spencer, “Remnant or Replacement? Outlining a Possible Apostasy Narrative,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2021): 105–27.

Drawing on the religious criticism of Harold Bloom, Richard L. Bushman has used this same scripture to argue that the Book of Mormon offers a “strong reading” of the Bible, or a reading that rests on the understanding of scripture “as the product of a people whose labors and pains must be acknowledged along with their records.”¹⁶ Such a view demands that we historicize and humanize the scripture-making process. This requirement extends to all phases of the process, and not just to the site of initial production. Readers are explicitly asked to honor the work the Jews did in creating the Bible, but the implication of the phrase “bring forth salvation,” is that the work is incomplete until a long series of events brings the Bible to the Gentiles. In other words, the Bible’s transmission history must be recognized and appreciated. But this principle can be elaborated even further if we read 2 Nephi 29:4 as not just diagnosing a myopic reading of the Bible but also condemning a problematic relationship with the world in general. Fundamentally, this verse is about the folly of claiming ownership of something without bothering to find out what that “something” is. At the same time, however, it suggests that the project of uncovering an object’s hidden multitudes will not result in more credible claims to ownership. Instead, a book that you regarded as Christian will be recognized as Jewish, and the object that you thought was unambiguously your own will become a gift from others.¹⁷

The Book of Mormon is quite straightforward with its readers about their obligation to read the Bible with an eye to its production history. The long history of labor and care seen in the Bible’s composition and

16. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 100. Bushman reads this verse as establishing a person’s obligation to the people who produced their scripture. While we agree with this reading, we argue that the definition of production ought to be extended beyond the initial act of transcribing God’s word to also include the processes of preservation, translation, and transmission. For example, if we were to apply this ethic to the small plates of Nephi, we would express gratitude for the succession of prophets (Nephi, Jacob, Enos, and others) who created that scripture as well as for Mormon, who “searched among the records,” discovered the small plates of Nephi, and appended them to his record (W of M 1:3).

17. Interestingly, this complication of the idea of ownership intersects with Joseph Spencer’s theorizing on the principle of consecration in his book *For Zion: A Mormon Theology of Hope*. Spencer argues that central to the idea of stewardship is a distinction between “use” and “ownership.” To be a steward is to “disentangle use from ownership, and specifically by owning *as though not* owning what she owns.” By encouraging its readers to realize that what they claim to own is not actually their own, the Book of Mormon prescribes just this sort of “owning as though not owning” orientation toward the Bible and other ancient texts. See *For Zion: A Mormon Theology of Hope* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014), 150–51.

recomposition and in the painstaking transmission of the text from one generation to another—all of this work that went into producing the Bible that we read today—really matters. A close reading indicates that the Book of Mormon wants itself to be read the same way. Multiple scholars have noted that the Book of Mormon tracks the arc of its own creation with great care—as Bushman observes, “Throughout the Book of Mormon, there is a recurrent clanking of plates as they pass from one record-keeper to another.”¹⁸ Terryl L. Givens argues that a “preoccupation . . . with authenticating the record’s provenance” is one of the central concerns of the book.¹⁹ Seth Perry makes a similar observation about the “exhaustively documented trail of authorship” in the Book of Mormon.²⁰ Interestingly, Givens and Perry begin with the same incisive observation but come to radically different conclusions. For Givens, the Book of Mormon’s obsession with its provenance runs counter to the early nineteenth-century assumption that scripture was something entirely divine that remained above and beyond human voices and human hands. For Perry, the Book of Mormon’s concern with its “material reliability” places it squarely within a culture concerned with the impact of translation and transmission processes on the credibility of scripture.²¹

18. Richard Bushman, “The Book of Mormon in Early Mormon History,” in *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 69.

19. Terryl Givens, “Joseph Smith’s American Bible: Radicalizing the Familiar,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 18, no. 2 (2009): 7.

20. Perry, *Bible Culture and Authority*, 119. Interestingly, while Perry thinks that this “exhaustively documented trail of authorship” is intended to buttress the reliability of the Book of Mormon, Jared Hickman sees it as having the opposite effect. Hickman argues that by consistently linking itself to its human narrators, the Book of Mormon actually undermines its own authority: “A certain friction is generated by the narrative’s frank embeddedness in particular viewpoints and memory practices. Any theological authority accorded to the content is intimately bound up with the identity of the author-narrator.” Jared Hickman, “*The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse*,” *American Literature* 86, no. 3 (2014): 447. The idea of the Book of Mormon’s moving through space and time is addressed in Jared Hickman, “Bringing Forth’ the Book of Mormon: Translation as the Reconfiguration of Bodies in Space-Time,” in *Producing Ancient Scripture: Joseph Smith’s Translation Projects in the Development of Mormon Christianity*, ed. Michael Hubbard MacKay, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Brian M. Hauglid (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2020), 54–80.

21. Givens and Perry also disagree on the audacity of Joseph Smith’s claim to have recovered and translated new scripture. Givens argues that the “Christian audience of Joseph’s day would have considered scriptural history to move inevitably toward completion and closure.” Givens, “Joseph Smith’s American Bible,” 15. Thus, the Book of Mormon would have been deemed blasphemous. Citing the rise of specified Bibles—a “family”

Whatever the explanation for the Book of Mormon's preoccupation with its own creation—that is, whether one sees this as counterdiscursive and thus confirmatory of the text's status as an ancient relic, or instead of evidence of its indebtedness to early nineteenth-century discourse—that preoccupation is undeniably a persistent and significant feature of the book.

One telling enactment of the theme of scriptural production occurs in the story of the twenty-four gold plates of Ether. Limhi's explorers bring them back as evidence of the ruins they had found while looking for Zarahemla (Mosiah 8:9), Mosiah translates at least a portion of these plates (Mosiah 28:17), Mormon promises to include an account taken from the plates (Mosiah 28:19), and Moroni finally provides that account (Ether 1:1). By describing the transition of these plates from material evidence to exciting oddity, to valuable history, and finally to a text with spiritual relevance, the Book of Mormon traces the process whereby an ancient record becomes scripture. Like the stones shaped by the brother of Jared, the raw materials of scripture are destroyed in transformation and are touched by the hand of God to become scripture. The result is revelatory rather than reality. The intent is not history, but scripture—light-filled and light-giving scripture.²²

2. From Records to Scripture

Before a text can become scripture, it must first be read. Ancient texts that cannot be read, like the twenty-four plates, need to be translated. When linguistic ability is lacking, God provides for texts to be translated by the gift and power of God, even if the text is not scripture. King Mosiah had “wherewith that he can look, and translate *all* records that are of an ancient date; and it is a gift from God” (Mosiah 8:13, emphasis added). The verbs used here and in verse 6 are “translate” and “interpret” (nominalized as “interpreter”). The purpose of translation, as given later in the chapter, is to “know of things which are past” and to make known “things which are not known” and things “which otherwise could not be known” (Mosiah 8:17). The Book of Mormon articulates this yearning for unknown and hidden things, or the “myster[ies] contained with

bible, a “pulpit” bible, a “Baptist” bible—Perry argues that the Book of Mormon came forth in a culture comfortable with, or at least grudgingly permissive of, an abundance of variations on the Bible. Perry, *Bible Culture and Authority*, 118.

22. This argument is also made in Rosalynde Frandsen Welch, *Ether: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2021), 54–69.

these” ancient texts, and “rejoice[s] exceedingly” in the gift of translation, and in those able to translate ancient texts because “doubtless [they are] prepared for the purpose of unfolding all such mysteries to the children of men” (Mosiah 8:19). This valorizing of translation seems to have been deeply influential in Joseph Smith’s own vision of the Restoration.²³

When King Limhi asks Ammon if he knows of someone who can translate the twenty-four plates that Limhi’s explorers found, the reasons Limhi offers for the plates’ value are historical (Mosiah 8:12). Limhi hopes that the plates will provide information about a civilization that no longer exists. He is particularly concerned with the cause of this civilization’s collapse. Limhi’s interests in the plates are shared by the people of King Mosiah. They too are “desirous beyond measure to know concerning those people who had been destroyed” (Mosiah 28:12). Importantly, neither Limhi nor the people of Mosiah say anything about the spiritual message of the twenty-four plates. And it would be surprising if they did, considering that the plates were retrieved for the purpose of substantiating the tales Limhi’s forty-three explorers told of a land covered by “bones of men, and of beasts, and . . . ruins of buildings of every kind, . . . a land which had been peopled with a people who were as numerous as the hosts of Israel” (Mosiah 8:8). Initially, then, the twenty-four plates performed the same function as the golden plates: provide a witness to a previously unknown chapter of ancient history.²⁴ The Book of Mormon is here enacting the work of translating an ancient text purely to better understand an ancient people and signaling the importance of this act by placing a prophet and the spiritual gift of translation at the center of the story.

Though the earliest readers of the twenty-four plates were primarily attuned to the plates’ historical importance, Mormon and his son Moroni were concerned with detecting the plates’ spiritual pulse. In the

23. See Bushman, *Believing History*, 240 for a discussion of how the story of King Mosiah translating the twenty-four Jaredite Plates influenced Joseph’s conception of what it meant to be a translator. Bushman further refers to the fact that Joseph Knight’s account includes neighborhood money diggers and the judgment that Joseph Smith cared more about the translators than the golden plates. David F. Holland uses this detail (that the translators interested Joseph more than the golden plates) to further his argument that Joseph Smith “felt that the discovery of the Book of Mormon represented the beginning of inquiry rather than the end.” David F. Holland, “American Visionaries and Their Approaches to the Past,” in *Approaching Antiquity: Joseph Smith and the Ancient World*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell, Matthew J. Grey, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 52.

24. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 90–91.

process of abridging the record for inclusion in the Book of Mormon, it became a text that resonates with the purpose of the Book of Mormon—that is, a text aligned with the two themes established on the title page: God’s covenant with Israel (“that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever”) and Jesus as the eternal and universal Christ. Grant Hardy argues that Moroni accomplishes this correlation project by using direct comparison, geographic references, parallel narrative elements, and shared phrases to “deliberately highlight [Jaredite] connections with the Nephites and Lamanites and minimize differences.” According to Hardy, however, the most significant thing that Moroni does is structure his abridgment to make it seem that the Jaredites were Christian.²⁵

Moroni’s reworking of the Jaredite record raises valuable questions about how we read and receive ancient texts. More to the point, how can we reconcile Moroni’s manipulation of the Jaredite record with an ethic for the reception of ancient texts that is predicated on the principle of charity, meaning a desire to see and understand a text in its own terms first? After all, Moroni’s Christianization of the Jaredite record finds a problematic analog in historical Christianity’s orientation toward the Old Testament, which Marilynne Robinson characterizes as the idea that the Old Testament is “a tribal epic which includes the compendium of strange laws and fierce prohibitions Jesus of Nazareth put aside when he established the dominion of grace.”²⁶

The easiest explanation for Moroni’s heavy-handed treatment of the twenty-four plates is that Jesus himself directed this treatment. As Grant Hardy notes, “Through overt, interruptive comments, [Moroni] is able to transform [the Jaredite record] into something different from what it seems to have been originally. He reportedly does so with the express permission and guidance of Jesus himself.”²⁷ Hardy doesn’t cite a specific verse to back up his claim about Moroni’s project being condoned by Jesus, though he seems to be suggesting that Jesus’s involvement in the

25. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 235. Hardy argues that Moroni accomplishes this primarily by invoking Jesus in his frequent editorial comments: “with a single exception, specific references to Jesus Christ appear only in Moroni’s editorial remarks” (235). Further valuable work on Moroni’s editorial process is found in Frederick W. Axelgard, “More Than Meets the Eye: How Nephite Prophets Managed the Jaredite Legacy,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 26 (2017): 135–64.

26. Marilynne Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2012), 96.

27. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 240.

project (see, for example, Ether 13:13) implies his approval. This response, however, avoids the question rather than answering it. We contend that Christ was unconcerned about this treatment of the twenty-four plates because earlier readers (really, listeners) had already approached the plates on their own terms by reading them as a historical record. In effect, Moroni's purposeful misinterpretation, an act that might productively be thought of as interpretative violence, was obviated by earlier readings. There is, then, a contrast between the work of a scholar who wants to historicize and analyze a text and the work of someone speaking scripture. "The scholar must not handle ancient texts violently," warns Anthony Grafton, "tearing them into their tiny original shreds, but gently, trying to release their original flavor and texture."²⁸ This is the scholar's craft, but as we have seen, it is not necessarily the way of the maker of scripture. There seems to be, rather, a violent handling of texts inherent in making and remaking scripture. Violence, that is, from a modern academic perspective.

However, as Grant Hardy has already suggested with the editorial work of Moroni in making the book of Ether, the sensibilities of the scholars and the practices of the prophets are sometimes quite different. A scholar trained in the historical-critical method of reading scripture might be surprised, for example, by this anecdote by Elder David A. Bednar: "Now, here comes the part that may make you laugh. I next used my scissors to cut out the scriptures I had copied and sorted them into piles by color. The process produced a large pile of scriptures marked with red, a large pile of scriptures marked with green, and so forth. I then sorted the scriptures within each large pile into smaller piles. As a first grader I must have really liked cutting with scissors and putting things into piles!"²⁹ However, it is the recreative violence of Elder Bednar cutting and pasting scriptural passages that makes new scripture—a process that ignores context, variation in authorial intention, hermeneutical consistency, and so on, in the service of recreating scripture anew. It is the violence of creation and recreation, birth and rebirth, the process whereby a record becomes scripture by passing through the stage of the historical record.

28. Anthony Grafton, "A Passion for the Past," *New York Review of Books*, March 8, 2001, 52, referring to Burckhardt's use of sources in contrast to the source critics.

29. David A. Bednar, "A Reservoir of Living Water," Brigham Young University devotional, February 4, 2007, accessed June 28, 2021, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/david-a-bednar/reservoir-living-water/>.

Moreover, the Book of Mormon teaches the making and remaking of scripture as a fundamental act of religious devotion with Christ at the center. “And we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins” (2 Ne. 25:26). Each life, each family, each generation must have its own conversation, its own sorrow and rejoicing, its own prophecies, and write and rewrite its own scripture. Scripture’s power is not in its creation, but in its invitation to be recreated, to be ingested, remembered, and renewed, to bring life.

3. A Fractured and Scattered Reality

The third requirement for reading ancient texts offered by the Book of Mormon is, ironically, an acknowledgment of a given text’s inherent *limitedness*. Any ancient text, even ancient scripture, is only one record in a “river of bibles cascading down through time from the diverse peoples of the earth.”³⁰ The concept of a “river of bibles” is described quite clearly in 2 Nephi 29:12, where we are told that Jews, Nephites, the lost tribes, and “all nations of the earth” will have their own scriptural canon. Thus, no single scripture can claim to be comprehensive, or, indeed, sufficient. As Elizabeth Fenton has noted, “The Book of Mormon complicates the very notion of an ur-text and offers a model of sacred history that depends upon iteration and proliferation.”³¹ Relatedly, David Holland has argued that this unique paradigm of sacred history, a series of prophetic voices bounded by time and space, ran counter to the tendencies of Joseph Smith’s religion-making contemporaries Mary Baker Eddy and Ellen White, as well as Smith’s own instincts. All three exhibited an affinity for universality and wholeness, yet Smith’s desire to “mend a fractured reality,” to borrow from Philip Barlow,³² went unfulfilled in the realm of scripture-production. Instead, Smith was forced to realize that “the grandeur of God’s earthly drama would only

30. Bushman, “The Book of Mormon in Early Mormon History,” 71.

31. Elizabeth Fenton, “Open Canons: Sacred History and American History in *The Book of Mormon*,” *Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 343. An urtext is an original text. Thus, Fenton is arguing that Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon argue that God works in the world through a proliferation of scriptures rather than pointing toward some kind of pristine original text.

32. Philip L. Barlow, “To Mend a Fractured Reality: Joseph Smith’s Project,” *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 3 (2012): 28–50.

fully be conveyed through the chorus of many historical voices, not its distillation into one.”³³

In a passage referenced earlier, King Limhi tells Ammon that he wants the twenty-four plates translated for the reason that “they will give us a knowledge of a remnant of the people who have been destroyed . . . ; or, perhaps, they will give us a knowledge of this very people who have been destroyed” (Mosiah 8:12). Limhi’s distinction between the “remnant of the people” and the “very people” demonstrates an awareness of a given text’s limited capacity to tell.³⁴ He has no pretensions to comprehensiveness but instead knows that the twenty-four plates are the record of a particular people, or even a particular subset (“a remnant”) of that people. Elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, Jesus Christ himself asks us to attend to the fragmentary nature of his communication with humanity. In 3 Nephi 26, Mormon intends to record Christ’s explication of all (3 Ne. 26:1–5), but the Lord forbids him from doing so (26:11). Here was Mormon’s chance to provide a comprehensive account of providential history, articulated by the author of that history, but instead he is forced to return to the laborious and decidedly uncomprehensive task of combining through records and painstakingly stitching together scripture from the narrative of Nephite history.

4. A Gathering of Texts

The ethic articulated above cannot merely be one of privileging fracture over wholeness. The Book of Mormon teaches us to respect gaps in the scriptural record while at the same time recognizing that those gaps will be filled (2 Ne. 29:14). That is, records will not proliferate ad infinitum.³⁵ Rather, as Lehi tells his son Joseph, they will come together and complement one another. The records produced by Judah’s posterity will join the records produced by Lehi’s posterity, and together they will confound false doctrines, lay down contentions, and establish peace (2 Ne. 3:12). This harmonious merging, however, is not inevitable; it requires great effort and care on our part. As Richard Bushman has pointed out, this type of attentive gathering and preservation of texts is modeled

33. Holland, “American Visionaries and Their Approaches to the Past,” 50.

34. Elsewhere, the Book of Mormon is conscious of its own inability to satisfactorily or completely narrate the events it records, as in, for example, 3 Nephi 17:17; 28:14.

35. See, however, John Durham Peters, “Recording beyond the Grave: Joseph Smith’s Celestial Bookkeeping,” *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 4 (Summer 2016): 842–64.

in the Book of Mormon. It is described in 2 Nephi 29, where the Lord tells the Nephites that the interactions he has had with different peoples will not only be recorded (“and they shall write it”) but also shared: the Jews will inherit the Nephite records, the Nephites will inherit the words of the Jews, and both the Nephites and the Jews will inherit the words of the “lost tribes of Israel” (2 Ne. 29:12). The next verse indicates that this textual gathering will be directly connected to the gathering of peoples; the gathering of the “house of Israel” will be replicated in the movement of the Lord’s word, which “also shall be gathered in one” (2 Ne. 29:14). In other words, eventually sacred history will move toward closure and completion, but not before we bear witness to the full extent of that history.

The process of record sharing and absorption plays out in the story of the people of Limhi. Limhi instructs the emissary from Zarahemla, Ammon, to give a history of all that had occurred in Zarahemla since Zeniff led a group to the land of Nephi (Mosiah 8:2). Additionally, Limhi provides Ammon with his people’s record of that same period of time (Mosiah 8:5). Finally, the return of Limhi’s people to Zarahemla sparks another public exchange of histories. Bushman observes that these local exchanges of records and histories prefigure the global exchange prophesied in 2 Nephi 29: “The ritual of exchanging histories practiced in miniature by Limhi, Mosiah, Alma and Ammon would be replicated on a grand scale.”³⁶

In 3 Nephi 16, the resurrected Jesus reframes this literal sharing of histories as a secondary solution to the inevitable lacunae in sacred history. The primary solution is knowledge that comes as a result of prayer and the Holy Ghost. Jesus tells the assembled Nephites that he has “other sheep” whom he has not yet visited but whom he plans to visit shortly (3 Ne. 16:1). He then tells them to “write these sayings” so that they can be delivered to the Gentiles, who will restore the Lamanite remnant to a knowledge of Christ and their covenantal status. However, this is necessary only because Christ’s disciples in Jerusalem “do not ask the Father in my name, that they may receive a knowledge of you by the Holy Ghost, and also of the other tribes whom they know not of” (3 Ne. 16:4). If the Old World Christians would simply ask, then the Holy Ghost would inform them of Christ’s other sheep. If they would only ask, then they could accomplish the gathering of scattered Israel on their own, and no

36. Bushman, “Book of Mormon in Early Mormon History,” 71.

Gentile intermediaries would be necessary. Thus, prayer can yield the same capacious understanding of God's work among his children that comes because of the gathering of records. A point of clarification is necessary here. We do not read this scripture as implying that scripture is unnecessary insofar as a person has sufficient faith to obtain through prayer the same knowledge available in the scriptures. Instead, we see it as saying that (1) our knowledge of ancient people is not entirely dependent on our discovery of ancient records and that (2) God is so concerned that we learn the radically expansive scope of his salvific work that he has established multiple avenues through which that learning might occur.

In the chapter referenced above, Richard Bushman posits that Nephites understood records as "surrogates of peoples." It is a little unclear what he means when he says that Nephites equated records with peoples or how that conception is distinct from understanding a record as a history of a people. However, Bushman seems to think that this unique view of ancient texts is in part explained by the linking of the physical gathering of Israel with the gathering into one of the sundry and scattered scriptural canons. In this case, a people's record is their representative, the instrument which gives them a "part in the grand orchestra of the nations."³⁷ If Nephites did indeed view records as surrogates of peoples, then Jesus Christ's resurrection of the corporate and covenantal theology of salvation in 3 Nephi acquires a new degree of significance. Grant Hardy notes that in his second discourse to the Nephites, Jesus Christ "modifies standard Book of Mormon soteriology" by focusing on "collective redemption." Hardy writes that "in the rest of the Book of Mormon, Christ is preeminently a personal savior whose atonement has made it possible for individuals to return to God, but as the resurrected Jesus defines his own role in 3 Nephi, his primary task is to save a people, *his* people."³⁸ If we combine this observation with Bushman's contention that Nephites understood records as surrogates of peoples, then it follows that the preservation of scripture is a salvific task. By viewing ancient texts as surrogates of peoples, and by treating those texts with great care and attentiveness, the Nephites could emulate God's grand project of redemption.

37. Bushman, "Book of Mormon in Early Mormon History," 72.

38. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 205, emphasis original.

When asking what the Book of Mormon has to say about a gathering of texts, it is important to remember that three of the records mentioned in the Book of Mormon were discovered accidentally—and even the recovery of the brass plates involved a certain serendipity. As mentioned above, Limhi's explorers discovered the twenty-four gold plates of Ether when they were looking for Zarahemla. In *Words of Mormon*, Mormon tells us that he stumbled upon the small plates of Nephi while perusing the records he had been given (W of M 1:3). Finally, it seems likely that the “large stone” of Jaredite origin mentioned in *Omni* was also recovered unintentionally, though we only learn of it when it is delivered to King Mosiah, so the circumstances surrounding its initial discovery are unknown (*Omni* 1:21–22). This pattern of serendipitous discovery seems to imply a few different things. First, it reinforces the notion of an ever-expanding canon as discussed earlier. Second, it implicitly recommends a certain reorientation toward the world, a renewed sense of awe for the sanctity of what we have been given. It seems as though the earth is teeming with ancient texts, and so it may not be inappropriate to approach it with a profound sense of gratitude and reverence, and even with the conviction that “wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration.”³⁹

The Book of Mormon seems to suggest that we need to be willing, as Alma told his son Helaman, when encountering an ancient text, whether newly discovered or transmitted carefully over time, to see that “it is for a wise purpose that they are kept” (*Alma* 37:2). “Kept” here implies both the active act of preservation and the divine acts of keeping—records “kept and preserved by the hand of the Lord” (*Alma* 37:4). When we find an ancient cuneiform tablet that is as clear today as when the wedges were first pressed into soft clay, or a Syriac manuscript kept for a thousand years in an Egyptian monastery that is as legible today as it was when it was first written—records that have “retain[ed] their brightness”—perhaps we should be inclined to wonder whether these survivors of the ravages of time might not “contain that which is holy” (*Alma* 37:5). There seems to be purpose in such preservation. Perhaps these ancient texts have and will continue to “enlarg[e] the memory of this people, yea, and convinc[e] many of the error of their ways, and [bring] them to the knowledge of their God unto the salvation of their souls” (*Alma* 37:8). “Now ye may suppose that this is foolishness in me; but behold I say unto you, that by small and simple things are great things

39. Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2004), 289.

brought to pass; and small means in many instances doth confound the wise” (Alma 37:6). How many ancient texts are waiting to be read by one who “is enlightened by the Spirit” so that we can “obtain benefit therefrom” (D&C 91:5)?

Finally, the theme of accidental discovery in the Book of Mormon teaches us to be humble, insofar as humility is a recognition of one’s smallness in comparison to the grandeur of God’s work. The proliferation of ancient texts anticipated in the Book of Mormon is humility-inducing on its own, but the fact that that proliferation will occur on its own terms and without our direction underscores the fact that, in the words of Adam Miller, “the world is much rounder, time much deeper, and the earth more eccentric than [we’ve previously realized]. . . . We live in a postdiluvian world, and the rain falls harder every day.”⁴⁰

Conclusion

The “restitution of all things,” inaugurated by the reestablishment of Jesus Christ’s Church on April 6, 1830, includes within its scope the recovery of ancient records, such as the Book of Mormon. According to this understanding, the Book of Mormon shattered the notion of a closed canon not merely by coming forth itself but also by signaling the imminent arrival of other texts, other voices, and other unknown chapters of world and sacred history. This article contends that the Book of Mormon is not only aware of its situation within a vast library of similar records, but also that it teaches its readers how to receive and attend to the records of which it prophesies. In both what it says and what it models, the Book of Mormon establishes a series of methods for engaging with ancient texts. First, the Book of Mormon asks that we attend to the production history of a text by acknowledging those who wrote it, those who preserved it, and those who transmitted it. Second, it asks that we mine a text for historical significance before we read it theologically. Third, it demands we recognize the limited perspective of any single text—that we respect the reality of fracture, without reifying that fracture. Fourth, the Book of Mormon encourages us to not lose sight of the eschatological gathering of all texts into one, but to recognize that, eventually, texts will be gathered and the divisions between them healed. By approaching an ancient text with these methods in mind, we can successfully enact a “hermeneutics of love” and emulate, through

40. Adam Miller, *Letters to a Young Mormon*, 2nd ed. (Provo, Utah: Maxwell Institute, 2018), 54–55.

our local saving of ancient records, the God of Israel's global redemption of peoples.⁴¹ By abiding by these principles, our engagement with other ancient texts can be transformed into something profoundly sacred, a type and shadow of the ever-ongoing salvific work of Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ.

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41. Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001).