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*Their Mothers Taught Them* by Brent Borup, graphite with digital coloring, 2020, by permission of the artist.

# Anti-Nephi-Lehi Mothers

## What They Taught Their Stripling Sons

Julie A. P. Frederick

When I first saw this shirt (see fig. 1), I was immediately taken with the contrast of the shirtless warriors in bodybuilder-type poses and the claim that these men with six-packs and bulging muscles were “momma’s boys.”<sup>1</sup> I have always loved a clever juxtaposition, and this one was so delightful that I remember it from years ago. I was a student walking down the main hallway of Orem High School, and I actually stopped in the middle of the hallway to stare at it, then continued down the hall laughing to myself. What made the shirt even more wonderful was that the student wearing it was a popular athlete, who was able to wear that shirt with no social recriminations (at least none that I saw).



FIGURE 1. T-shirt the author saw in Orem High School, Orem, Utah. Courtesy BuyLDProducts.com.

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1. Part of the reason for the muscular depictions is to show the spiritual strength of the sons through their physical appearance, since there isn't an obvious way to show their spiritual strength in an illustration. Unfortunately, that imagery can distort our mental picture about their actual appearance. J. David Pulsipher suggests that the muscular depictions of Book of Mormon characters are related to Ezra Taft Benson's reading of the text. See J. David Pulsipher, "Buried Swords: The Shifting Interpretive Ground of a Beloved Book of Mormon Narrative," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 26, no. 1 (2017): 32.

I still think it's wonderful that a teenage boy could see the stripling soldiers as models of men who could be strong—not in spite of but because of how much they valued their mothers.<sup>2</sup> However, the shirt gives the wrong impression about who the stripling soldiers were and somewhat obscures their relationship to and the importance of their mothers. The assumptions made by this image and others like it can distort the story, a story which has so much more to teach us.

The only verses that specifically mention “mothers” are Alma 56:47–48 and Alma 57:21, 26–27. Based on these verses, three pieces of information can be identified about the mothers of the stripling soldiers: (1) they each had a “stripling” son (or sons) in Helaman’s army, (2) they taught their sons, and (3) they were part of the Anti-Nephi-Lehi people.<sup>3</sup> With these pieces of information, I will outline the information about what the mothers taught and then propose the likely age range of the mothers from the information about their sons. Then, I will contextualize these mothers by incorporating them into the history of the Anti-Nephi-Lehi people. Finally, I will discuss their significance as possibly the largest group of women in the Book of Mormon who are credited with an important, positive contribution to their society and whose story teaches what the mothers knew about the promises of the Lord and the power of deliverance.

## Mothers of the “Stripling Warriors”

Four references tell us what the sons learned from their mothers.<sup>4</sup> A chart comparing the passages might look like this (table 1):

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2. “Stripling Warriors Mommas Boys T-Shirt,” BuyLDSproducts.com, updated 2024, <https://www.buylldsproducts.com/stripling-warriors-mommas-boys-t-shirt/>.

3. While the text never identifies the mothers as Anti-Nephi-Lehies, it is an inescapable conclusion from the text. The sons did not enter the covenant to never shed blood again, and the son’s parents were those who did enter the covenant. The mothers and fathers would have had to be married before or shortly after the time of the covenant for the mothers and fathers to have been parents of the stripling soldiers. Since the sons were born at most a few years before and possibly a few years after the covenant, the mothers must have been from among the converted Lamanites, or those who took the new name of Anti-Nephi-Lehi.

4. Only two of the four passages in table 1 specifically mention that it is the mothers who taught the stripling sons. The three passages in Alma 56 and 57 are all part of the letter from Helaman to Moroni. Since the description in 57:26–27 follows just a few verses after the attribution in 57:20–21, that description should also be attributed to what the mothers taught. The descriptions in Alma 53 are different because they are from Mormon’s abridgement of the record. However, the shift from the third person account in the first nine

**Table 1. Descriptions of Characteristics**

|  | <b>Alma 53:21</b>  | <b>Alma 56:47–48</b>  | <b>Alma 57:20–21</b>  | <b>Alma 57:26–27</b>  |
|--|--|---|---|---|
| <i>Teaching verbs</i>                        | “had been taught”  | “had been taught by their mothers”  | “their mothers had taught them”   | “faith in that which they had been taught to believe”   |
| <i>What was taught</i>                       | “to keep the commandments of God and to walk uprightly before him” | “if they did not doubt, God would deliver them”   |   | “there was a just God, and whosoever did not doubt, . . . should be preserved by his marvelous power” |
| <i>Resulting beliefs and characteristics</i> | “men of truth and soberness”                                       | “they did not fear death; and they did think more on liberty of fathers than they did upon their lives” | “firm and undaunted”<br>“they did obey and observe to perform every word of command with exactness” | “their minds are firm, and they do put their trust in God continually”                                |

Arranging the information as illustrated in table 1 shows the incredible impact that the mothers’ teachings had on their sons. What the mothers taught their sons was not simply information about religion; they taught the importance of trusting God, the courage that results from faith and obedience, and the promise of preservation. How did the mothers know what they taught to their sons? Presumably, since the mothers were able to teach their sons these ideas, the mothers would have had to learn and know them first. Looking at the Anti-Nephi-Lehi mothers’ history shows that what the mothers knew came directly from what they experienced.

Since each of the women had a son described as “stripling” when they went to war, we can extrapolate some information about the mothers from the information about their sons. Because of the nickname

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verses to the first person in verse ten, “I have somewhat to say concerning the people of Ammon,” makes it difficult to know exactly where the description is coming from. Mormon might be quoting another correspondence from Helaman or from someone else. However, all four passages use the same verb “taught” with similar tenses and phrasing, suggesting that what the sons learned in each description was taught by their mothers.

“stripling warriors” and much of the artwork depicting them, a mental image of the stripling warriors often looks like the shirt I saw, the famous painting by Arnold Friberg (fig. 2), or this action figure available at Deseret Book (fig. 3).



FIGURE 2. *Helaman's Stripling Warriors* by Arnold Friberg, 1952–55, cropped. © By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.



FIGURE 3. “Stripling Warrior Action Figure” at Deseret Book. Courtesy Latter Day Designs.

The difficulty with this nickname and these depictions, however, is that the term “stripling warrior” does not appear in the Book of Mormon. The word “warrior” is never used of the sons and invokes an idea that is not true to the text.<sup>5</sup> They are called “stripling soldiers” (Alma 53:22) and “stripling Ammonites” (Alma 56:57). A more accurate attribution than “stripling warriors” would be “stripling soldiers” or “stripling sons.”<sup>6</sup> According to Noah Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language*, a “stripling” is “a youth in the state of adolescence, or just passing from boyhood to manhood” and comes

5. In fact, the only use of the word “warriors” in Alma is in Alma 51:31, and it is used specifically to describe Teancum’s men, who were “great warriors” and “did exceed the Lamanites in their strength and in their skill of war.” Nephi quoting Isaiah in 2 Nephi 19:5 is the only other time the word “warrior” appears in the Book of Mormon.

6. They are also called “sons of the Ammonites” in Alma 57:6 when Helaman explains that sixty more had come “to join their brethren, my little band of two thousand.”



from “strip” which is “primarily a tall slender youth, one that shoots up suddenly.”<sup>7</sup> While this definition does not give a definitive age range, it does suggest that someone described as “stripling” is closer to the beginnings of puberty than to the end of it—that is, closer to 12 than to 20.<sup>8</sup>

The stripling soldiers are also called “young men” several times.<sup>9</sup> The one other time the Book of Mormon uses the term “very young” in terms of military service is in Mosiah 10:9, where Zeniff says that he “caused that all [the] old men that could bear arms, and also all [the] young men that were able to bear arms, should gather themselves together to go to battle.” The young men and old men here are those who were too young or too old to be expected to serve in the military; the desperate situation called for those old and young men to join the army despite being outside the normal age ranges.

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7. *American Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. “stripling,” last modified July 7, 2022, <https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/stripling>; *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “stripling, noun,” sense 1, accessed August 1, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9386524040>.

8. Anthony Sweat argues that “stripling” could be considered a boy who looks like a “bean pole.” He suggests that because of the way the stripling sons are presented in art, our mental picture of them is much closer to “strapping” young men than “stripling.” “Stripling warriors are . . . boys who haven’t reached manhood. Picture your local congregation’s teacher’s quorum. That is the 2000 stripling warriors.” Anthony Sweat, “History and Art: Mediating the Rocky Relationship,” Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR), accessed July 2024, <https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/conference/2020-fairmormon-conference/history-and-art>.

9. Alma 53:18, 20; Alma 56:5, 9, 55 all describe them as “young men.” Alma 57:27 uses “young” and Alma 56:46 calls them “very young.” The only times that the sons are called “men”—in Alma 53:20, 21—are when the characteristics of the soldiers are being described, rather than their age or physical appearance. Of the ten times the Book of Mormon uses the term “young men,” five of them refer specifically to the stripling soldiers (Alma 53:18, 20; 56:5, 9, 55). Other than those five references, the term “young men” is only used once in reference to soldiers in Mosiah 10:9. The other four references to “young men” are 2 Nephi 19:17; 23:18; Mosiah 2:40; and 3 Nephi 2:16. The two references in 2 Nephi are part of the Isaiah chapters and seem to both be included in groups who are powerless against destruction. In Mosiah 2:40, the young men are in a list with old men and little children, which could suggest that “young men” refers to everyone who is not a child and not old—that is, males in their twenties or thirties who might already be married and have children. Third Nephi 2:16 talks about the young men and young women of Lamanite descent who are numbered among the Nephites. The specific mention that these young men and women are “exceedingly fair” suggests that they are of marriageable age, but not yet married or perhaps very recently married. (1 Nephi 11:13 and Ether 8:9 also suggest that the term “exceedingly fair” refers to someone who is of marriageable age, but not yet married.) Given these five usages, it seems more likely that “young men” refers to males who are not children, but not yet mature adults.

In Alma 56:39, Helaman calls them “my little sons,” which seems to suggest that the sons are more likely younger than typical military age.<sup>10</sup> Given the other use of the term “young men” in the Book of Mormon, the nineteenth-century meaning of “stripling,” and that Helaman calls his soldiers “very young,” and “my little sons,” an age range of 12 to 16 seems most likely. Grant Hardy’s Book of Mormon commentary claims, “Since the people of Ammon had renounced violence just before the destruction of Ammonihah in –81, some fifteen years earlier, their sons who were too young to join in the covenant or were born shortly thereafter would now be teenagers.”<sup>11</sup> Brant Gardner’s Book of Mormon commentary also concludes that the entire community would have been bound by that oath because they saw themselves guilty of murder. As such, the stripling soldiers would not have been older than 16.<sup>12</sup>

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10. John Welch has argued that the sons were 20 to 22: “Since the term *young men* in the Book of Mormon almost always refers to soldiers, it is reasonable to conclude that a ‘young man’ under Nephite law and society was a man who had attained the age of twenty and who was responsible to render military service. (The Hebrew terms *bahurim* and *necurim* refer precisely to such young men liable for military service.)” John W. Welch, “Law and War in the Book of Mormon,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1990), 65–66, italics original. Stephen Ricks agrees with this assessment in his chapter: “‘Holy War’: The Sacral Ideology of War in the Book of Mormon and in the Ancient Near East,” in Ricks and Hamblin, *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, 109. John A. Tvedtnes also follows this number in “What Were the Ages of Helaman’s ‘Stripling Warriors?’” *Ensign* 22, no. 9 (September 1992): 28. The assumption for this argument is that the army is made up of sons who were not old enough to make the covenant their parents did, but who have since come into the age of military service.

The difficulty of this assumption is that the text does not state the specifics of the oath, whether it was taken by adults of a certain age, only by men, or only by men of military age or by every one of the converts. If the oath required a verbal pronouncement, children too young to speak would not have taken the oath. However, if the oath applied only to adults at the time of the oath, then many of the younger boys would have come of age during the many years of war since the Anti-Nephi-Lehies made the oath. The wording of Alma 53:14 suggests that all the men who would be of typical military age during these many years of war were all considered to be bound by the oath. The “many sons, who had not entered into a covenant” (Alma 53:15) were most likely those who were too young to say the words of the oath or had not yet been born when the oath was taken. This is complicated because the text does not tell us the exact year when the oath was taken, but we know that it was taken before the sacking of Ammonihah in the eleventh year of the reign of the judges.

11. Grant Hardy, *The Annotated Book of Mormon* (Oxford University, 2023), 470 n. 16.

12. See Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, vol. 4, *Alma* (Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 353–55, and 686 with n. 4.



*Stripling Warriors* by Jody Livingston, mixed media, 2016, by permission of the artist.

Why does this information about the sons' ages matter to understanding their mothers' context? First, pointing out that these women were old enough to be mothers helps us recognize that they had lived long enough to experience the history of their people. A mother with a "stripling" child could be anywhere from 25 to 65 years old, but anywhere in that range means that the mothers were adults during the history of their people described in Alma 22–28 (see table 2).<sup>13</sup> Second,

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13. Some of the women may have been in their teens, a few even pre-teens, during the events described in Alma 23–28, but they were old enough to be having children, so I have included them in the category of "adults." Unfortunately, we know very little about Lehiite marriage ages. When Lehi and Sariah left Jerusalem, they had four unmarried sons. Because all the sons were unmarried when they left, but all were married simultaneously in the wilderness, they were likely between ages 12 and 18. Sariah also has daughters and two more sons in the wilderness, so she could have been having children into her 40s. Some ancient cultures do marry girls as young as 12 who have children by 13. If the Lamanites had a lower marriageable age of 12, and if the "stripling" son was the mother's first child, born a year after marriage, and was one of the youngest warriors (12 years old), the youngest mothers of the stripling soldiers would have been 25 when their sons went to war. If the mother was on the oldest end and gave birth to the son later in life, in mid-40s, and

**Table 2. Anti-Nephi-Lehi Timeline with Approximate Ages for the Mothers**

| Year of the Reign of the Judges                                       | Approximate Age of Mothers                            | Alma Reference   | Event   |
|---|---|------------------|---|
| Thirty years before and up to the 1st year of the reign of the judges | oldest mothers born during this thirty-year time span | 17:6             | Sons of Mosiah leave for their missions in the 1st year of the reign of the judges                                  |
| Sometime between the 2nd year and the end of the 10th year            | youngest mothers born                                 | 17–20, 22        | King Lamoni’s and father’s conversions  |
|   |   | 23:1–3           | King Lamoni’s father’s religious freedom proclamation   |
|   |   | 24:17–18         | Anti-Nephi-Lehi covenant of nonviolence   |
| 11th (see Alma 25:1–2)  | youngest: age 9<br>oldest: up to age 45               | 24:20–22         | First massacre of Anti-Nephi-Lehies   |
| 11th  |   | 16:1–3, 12       | Ammonihah destroyed<br>15-year-old soldiers born  |
|   |   | 27:3–10          | Second massacre of Anti-Nephi-Lehies<br>12-year-old soldiers born   |
| 14th (see 16:1–3, 12 and 17:1–6)                                      |   | 27:4–13          | Decision to leave Nephite land  |
|   |   | 27:14            | Migration through the wilderness  |
| 15th  | youngest: 13<br>oldest: up to 49                      | 28:1             | Settled in Jershon  |
|   |   | 28:1–3, 7–10     | War of Ammonite succession, or the “tremendous battle” at Jershon   |
| 18th  | youngest: 16<br>oldest: up to 52                      | 43:3–4           | Beginning of Zoramite war (converted Zoramites become Anti-Nephi-Lehies)  |
| 26th  | youngest: 24<br>oldest: up to 60                      | 53:10–18; 56:7–9 | Anti-Nephi-Lehies’ decision to not break their oath   |
|   |   | 53:16–18         | Two thousand sons covenant to fight “for the liberty of the Nephites” (verse 17)                                    |
| 26th–27th   | youngest: 24–25<br>oldest: 60–61                      | 56:47            | “Now they never had fought, yet they did not fear death”  |
| 28th end–29th   | youngest: 26–27<br>oldest: 62–63                      | 57:5–6           | Six thousand troops plus sixty Ammonite sons join the Anti-Nephi-Lehi army  |
|   |   | 57:25–27         | The sons have “exceeding faith” in “a just God,” their “minds are firm,” they “put their trust in God continually.” |

establishing the age ranges suggests that the mothers had a child (or children) young enough to be still living with their parents and siblings. Third, if we consider the age ranges for the sons, we can estimate when these mothers were pregnant and when they were in the early stages of raising their sons. We can then see where the mother's experiences with these sons fit in the history of their people. We will return to this idea and its significance after the discussion of the Anti-Nephi-Lehi history and timeline.

## The Context of the Mothers in Anti-Nephi-Lehi History

One difficulty of putting the mothers onto a timeline of Anti-Nephi-Lehi history comes from where the different pieces of the story are told in the book of Alma. Because the Anti-Nephi-Lehi story is told mainly in Alma 22–28, but the account of the stripling soldiers (and the comments about their mothers) does not appear until Alma 53, it is easy to miss the connection between the mothers and their history.<sup>14</sup>

Another difficulty is that Mormon does not give any specific “year of the judges” timestamps when he recounts the missions of Ammon, Aaron, Omner, and Himni. We have to coordinate dates from surrounding stories outside of the Anti-Nephi-Lehi narrative to establish a timeline for the Anti-Nephi-Lehi people and the mothers of the stripling sons.<sup>15</sup> The three firm dates given in the Book of Mormon that help with this are the following: (1) Ammonihah was sacked in the eleventh

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her son was one of the older soldiers, maybe 16, then the oldest of the mothers would have been around age 60. This puts the youngest of the mothers born around the third year of King Mosiah's sons' mission, and the oldest of the mothers could have been born up to thirty years before the missions started. These edges of the age range are not likely the most common for the mothers; the average age would probably be on the lower end with the mothers being in their late 20s or early 30s when their sons went to war, so most of them were likely born several years before the missions started or a few years after. This puts the mothers in their late teens to mid-thirties in the eleventh year of the reign of the judges.

14. Helaman 3:12 is the last specific mention of the people of Ammon. It tells that during the forty-sixth year of the reign of the judges, they were part of those who went forth into outlying lands.

15. Ammon and his brethren's missions began in the first year of the reign of the judges (Alma 17:6). Their missions last fourteen years (Alma 17:4) and the war precipitated by the Ammonite conversion ends in the fifteenth year of the reign of the judges. Presumably, the missionaries returned and reunited with Alma in the fourteenth year of the reign of the judges (Alma 17:1 and Alma 28:7). The heading to Alma 17 states that the section is “an account of the sons of Mosiah . . . according to the record of Alma.” The wording of Helaman 3:12–13 seems to suggest that the Anti-Nephi-Lehi people kept records of their own, which could have been a source for Alma. If their records did not include timestamps, it would explain why Mormon was not able to include any.

year of the reign of the judges,<sup>16</sup> (2) the Anti-Nephi-Lehies moved from Lamanite territory to Jershon around the fourteenth year of the reign of the judges and were there by the fifteenth year,<sup>17</sup> and (3) the sons went to war in the twenty-sixth year of the reign of the judges.<sup>18</sup> With the help of these three timestamps and the approximate ages of the sons and mothers, we can look at the events in Anti-Nephi-Lehi history to see where the mothers fit in. See table 2 for a chronological list of events in Anti-Nephi-Lehi history and the approximate ages of the mothers during each event.

### The Conversion(s) of the Anti-Nephi-Lehi People and the Violence against Them

Though they came together to form one people, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies<sup>19</sup> were a combination of four different Lamanite groups from different

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16. This timestamp is important because the same Lamanites who massacred the Anti-Nephi-Lehies (Alma 25:2) are those who leave and sack Ammonihah (Alma 16:9). Alma 16:21 points to the end of the fourteenth year, and this is before Alma is reunited with Ammon and his brethren.

17. Brant Gardner discusses the difficulty that the Lamanites return in the fourteenth year (Alma 16:12), and that the same battle is described in Alma 28:1–7 as concluding at the end of the fifteenth year. See Gardner, *Alma*, 390–92, especially 391.

18. Even this year is a little bit difficult to know for sure. According to Helaman's letter to Moroni, the sons go to war in the twenty-sixth year of the reign of the judges (Alma 56:9). However, in Mormon's abridgement of the record, the twenty-sixth year happens in Alma 52:1–14, where the stripling sons are not mentioned. It is in Alma 53:10–23 when the stripling sons are introduced in Mormon's narrative, and the timestamp given at the end of that chapter is the end of the twenty-eighth year. In the twenty-sixth year, the war is very dire (Alma 52:14), so it may correspond to when the stripling sons gather and go to help Antipus, even though Mormon does not mention them until the twenty-eighth year.

19. Though I use the term "Anti-Nephi-Lehies" in this article because it is commonly used, I prefer the name "Anti-Nephi-Lehites" for this group of people as a whole instead of "Anti-Nephi-Lehies" or "Ammonites." The Nephites refer to these Lamanite converts as "the people of Ammon" and that name is used a total of nineteen times (Alma 27:26; 28:1; 30:1, 19; 35:8–11, 13; Alma 43:11, 13; 47:29; 53:10; 58:39; 62:17, 27, 29; Hel. 3:12). The sons are called "stripling Ammonites" and "sons of the Ammonites" in Alma 56:57 and 57:6 respectively. Since the Book of Mormon regularly uses "ites" as a suffix meaning "people of," Ammonites is a reasonable name for this people. However, "Ammon" is not the name that the people chose for and took upon themselves.

In Alma 23:16–17, when the group desires a new name to distinguish themselves from those who were not converted, they chose the name "Anti-Nephi-Lehi." "Anti-Nephi-Lehi" is the name of the king who succeeds King Lamoni's father (Alma 24:4–5). The people chose this name for themselves and "they called their *names* Anti-Nephi-Lehies" (Alma 23:17, emphasis added). It is significant that the word "names" is plural and that "Anti-Nephi-Lehies" is also plural here. It seems that each individual took upon



areas and at different times. The first group of converts, the origin of the Anti-Nephi-Lehi people, were the families of King Lamoni and King Lamoni's father (Alma 17–22).<sup>20</sup> After being converted, King Lamoni's

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themselves the name "Anti-Nephi-Lehi." This is how the name is also used in Alma 24:1, where those "who had not been converted . . . had not taken upon them the name of Anti-Nephi-Lehi." Because of the plural use, "Anti-Nephi-Lehies" in Alma 23:17, it has become common to use that plural to designate the group as a whole.

Since the Book of Mormon does not use a similar type of plural for other groups of people, the name "Anti-Nephi-Lehies" could be a plural use of "Anti-Nephi-Lehi," meaning that multiple people have that same name, rather than the name of the group as a whole. When discussing multiple individuals with the same name, the name is pluralized without being the name of a specific group, for example there are four Nephies, two Josephs, two Helamans, and two Mormons in the Book of Mormon. This is a list of individuals who share a name, but not a group who are a distinct people. Mosiah 25:12 gives a specific example of how the children of Amulon and his brethren take the name Nephi "they might be called the children of Nephi and be numbered among those who were called Nephites." This pattern is attested numerous times in the Book of Mormon as it uses Nephites as a name for the people of Nephi, Lamanites for the peoples of Laman, and "Jacobites, Josephites, Zoramites, Lamanites, Lemuelites, and Ishmaelites" for the people of those families (Jacob 1:13–14, see also 4 Ne. 1:36–38 and Morm. 1:8–9).

In addition to calling this group "the people of Ammon," the Book of Mormon uses the phrase "the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi" eight times (Alma 24:2, 12; 25:1, 13, 27:2, 21, 25; 43:1). Because they are specified as a "people of" and the name "Anti-Nephi-Lehi" is the name they chose and took upon themselves, it seems appropriate to use an "-ites" suffix with that name. Since the name "Anti-Nephi-Lehies" does not coordinate them with the other specific and recognizable groups in the Book of Mormon, I think that "Anti-Nephi-Lehites" is a better designation for them. The Book of Mormon does not use the words "Lehites" or "Limhites," but these names are sometimes used to refer to all Lehi's descendants or to Limhi's people. In a similar way, I think the term "Anti-Nephi-Lehites" is a more useful designation for the "people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi."

20. It's notable that the story of the Anti-Nephi-Lehi people starts with a story where two other women are central, Abish and King Lamoni's wife, in Alma 19. For an exemplary analysis of this story and its effect on Lehiite history, see Nicholas J. Frederick and Joseph M. Spencer, "John 11 in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of the Bible and Its Reception* 5, no. 1 (2018): 81–105, <https://doi-org.byu.idm.oclc.org/10.1515/jbr-2016-0025>.

The Book of Mormon does not say when King Lamoni's and his father's conversions happened during Ammon's fourteen-year mission or how long it was between the kings' conversions and the following conversions of the other Lamanite areas. George Reynolds suggests that it is "probable that the conversion of king Lamoni took place in the first year of their ministry." George Reynolds, *The Story of the Book of Mormon* (Joseph Hyrum Parry, 1888), 141. However, a comparison to Aaron's journeys makes that seem unlikely. Aaron teaches in the city of Jerusalem (Alma 21:1), then goes to Ani-Anti (21:11), and then to the land of Middoni (Alma 21:12) where he is cast into prison. He is delivered out of prison by Ammon and King Lamoni. Ammon's travels to three different cities could have happened within the first year of the missions, but they could also have taken several years. Brant Gardner suggests that Mormon has compressed the time-frame of Ammon's experiences in order to easily coordinate with the other missionaries'

father sent out a decree that the Nephite missionaries (Ammon, Aaron, Omner, and Himni) should not be persecuted but be able to preach freely (Alma 23:1–3). This resulted in the second group of converted Lamanites, who likely made up the largest group as “thousands” of Lamanites (Alma 23:5) in seven different surrounding areas were converted.<sup>21</sup> Because this is probably the largest group of converts, many of the mothers likely came from these conversions.

This massive conversion and formation of a people who no longer wanted to be called “Lamanites” and intentionally chose a new name to distinguish themselves from other Lamanites (Alma 23:16–17) did not go unnoticed.<sup>22</sup> Lamanites in surrounding areas took up arms against the Anti-Nephi-Lehies (Alma 24:2).<sup>23</sup> This group included those “in all the land round about, who had not converted,” (Alma 24:1) telling us that not everyone in the seven converted areas listed was converted.<sup>24</sup> Those people who were not converted were likely still part of the kingdom of King Lamoni’s father because they are described as rebelling “against their king” and wanting to depose him (Alma 24:2). This suggests that the conflict was within the same kingdom. Some of those who

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stories and to tell Ammon’s story more efficiently. Gardner, *Alma*, 319. This suggests that Lamoni’s conversion was in the earlier years of the mission, maybe between the third and fifth, but not necessarily in the first year.

21. The list in Alma 23:8–12 contains seven places and names some of them “lands” and some “cities.” The lands are the lands of Ishmael, Middoni, Shilom, and Shemlon. The cities are the cities of Nephi, Lemuel, and Shimnilom.

22. John Welch suggests that the name meant “Non-Nephite Lehies.” John W. Welch, *Inspirations and Insights from the Book of Mormon: A Come, Follow Me Commentary* (Covenant, 2023), 177. For more on the meaning of the name “Anti-Nephi-Lehi,” see Hardy, *Annotated Book of Mormon*, 380; Hugh Nibley, quoted in Daniel Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Book of Mormon* (Deseret Book, 1976), 209–10; Gordon C. Thomasson, “What’s in a Name? Book of Mormon Language, Name, and Metonymic Naming,” *JBMS* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1994):14–15; and Stephen D. Ricks, “Anti-Nephi-Lehi,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, ed. Dennis L. Largey (Deseret Book, 2003), 67.

23. Alma 24:2 says that these people “took up arms against the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi,” but it does not specify if this refers to earlier violence that happened while King Lamoni’s father was alive and reigning or if it refers to the violence described in Alma 24:20 after King Anti-Nephi-Lehi became king.

24. In Alma 24:1–2, these people are also specified by their lands, specifically, Amulon, Helam, and Jerusalem, but they also include those “in all the land about, who had not converted.” See also Alma 25:13 when some of the Lamanites coming home from sacking Ammonihah return to Ishmael and Nephi, areas that are listed as converted in Alma 23:8–12. Gardner suggests that the Anti-Nephi-Lehies migrated to a single location from the seven areas listed, given that they seem to fit into one city or area when they move to Nephite territory. This would also explain how and why it was possible for the other Lamanites to come against them so easily. Gardner, *Alma*, 346.



*Anti-Nephi-Lehi Mother and Her Stripling Warrior* by Sierra Newbold; ink, water-color, and markers; 2021; by permission of the artist.

took up arms against the Anti-Nephi-Lehies could have been Lamanites from the same lands and possibly from the same families as the Anti-Nephi-Lehies. Many of the mothers of the stripling sons were likely part of these converted families who faced difficult tension and even violence because of the missionary work and conversions of their people.<sup>25</sup>

It was in response to the attacks from these fellow Lamanites that the Anti-Nephi-Lehies decided not to defend themselves. King Lamoni's father left the kingship to his son, Lamoni's brother, who was named

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25. While it is impossible to know when or where any of the mothers joined with the converts, there is no indication that anyone joined the Anti-Nephi-Lehi people from when they decided to leave Lamanite territory to when the Zoramites join them several years later. Theoretically, some of the mothers could have come from outside the Anti-Nephi-Lehies and joined the group later. However, all the women who became the mothers of the stripling soldiers were married to men who covenanted not to shed blood, so they must have been part of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies by the time they left Lamanite territory. In Alma 53:10–16, which explains the oath of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, it is “the people of Ammon” in verse 10 who are the “they” “who had many sons” in verse 16, suggesting that the parents of the sons were all part of the Anti-Nephi-Lehi people before they left Lamanite territory.

Anti-Nephi-Lehi, and then King Lamoni's father passed away in the same year (Alma 24:4). Seeing that violence was inevitable, Lamoni, Anti-Nephi-Lehi, and Ammon and his brethren counseled together to decide how to respond. Among the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, "there was not one soul among all the people who had been converted unto the Lord that would take up arms against their brethren" (Alma 24:6). King Anti-Nephi-Lehi gave an impassioned speech to his people, recorded in Alma 24:7–16, praising God for their conversion. He and his people buried their swords and made a covenant that they would not shed blood (Alma 24:17–18).<sup>26</sup>

Some of these same Lamanites who slaughtered the Anti-Nephi-Lehies constitute the third group of Lamanites who joined the Anti-Nephi-Lehies. When these Lamanites saw the refusal of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies to retaliate or even defend themselves, more than a thousand of the Lamanites stopped killing and joined the Anti-Nephi-Lehies (Alma 24:24–26).

Later, a fourth group of converts originated from the same group who had been slaughtering the Anti-Nephi-Lehies. After the slaughter, the Lamanites who remained unconverted went to Ammonihah. While in the wilderness, some of them were converted and joined the Anti-Nephi-Lehies.<sup>27</sup> Each mother of a stripling soldier would have been part of one of these four groups.<sup>28</sup> All of them would have been the daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, and extended families of those who were

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26. The text doesn't specify the role of the women in these decisions, covenants, or the bloodshed. Perhaps those who went out and prostrated themselves were only the men who would have otherwise been fighting, but perhaps there were women and children as well. Alma 24:21 says that the "people" saw the Lamanites coming against them and "they went out to meet them," suggesting that the group could have been all of the people. However, verse 23 says that "the Lamanites saw that their brethren would not flee," suggesting that it was more likely the military-aged men who prostrated themselves.

27. This group's conversion is a little more indirect than the others. Some of the Lamanites who had gone to Ammonihah become disenchanted and are "stirred up in remembrance of the words which Aaron and his brethren had preached to them in their land" and are "converted in the wilderness" (Alma 25:6). These wilderness converts, however, were never able to join the Anti-Nephi-Lehies because they were executed by their fellow soldiers while still in the wilderness (Alma 25:7). But others of their company, when seeing those executions, were "stirred up to anger" (Alma 25:8) and hunted the executors. A group of these Lamanites returned to their own lands, "did join themselves to the people of God, who were the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi," and buried their weapons of war (Alma 25:13).

28. There are two other additions to the Anti-Nephi-Lehi people: the displaced Zoramites (Alma 32:2, 6), and the "large body" of Lamanite men conquered by Moroni's army (thirty-first year of the judges, Alma 62:15–17). Neither of these groups would have been part of the stripling soldiers. Zoramites who could serve in the army

slaughtered by the unconverted Lamanites or those who had been slaughtering before their own conversion.

### Continued Violence and Exodus of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies

The unconverted Lamanites who had returned home from Ammonihah came against the Anti-Nephi-Lehies again. Specifically, the Amalekites “began to stir up the people in anger against their brethren, the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi; therefore they began again to destroy them” (Alma 27:2). According to their covenant, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies refused to fight, and more slaughter ensued (Alma 27:3).

Families from any of the four Anti-Nephi-Lehi groups would have been subject to this slaughter. For many of the mothers of the stripling sons, this would have been the second time their families refused to defend themselves. For others, they would now be on the receiving end of the killing that their groups had previously initiated. Although the text only gives us a few verses about this time, the fear, animosity, and perhaps violence could have lasted years. The persecution began before the sacking of Ammonihah in the eleventh year of the reign of the judges, and Ammon and his brethren reunited with Alma in the fourteenth year of the reign of the judges, meaning there were up to five years of undefended, continual aggression against the Anti-Nephi-Lehi people.

Because the persecution was so severe, Ammon and his brethren suggested to the Anti-Nephi-Lehi king that the people move into Nephite territory. The king protested that “the Nephites will destroy us, because of the many murders and sins we have committed against them” (Alma 27:6). His fear shows the incredibly precarious situation of these people. If they stayed in their homeland, they would continue to be persecuted and perhaps slaughtered by the unconverted Lamanites. But if they tried to relocate, they anticipated being destroyed by the Nephites. When Ammon inquired of the Lord, the Lord told Ammon to “get this people out of this land” (Alma 27:12). Then the Anti-Nephi-Lehi people received an incredible promise from the Lord, who told Ammon, “Blessed are this people in this generation, for I will preserve them” (Alma 27:12).<sup>29</sup>

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probably would have joined earlier than the stripling soldiers, and the conquered Lamanite men would have joined the Anti-Nephi-Lehies toward the end of the war.

29. This promise comes after the return from Ammonihah (Alma 16:1–3, 12) but before the reunion between Alma and the missionaries (Alma 17:1–2), putting it sometime after the eleventh year of the reign of the judges and before the fourteenth year of the reign of the judges.



*Our Mothers Knew It* by Megan Rieker, oil on canvas, 2017, by permission of the artist.

With this promise of preservation, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies began their exodus from their homes and into Nephite territory. They “did gather together all their flocks and herds, and departed out of the land” (Alma 27:14). However, the unconverted Lamanites were not content to let those people go, and “the armies of the Lamanites . . . followed their brethren into the wilderness” (Alma 28:1). The Book of Mormon preserves few details about the experience of this migration, but it may have taken several months and possibly a full year because their exodus happened sometime in the fourteenth year of the reign of the judges (Alma 16:12) and the Anti-Nephi-Lehies did not settle in Jershon until the fifteenth year (Alma 28:7).

When they first “came into the wilderness which divided the land of Nephi from the land of Zarahemla” (Alma 27:14), they remained there and waited until Ammon could go into Zarahemla, contact the chief judge, and wait for the results from “the voice of the people concerning the admitting their brethren, who were the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi” (Alma 27:15, 20–21).<sup>30</sup> Since Lamanite armies followed them there and

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30. In a letter to Captain Moroni, one of Helaman’s arguments for allowing the strip-lining soldiers to fight was that the Anti-Nephi-Lehies were descended from the Lehiite lineage. Alma 56:3 “now ye have known that these were descendants of Laman, who was the eldest son of our father Lehi.”



those armies fought a battle with the Nephites after the Anti-Nephi-Lehies arrived, the armies were following the Anti-Nephi-Lehies during their migration and waiting.

The promise of preservation must have been a great source of comfort during this time. While we may assume that the promised preservation was individual—that is, each one of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies was protected and not harmed by the army pursuing them—it is also possible, perhaps more likely, that the promise was corporate. The promise may have meant that the people as a whole would be preserved and able to enter Nephite territory, but some of the individuals may have been attacked, wounded, or killed by the pursuing army. While traveling to Jershon, the Anti-Nephi-Lehi people would have continued to keep their covenant of nonviolence, which means they would not have defended themselves if small groups from the Lamanite army attacked or raided them. The Lamanite army knew that the Anti-Nephi-Lehies would not defend themselves, so it would not be surprising if they attempted to steal from and raid the Anti-Nephi-Lehies.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps it is significant that at the end of this chapter chronicling their migration, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies are described as people who “would suffer death in the most aggravating and distressing manner which could be inflicted by their brethren, before they would take the sword or cimeter to smite them” (Alma 27:29). Their experience in the wilderness might have been more than grueling travel; it may have been very dangerous as well.

### The Anti-Nephi-Lehies in Nephite Territory

By “the voice of the people,” the Nephites agreed to give the Anti-Nephi-Lehies the land of Jershon and to “guard them from their enemies with our armies, on condition that they will give us a portion of their substance to assist us that we may maintain our armies” (Alma 27:22–24). This was not a minor commitment by the Nephites. The Anti-Nephi-Lehi defection and their arrival in Jershon precipitated a huge battle

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31. While we do not have any details from the Book of Mormon about the Anti-Nephi-Lehi traveling experience, the practice of stealing, robbing, and plundering seems to have been common between different groups of Lamanites and unrighteous Nephites. For example, when Ammon was guarding the king's flocks in Alma 18:7, it reads, “it was the practice of these Lamanites to stand by the waters of Sebus to scatter the flocks . . . it being a practice of plunder among them” (see also Alma 17:14, 23:3, 50:21). However, we cannot always take Mormon's descriptions of the Lamanites at face value. For an informed perspective on this, see Jan J. Martin, “Samuel the Lamanite: Confronting the Wall of Nephite Prejudice,” in *Samuel the Lamanite: That Ye Might Believe*, ed. Charles Swift (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2021), 107–52.

between the Nephites protecting the Anti-Nephi-Lehies and the Lamanites pursuing them. Sometimes called the War of Ammonite Secession,<sup>32</sup> Mormon described this as a battle “as never had been known among all the people in the land from the time Lehi left Jerusalem” (Alma 28:2). The Nephites paid a high price in blood to protect the new converts.

After this battle, there was peace in the sixteenth year of the reign of the judges (Alma 30:4) and at the beginning of the seventeenth year (Alma 30:5, Alma 35:12). In the seventeenth year, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies accepted the Zoramite refugees (Alma 35:6). These people were the poor who converted through the preachings of Alma and Amulek (see Alma 32–34). Because they believed the words of Alma and Amulek, they were cast out of their own land and joined Alma and Amulek, who had already relocated to Jershon with the Anti-Nephi-Lehies (Alma 35:1). Although the chief ruler of the Zoramites “breathed out many threatenings against” the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, they refused to reject the refugees, “but they did receive all the poor of the Zoramites that came over unto them; and they did nourish them, and did clothe them, and did give unto them lands for their inheritance; and they did administer unto them according to their wants” (Alma 35:9). The Anti-Nephi-Lehi people, including the mothers of the stripling soldiers, likely would have borne the responsibility for feeding, clothing, and (at least temporarily) housing the refugees.

The additional hostility over the Zoramite converts caused the unconverted Zoramites to collude with the Lamanites and come against the Nephites to war again in the eighteenth year of the reign of the judges. So much of the war was on the border territory around Jershon that the Anti-Nephi-Lehies had to leave Jershon after being in their new home for only three years so that the Nephite army could use that area (Alma 35:12–13). Once resettled in Melek, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies continued to supply the Nephite army while the Nephite army protected and preserved them through years of war (Alma 27:22, 43:13).

This war (sometimes called the Zoramite war)<sup>33</sup> started in the eighteenth year of the reign of the judges and continued for years. When the stripling sons joined the army in the twenty-sixth year of the reign of the judges (Alma 56:9), there had been approximately eight years of ongoing war. The situation had become so serious that the Anti-Nephi-Lehies considered breaking their oath and taking up arms to help the

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32. John W. Welch and J. Gregory Welch, *Charting the Book of Mormon: Visual Aids for Personal Study and Teaching* (Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1999), chart 136.

33. Welch and Welch, *Charting the Book of Mormon*, chart 137.



*Helaman's Army Preparing for Battle* by Jorge Cocco Santángelo, oil on canvas, 2023, by permission of the artist.

Nephite army (Alma 53:13–14). Instead, the two thousand “stripling sons” chose Helaman to lead them and left to support the Nephite armies (Alma 53:17–19).<sup>34</sup> Reviewing the trials and suffering throughout the history of the Anti-Nephi-Lehi people demonstrates the strength of their conversion since Mormon says that “as the Lord liveth, as many of the Lamanites as believed . . . and were converted unto the Lord, never did fall away” (Alma 23:6).

### The Significance of the Stripling Soldiers’ Mothers

Because we know that there were two thousand (and sixty) stripling sons, we know these mothers were a large group of women. The highest number of mothers possible would be two thousand if all of the mothers had only one son in the army. However, some of the mothers may have had more than one son in the army. With the age range of 12 to 14 but up to age 16 for the sons, there could be up to five years between

34. After the accounts of the stripling soldiers in Alma 53 and 56–58, the Book of Mormon does not tell us more about the Anti-Nephi-Lehi people except for a mention in Helaman 3:12 that the people of Ammon were part of a group who go into “the land northward.”

the oldest and youngest of the stripling sons. Theoretically, one woman could have four children in five years, though it would be very unusual and even more unusual for all four to be sons. If all the women had four sons in the army, the total number of women would be five hundred, which we can take as the very lowest and most unlikely number. If we estimate that most of the mothers had one son, some or many had two, and a few had three or four sons in the army, a likely total number of mothers would be between twelve hundred and eighteen hundred. This estimation gives an idea of how substantial a group of women this was. With somewhere between twelve and eighteen hundred women, this group of mothers is the largest group of women in the Book of Mormon whose teachings and contribution are specified.

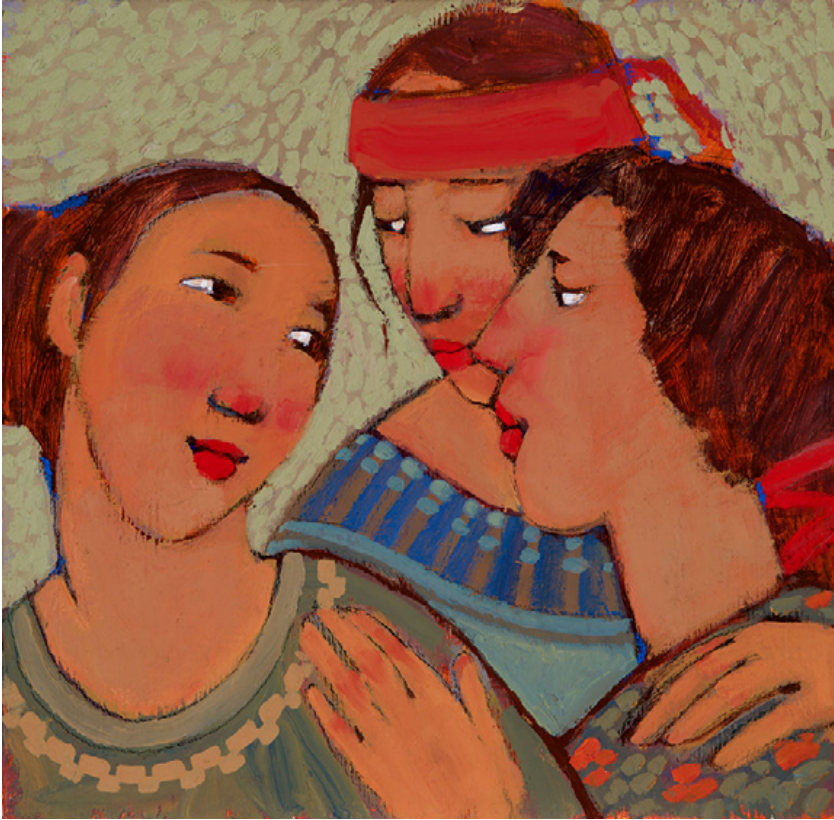
For each of these women to have a “stripling” son in the twenty-sixth year of the reign of the judges, most or all the mothers would have lived through the conversion, persecution, slaughter, exodus, and resettlements of their people. Placing them within the context of their people shows how extraordinary the story of these mothers is, and their history offers insight into what preservation and deliverance meant to them.

### When They Became Mothers to the Stripling Soldiers

When putting the stripling soldiers on the timeline of the Anti-Nephi-Lehi people,<sup>35</sup> we might expect them to have been born before the severe violence against their people (before the eleventh year) or after the people were safely settled in Jershon (in the fifteenth year). A bumper crop of children in the year after the safety of the people was established seems reasonable. However, if the stripling sons were between 12 and 16 years old when they went to war in the twenty-sixth year, they would have been born sometime between the tenth and the fourteenth year of the reign of the judges.

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35. In this portion of the Book of Mormon text, the women as mothers is an important part of their identity and contribution. I do not want to reduce all women and their contributions to their reproductive functions. I also do not want to minimize the complexities of being a woman disciple—mother or not. I don’t want to be insensitive to other situations, but I do want to focus on this specific text, so the discussion is centered around these women as mothers. Pregnancy is a distinct experience that is limited and outside of some people’s experience. Most women who are mothers were at some point pregnant. It is certainly possible that some of the sons could have been adopted or raised by a nonbiological mother given the violence their people were experiencing when these sons were being raised. However, it’s a reasonably safe assumption that most mothers of the stripling soldiers were pregnant with, gave birth to, nursed, and raised the sons who joined Helaman’s army.



*Stripling Warrior Mothers* by Kathleen Peterson, oil, 2015, by permission of the artist.

Those years were significant and correlate with two of the very important years in the people's history—namely, the eleventh and fifteenth years. The first slaughter of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies was before the sacking of Ammonihah in the eleventh year of the reign of the judges, and the Anti-Nephi-Lehies had settled in Jershon by the fifteenth year. If any mothers were pregnant between the ninth and thirteenth years, then all those mothers had their sons during these incredibly difficult years. They would have been pregnant, nursing, or raising toddlers when their people were converted, when they made the covenant not to shed blood, when they were then slaughtered by the other Lamanites, and when they were moving from their homelands into Nephite territory while being followed by a Lamanite army.

Perhaps the timing of the conversion and trial of their people with the mothers carrying, bearing, and raising the stripling sons is more

causal than coincidental to what the mothers taught their sons. The mothers of the stripling sons learned the realities of faith, preservation, and deliverance while carrying their sons in their wombs and in their arms. The mothers raised these sons to the stage of “stripling” while they lived in Jershon and then in Melek. The wars between the Nephites who had welcomed them and the Lamanites who had rejected them were being waged around them as their sons grew from infants and toddlers and into the “stripling” young men who were taught by their mothers to keep the commandments and trust in God continually.

### The Fathers of the Stripling Soldiers

Considering the slaughters of their people, which likely killed many men, and the emphasis on the mothers of the stripling soldiers, we might assume that the mothers were so influential because many were widows. If the mothers were raising their children without their fathers, this significant emphasis on the mothers in the role of teaching the children would be more expected. However, the fathers of these sons are mentioned in the record too, so it seems that at least some, perhaps many, were still alive when the sons were at war. In Alma 56:27, Helaman mentions that “there was brought unto us many provisions from the fathers of those my two thousand sons.”<sup>36</sup> Since the Anti-Nephi-Lehies provided provisions for the Nephite army, it makes sense that the stripling sons’ fathers contributed to provisions (Alma 27:22, 43:13). The mention of fathers providing provisions along with the mothers teaching the sons gives us a picture of mothers, fathers, and children all contributing to their community.<sup>37</sup> The mothers contributed spiritual instruction,

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36. The other mention of *fathers* is in Alma 56:47, where both fathers and mothers are mentioned: “They did think more upon the liberty of their fathers than they did upon their lives; yea, they had been taught by their mothers, that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them.”

Eighteen of the twenty uses of *two thousand* in the Book of Mormon are in Alma 53, and 56–58. (The other two are 3 Nephi 17:25, “two thousand and five hundred souls,” and Mormon 2:9, “forty and two thousand.”) *Two thousand* seems to be a standard number for a group of Nephite soldiers, though the number could mean more a type of group than an exact count of soldiers.

37. There are eighty-seven women or groups of women in the Book of Mormon. See Heather Farrell and Mandy Jane Williams, *Walking with the Women of the Book of Mormon* (Cedar Fort, 2019) and Wendy Hamilton Christian, “‘And Well She Can Persuade’: The Power and Presence of Women in the Book of Mormon” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 2002), <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/4597>. For a bibliography about gender in the Book of Mormon see Daniel Becerra and others, *Book of Mormon*



the fathers contributed provisions, and the children contributed to the safety and security of their people.

### Preservation and Deliverance

The significance of the stripling soldiers to the Nephite war was substantial. The addition of the sons, though small in number, tipped the scale of at least two battles (Alma 56:43–56; 57:7–26) and provided “great hopes and much joy” to the other Nephites (Alma 56:17). The contribution of the sons, made possible by the teachings of their mothers, arguably changed the outcome of the war.

Because we know that the Nephites win the war and that all the sons survive the battles they fight, we might assume that the outcome was as obvious to those who fought the battles as it is to us now. It might be easy to assume that the mothers taught their sons that their lives would not be at risk if their sons remained faithful. However, especially if the promise of preservation given to the parents was corporate rather than individual and given the amount of slaughter and suffering the mothers experienced, perhaps there is something more to the idea of preservation and deliverance in this story than simple survival.

In Alma 56, Helaman told of a time when his army of stripling soldiers were in a precarious position, one that could accurately be called a death trap. Helaman’s army had coaxed a Lamanite army to pursue them and leave the Lamanite stronghold of Antiparah. The Lamanite army pursuing them was larger and much more experienced than Helaman’s army (Alma 56:34, 36). Because Helaman had no confirmation that their Nephite allies had been able to follow as planned, Helaman realized that if they engaged the pursuing army, his army would be defeated (Alma 56:39). After days of marching, Helaman asked the stripling soldiers if they were willing to fight an army that they could not defeat. Facing this life-threatening danger, they responded, “our God is with us, and he will not suffer that we should fall; then let us go forth” (Alma 56:46). The sons had this confidence because “they had been taught by their mothers, that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them. And they rehearsed unto [Helaman] the words of their mothers, saying: We do not doubt our mothers knew it” (Alma 56:47–48).<sup>38</sup> It is easy to assume that this deliverance

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*Studies: An Introduction and Guide* (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2022), 151–52.

38. This situation of the sons is an interesting parallel to the experience of their parents leaving their homeland. Both groups were leaving an area while being pursued by a



*Mothers of the Stripling Warriors* by Kathleen Peterson, oil, 2015, by permission of the artist.

was specifically about survival since the context of the chapter is the stripling soldiers engaging the much larger and more experienced army from Antiparah. However, after the battle, Helaman “numbered those young men who had fought, . . . fearing lest there were many of them slain” (Alma 56:55). Despite the sons’ confidence that God would not let them fall, Helaman did not expect all of his army to survive.

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Lamanite army. The parents had made a covenant not to fight and left their homes so they would not be killed; the sons were facing an army that was superior to theirs in numbers and strength. Both groups were delivered from the army pursuing them. The Anti-Nephi-Lehi parents were delivered by being given a safe haven in Nephite lands and by the Nephite army protecting them. The sons were delivered because Antipus’s army was able to catch up to the Lamanite army and start fighting. The parallel situation is also interesting because of the reverse parallel of each groups’ covenant. The parents had promised not to take up arms even in defense; the sons had promised to fight to their deaths.

In Alma 57, sixty more Ammonite sons joined Helaman's army, and Helaman related the extraordinary efforts of the stripling soldiers during another battle (Alma 57:19–21). After the battle, he found that all of his sons had been wounded and two hundred of his 2,060 had fainted from the loss of blood, but “to our great astonishment, and also the joy of our whole army, there was not one soul of them who did perish . . . and we [did] justly ascribe it to the miraculous power of God” (Alma 57:25–26). Helaman's astonishment that none of the stripling soldiers had died shows that, once again, he did not expect them all to survive.

Helaman also knew the history of the Anti-Nephi-Lehi people. He knew of the parent's covenant and convinced them not to break it (Alma 53:14–15; 56:7–8), and he was present when the sons made their promise (Alma 53:16–19). His surprise at seeing all the sons alive after each of the battles suggests that no one expected individual survival, including the mothers. Their expectations may have been corporate rather than individual. Like the promise of preservation given to their parents, it is possible that the sons could have had complete confidence that God would deliver their army from their enemy, without expecting that each individually would survive the battle. When the sons chose to go to war, they “entered into a covenant to fight for the liberty of the Nephites, yea, to protect the land unto the laying down of their lives” (Alma 53:17). Their willingness to fight to the death indicates that they saw death as a very real possibility.<sup>39</sup>

Helaman says that the sons “did think more upon the liberty of their fathers than they did upon their lives” (Alma 56:47). This mention of liberty (instead of death) as the focus of their thoughts also relates to the promise of deliverance and preservation. Helaman contrasts their thoughts of death with their thoughts of the freedom to live according to their religious conversion. In addition to being willing to lay down their lives, when the stripling sons chose to go to war, they “covenanted that they never would give up their liberty, but they would fight in all cases to protect the Nephites and themselves from bondage” (Alma 53:17). The

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39. By chapter 58, Helaman recounts the attitude of the whole army being aligned with the faith of the stripling sons. Alma 58:11–12 states, “the Lord our God did visit us with assurances that he would deliver us; yea, insomuch that he did speak peace to our souls, and did grant unto us great faith, and did cause us that we should hope for our deliverance in him. And we did take courage with our small force which we had received, and were fixed with a determination to conquer our enemies, and to maintain our lands, and our possessions, and our wives, and our children, and the cause of our liberty.” It is notable that this campaign to retake the city of Manti was also accomplished “without the shedding of blood” (Alma 58:28).

bondage they were avoiding presumably would have included being taken captive by the Lamanites, which just as likely included the bondage of not being able to worship Christ. Like their parents, the stripling sons did not fear death (see Alma 27:28–29 for parents and 56:47–48 for sons), or more likely, they feared Lamanite victory more than death because they were fighting for their families’ religious freedom. Helaman described them as sons who “stand fast in that liberty wherewith God has made them free” (Alma 58:39–40). The sons knew their own lives were at risk, but their courage to “stand fast” came from caring more about the liberty of their fathers—a liberty the Anti-Nephi-Lehies enjoyed because of their conversion and migration, even at the cost of individual deaths.

When the original promise of preservation was made to the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, it certainly was in the context of being preserved from death—that is, an assurance that the Nephites would not kill them if the Anti-Nephi-Lehies moved into Nephite territory. However, the need to move was not only to preserve their lives but also to preserve their religious liberty. They needed a place to live where they could worship according to their new beliefs. Though the Nephite’s physical protection from the Lamanite army was crucial to the Anti-Nephi-Lehies’ survival, the idea of the liberty to live according to their conversion was more important to them. The sons’ deliverance and preservation was likely about preserving their people’s right to religious freedom—not about escaping death.

During the first slaughter of their people, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies “praised God even in the very act of perishing under the sword” (Alma 24:23). They had come to see death as a part of their covenant not to fight. The heritage of these people was that death was not something to avoid at all costs but was a testament to their covenant. In fact, Mormon said that the Anti-Nephi-Lehies “never did look upon death with any degree of terror, for their hope and views of Christ and the resurrection; therefore, death was swallowed up to them by the victory of Christ over it” (Alma 27:28).<sup>40</sup> This verse suggests that, rather than fearing death, the

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40. When considering the casualties of Antipus’ army Helaman stated, “We may console ourselves in this point, that they have died in the cause of their country and of their God, yea, and they are happy” (Alma 56:11). See Alma 21:9 and Alma 22:13–14 for Aaron’s teachings to king Lamoni’s father, which were presumably also taught to the other converts, about the coming of Christ, the resurrection, the atonement, and that “the grave shall have no victory, and that the sting of death should be swallowed up in the hopes of glory.”

Anti-Nephi-Lehies focused on Christ's victory over death and their own future resurrection. Because the mothers taught their sons that "there was a just God" (Alma 57:26–27) who "would deliver them" (Alma 56:47–48), and they could "be preserved by his marvelous power" (Alma 57:26–27), they certainly believed in God's *ability* to preserve and deliver the army of their sons from an enemy army. However, based on what we can extrapolate about the mothers' experience during the history of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, they would not



*Mother Knew*, generated using MidJourney by Ethan Smith, 2023, by permission of the artist.

have believed that their sons would each be protected from death in battle. They had seen that the possibility of death was real, even likely. But the mothers taught their sons that they could trust in God's deliverance, even when deliverance did not mean safety. For these mothers and stripling sons, deliverance and preservation meant that their families could remain in a land with religious freedom and that they would be "raised to dwell at the right hand of God, in a state of never-ending happiness" (Alma 28:12).<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

With somewhere between twelve hundred and eighteen hundred women, the mothers of the stripling soldiers constitute the largest group of women in the Book of Mormon who influence the narrative in a positive and important way. They are depicted as knowing that God is trustworthy, that God's deliverance is real, and that the privilege to worship God was worth dying for. The mothers' testimony and resilience in the face of death taught their sons that courage comes from faith in Christ.

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41. Mormon states this about all the Nephites who mourned the loss of someone killed in the battle of Jershon and would presumably apply to all the faithful when they die, whether or not in battle, including the Anti-Nephi-Lehies who "never did fall away" (Alma 23:6).

Their ability to teach these lessons to their sons significantly impacted the Nephite wars. Instead of clever, but misleading art like the t-shirt in the introduction, we might be better served with more art like what we see in this article,<sup>42</sup> which, while less amusing, better represent the lives and experiences of the mothers and their sons. When understood in the context of their history, the mothers of the stripling soldiers are exemplars of women who learned from experience what it means to be converted and stay faithful through trials.

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42. All art in this article can be found on the Book of Mormon Art Catalog website: <https://bookofmormonartcatalog.org>.



## Artist Statement—*Our Mothers Knew It*

Ashley Jensen

This piece explores the immense trust and emotion the families of the two thousand young men fighting under Helaman’s command may have felt as they sent their sons off to battle, with a special emphasis on how the mothers and sisters may have felt. When we think of Helaman’s army, we most often reflect on their characteristics, spiritual courage, and the physical battles they fought. But how often do we reflect on the feelings and personal battles their families may have been fighting in their own hearts?

Throughout Alma 56, we see the courage of these young boys and their unshakable trust in the Lord. We also learn where their testimonies and that trust stemmed from, for “they had been taught by their mothers, that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them . . . [and] we do not doubt our mothers knew it” (vv. 47–48). Not only were their mothers a great spiritual support to them but also their fathers, who brought provisions and provided physical support during the war (v. 27).

These mothers raised children during a time of physical and spiritual turmoil. Not only had they faced watching the Nephites fight a war with a people they once belonged to, they had also been fighting the spiritual battle of personal change and redemption, learning about Jesus Christ, choosing to follow him despite the pushback and their natural weakness. They had been changing their hearts and leaving behind wicked traditions as they chose every day to follow the Savior. They knew how important it was to teach these lessons to their children. They knew the importance of “doubting not.”

I imagine they kept showing their children how to trust as they waited for their sons to come home. Do we have this same trust in the Lord when our lives seem overwhelming and heavy? Do we trust that everything will be okay and know in our hearts that God will deliver us, no matter what that deliverance looks like? As I've reflected on the Anti-Nephi-Lehies and the trust in the Lord they demonstrated, it helps strengthen my faith that the Lord is involved in my personal battles and aware of my physical and spiritual well-being. By turning my life over to the Lord and his care, I have faith he is micromanaging the details as I choose to trust in God's deliverance.

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Ashley Jensen received her BA in art from Brigham Young University in December 2023. Born on the East Coast and raised in the West, Ashley creates a wide variety of work, with an emphasis on oil and acrylic paintings, with occasional pen, digital, and charcoal drawings. Her subjects circle around abstract shape and line, with a more recent focus on nature, human, and animal figures. She's especially inspired by the landscape around where she's lived: mainly Utah and Arizona. Ashley aims to further develop her cohesive artistic voice and enjoys commissions and challenging subjects to help further that process.

# Temple Marriages Are Less Likely to End in Divorce

## Insights from the B. H. Roberts 2023 Current and Former Latter-day Saint Survey

*Stephen Cranney and Joshua Coates*

### Introduction and Background

It is a commonly held truism that temple marriages are less likely to end in divorce. But is it true? How do we know? The fact is that this popular belief is primarily based on surveys that are now forty to fifty years old. A popular statistic of temple marriages having a 6% divorce rate is cited by the Gospel Topics essay on “Temple Marriage,”<sup>1</sup> which in turn cites an article from the *Los Angeles Times*.<sup>2</sup> However, the *Times* article came from a 1985 Church study that used 1981 data,<sup>3</sup> making this 6% number more than forty years out of date.

Another commonly referenced statistic of a 10% divorce rate is based on a small survey (364 temple marriages) cited by President Spencer W. Kimball in 1976.<sup>4</sup> This number is likely based on an internal Church survey, as we have been unable to find a public-facing source. Regardless, the latest this survey could have been conducted was in 1976, making this

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1. “Temple Marriage,” Newsroom, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed November 15, 2021, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/temple-marriage>.

2. William Lobdell, “Holy Matrimony,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 8, 2000, accessed November 15, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2000-apr-08-me-17262-story.html>.

3. Tim B. Heaton and Kristen L. Goodman, “Religion and Family Formation,” *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 4 (1985): 354, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3511049>.

4. Spencer W. Kimball, “Marriage and Divorce” (devotional address, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, September 7, 1976), BYU Speeches, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/spencer-w-kimball/marriage-divorce/>.

statistic almost a half century old. Another survey from the early 1980s found a 7% divorce rate among Utah Latter-day Saints.<sup>5</sup> A mid-century study on Latter-day Saint divorce used Utah and Salt Lake County marriage records from the first half of the early twentieth century and found that temple marriages had divorce rates of about 1–2%, as opposed to nontemple Latter-day Saint divorce rates of approximately 8–12%.<sup>6</sup>

However, there is more recent data available that is correlated with temple marriage divorce rates, even if the precise question about temple marriages was not asked. At a 2002 FAIR Conference, BYU professor and demographer Tim Heaton conjectured that temple sealing divorce rates were about 25–30% (two-thirds the national average), extrapolating this conclusion from 1990s data on divorce rates for church-attending Latter-day Saints.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the authors of a more recent survey of returned missionaries in the late 1990s and early 2000s suggested that return missionary divorce rates might imply a lifelong temple divorce rate “somewhere in the teens and probably no higher than 20%.”<sup>8</sup>

While prior researchers did fine work given the data limitations, the fact is that current temple divorce estimates are either based on very out-of-date data or are indirect conjectures based on related but distinct concepts such as returned missionary status and church attendance. However, with the 2023 B. H. Roberts Survey of Current and Former Latter-day Saints (2023 CFLDS Survey), we now have a dataset that is large, current, and precise enough to calculate current temple divorce rates. We can also rigorously and statistically compare temple divorce rates to rates for those who do not marry in the temple and those who marry civilly first and are later sealed in the temple.

Why might we expect temple marriages to have lower divorce rates? In addition to the suggestive prior empirical findings by Heaton and others, there are several theoretical reasons why this might be the case that are

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5. Stan L. Albrecht, Howard M. Bahr, and Kristen L. Goodman, *Divorce and Remarriage: Problems, Adaptations, and Adjustments* (Greenwood Press, 1983).

6. Harold T. Christensen and Kenneth L. Cannon, “Temple Versus Nontemple Marriage in Utah: Some Demographic Considerations,” *Social Science* 39, no. 1 (1964): 26–33, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41885017>.

7. Tim Heaton, “Dealing with Demographics,” 2002 FAIR Conference, accessed November 15, 2021, <https://www.fairlatterdaysaints.org/conference/august-2002/dealing-with-demographics>; Vaughn R. A. Call and Tim B. Heaton, “Religious Influence on Marital Stability,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36, no. 3 (September 1997): 382–92, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1387856>.

8. Bruce A. Chadwick, Brent L. Top, and Richard J. McClendon, *Shield of Faith: The Power of Religion in the Lives of LDS Youth and Young* (Deseret Book, 2010), 261.

supported by the divorce and religion literature more broadly. First, it is likely that temple marriages are proxying on some level for religious commitment, and religiosity has been shown to have many salutary benefits for marriage. For example, one study found that religiosity protected against divorce through the mediating mechanism of higher happiness. In other words, religious people are happier, and happier people are less likely to get a divorce.<sup>9</sup> Another study found that religiosity was associated with higher marital commitment, which in turn lead to lower divorce rates and was negatively associated with known risk factors for marital distress.<sup>10</sup>

Though not every study has found a relationship between religiosity and divorce,<sup>11</sup> there has been sufficient research showing that religiosity is related to measures of a lasting marriage, making it likely that the lower divorce rate of temple marriage has something to do with the higher religiosity of the couple. To be more specific, a temple marriage can be seen as an act of marital sanctification, or “the process via which one’s spouse or marital relationship is perceived as having divine character or sacred significance,”<sup>12</sup> and marriages that score higher on marital sanctification have been shown to have higher marital quality. A temple marriage is an endowment of a marriage with divine, eternal significance, and this act of sanctification can, in principle, contribute to a lasting marriage.

The cohabitation literature may also be germane here. While initially many believed that premarital cohabitation would be related to a lower risk of divorce, it is now clearly demonstrated in the literature that the opposite is true: couples who cohabit before marriage have been shown to have a *higher* risk of divorce,<sup>13</sup> perhaps because cohabitators are more

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9. Joshua D. Tuttle and Shannon N. Davis, “Religion, Infidelity, and Divorce: Reexamining the Effect of Religious Behavior on Divorce Among Long-Married Couples,” *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 56, no. 6 (2015): 475–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2015.1058660>.

10. Jonathan R. Olson, H. Wallace Goddard, and James P. Marshall, “Relations Among Risk, Religiosity, and Marital Commitment,” *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy* 12, no. 3 (2013): 235–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332691.2013.806705>.

11. Susan McDaniel, Adebiyi Germain Boco, and Sara Zella, “Changing Patterns of Religious Affiliation, Religiosity, and Marital Dissolution: A 35-Year Study of Three-Generation Families,” *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 54, no. 8 (2013): 629–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2013.837723>.

12. Christopher G. Ellison and others, “Sanctification, Stress, and Marital Quality,” *Family Relations* 60, no. 4 (2011): 404–20.

13. R. Kelly Raley and Megan M. Sweeney, “Divorce, Repartnering, and Stepfamilies: A Decade in Review,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 82, no. 1 (2020): 81–99, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12651>.

open to marital dissolution.<sup>14</sup> In addition, people who save their sexuality for marriage might take the status of being married more seriously. In much the same way, temple marriages “for time and eternity” may make the boundary between marriage and divorce even higher given the stakes and added seriousness of an eternal marriage.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing here that we are specifically analyzing the effect of first-time marriages, while second, third, or other higher-order marriages (marriages after a first marriage) have been shown to have a higher risk of divorce.<sup>15</sup> Given that higher-order divorces are relatively rare, it is difficult to obtain an adequate sample size with enough statistical power to investigate the effects of higher-order temple marriages. Additionally, multiple marriages could include a combination of temple and nontemple marriages, splitting the sample even further and making it more difficult to isolate the association between marital stability and temple marriages. Consequently, in this analysis we will focus on first-time marriages.

## Data and Methodology

The 2023 CFLDS is a large-N (N=3,865) multimodel survey consisting of two main components:

1. An address-based mailer survey of the Latter-day Saint corridor region, defined as counties with 15% or more Latter-day Saints. Mailers were sent using the USPS’s Every Door Direct Mail approach, where entire mail routes were sampled. Mail routes were randomly selected within counties, and the number of mail routes within a county was probabilistically selected based on Latter-day Saint percentages. Consequently, this sample was designed to be representative of members residing in the Latter-day Saint corridor region.
2. A survey disseminated using Facebook ads targeted toward people the Facebook algorithm determined were likely to be Latter-day Saints. Facebook ads have been shown to be an effective method for surveying organizations like The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

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14. Martin Kreidl and Zuzana Žilinčíková, “How Does Cohabitation Change People’s Attitudes Toward Family Dissolution?,” *European Sociological Review* 37, no. 4 (2021): 541–54, <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcaa073>.

15. Anne-Rigt Poortman and Torkild Hovde Lyngstad, “Dissolution Risks in First and Higher Order Marital and Cohabiting Unions,” *Social Science Research* 36, no. 4 (2007): 1431–46, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2007.02.005>.



Saints that do not have publicly available membership lists to serve as a sampling frame.<sup>16</sup>

There were also some responses from word of mouth, but these were excluded from this analysis. We also excluded the never-married and mixed-faith couples, and we deleted observations with missing data due to participant nonresponse, which left an analytical sample of  $N \sim 1,675$ .

The Facebook component of the survey was further split into inside and outside the Latter-day Saint corridor, and weights were applied separately to each of the three samples per Latter-day Saint demographics derived from the Cooperative Election Study.<sup>17</sup> Specifically, these weights were designed to make the Latter-day Saint corridor samples approximate the age, gender, and educational characteristics of Latter-day Saints living in the Latter-day Saint corridor (represented by those living in Utah and Idaho in the Church Education System or CES) and, separately, members living outside the Latter-day Saint corridor (those living outside of Utah and Idaho in the CES). Weights were not included in any regression analyses that used age, gender, and education as covariates.

As there is a risk of systematic bias in the Facebook-centered survey data, since it specifically selects people who are active on Facebook, numbers will be provided for each of the three subsamples (address-based Latter-day Saint corridor, Facebook Latter-day Saint corridor, and Facebook outside Latter-day Saint corridor). Further methodological details are provided at the B. H. Roberts Foundation website.<sup>18</sup>

The divorce rates were derived from two questions in the survey.

Which of the following best describes your situation?

- ☐ I have never been married.
- ☐ I am currently married and have only been married once.
- ☐ I was married once, and that marriage ended in divorce.
- ☐ I was married once, and that marriage ended in the death of my spouse.

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16. Daniel Schneider and Kristen Harknett, "What's to Like? Facebook as a Tool for Survey Data Collection," *Sociological Methods & Research* 51, no. 1 (2022): 108–40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124119882477>.

17. "Cooperative Election Study," Harvard University, accessed August 19, 2024, <https://cces.gov.harvard.edu/>.

18. "2023 National Current and Former LDS Survey," Projects, B. H. Roberts Foundation, accessed November 15, 2021, <https://bhroberts.org/projects/survey2023>.

- ☐ I have been married multiple times, and my first marriage ended in divorce.
- ☐ I have been married multiple times, and my first marriage ended in the death of my spouse.

This question was designed to parsimoniously measure both marital status and whether the first marriage ended in divorce. Never-married individuals were dropped from the sample, while current and former members were considered separately, as they represent very distinct populations. Also, in the case of former members, we do not have time-order data as to when they left the Church and when they married a member. In other words, it could be that some of the “never sealed in the temple” category for former members are marriages to current members that are not sealed in the temple because the respondent is not in the Church. While this group is probably small, the distinctions do not exist in this dataset to empirically know for sure.

We divided the “sealed in the temple” concept into three categories to more precisely differentiate between different marital contexts.

Which of the following best describes your situation? If you have been married more than once, please answer according to your first marriage.

- ☐ I was married in the temple.
- ☐ I was not married in the temple at first but was later sealed in the temple.
- ☐ I was married outside of the temple, and we have never been sealed in the temple.

We removed interfaith marriages since, while technically nontemple marriages, they represent a distinct phenomenon. Divorce rates are notoriously complicated and controversial to calculate<sup>19</sup> because it is impossible to know whether the couple will *ever* divorce until one of the partners dies. As long as they are both still alive, there is a chance that it will end in divorce in the future. While this data does not include how old the marriage is, we controlled for age in our regression models to capture some of the time effect. We performed a simple logistic

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19. Robert Schoen and Vladimir Canudas-Romo, “Timing Effects on Divorce: 20th Century Experience in the United States,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68, no. 3 (2006): 749–58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2006.00287.x>.

regression analysis with accompanying predicted probabilities to test whether the effect of being married in the temple is spuriously correlated with other variables.

## Summary Statistics

We calculated the weighted proportion of respondents who reported that their first marriage ended in divorce by survey subsample and temple marriage status. The number of responses are reported distinctly for current and former members.

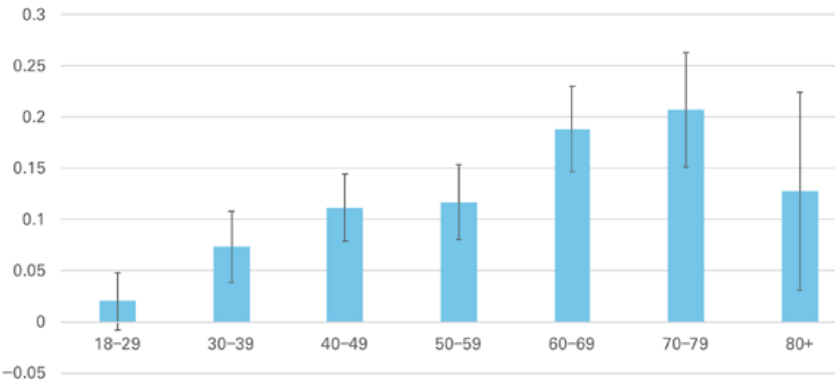
**Table 1. Average Divorce Percentages by First Temple Marriage Status, Current Members**

|              | <b>Mailer (Latter-day Saint corridor)</b> | <b>Facebook (Latter-day Saint corridor)</b> | <b>Facebook (Non-Latter-day Saint corridor)</b> |
|--------------|---|---|---|
| Sealed First | 12% (n = 622) <sup>20</sup>               | 14% (n = 317)                               | 14% (n = 362)                                   |
| Sealed Later | 16% (n = 80)                              | 16% (n = 48)                                | 23% (n = 68)                                    |
| Never Sealed | 38% (n = 49)                              | 93% (n = 8)                                 | 61% (n = 28)                                    |

As seen in table 1, the number of current members who are married but not sealed is relatively low. Much higher are temple marriages of members who were sealed later. Still, the summary statistics suggest that the probability of temple marriages ending in divorce is quite low, in the teens. While the sample sizes for the other categories are too small to split by age, we combined the different survey subsamples and have a large enough sample to chart age-specific probabilities of a temple marriage ending in divorce. Again, this is not a time-since-marriage estimate, and to some extent, a person's age is proxying for cohort (the era somebody was born in). Still, showing probabilities by age provides insight into possible lifetime divorce rates for temple marriages. Because the weighting is largely based on age distributions anyway, we show unweighted estimates for simplicity.

20. In this article, *n* refers to the number of people who responded to the survey.

**Figure 1. Temple Divorce Rates by Age Group**



**Table 2. Divorce Percentages for Temple Marriages by Age Group**

| Age group | Not divorced | Divorced | Divorced % |
|-----------|--------------|----------|------------|
| 18–29     | 97           | 2        | 2%         |
| 30–39     | 202          | 16       | 7%         |
| 40–49     | 318          | 40       | 11%        |
| 50–59     | 264          | 35       | 12%        |
| 60–69     | 276          | 64       | 19%        |
| 70–79     | 161          | 42       | 21%        |
| 80+       | 41           | 6        | 13%        |

As seen in table 2 and figure 1, the temple-married divorce percentage is about 20% for the older groups, which approximately matches the estimate of Chadwick, Top, and McLendon (the authors of the returned missionary study) and is slightly lower than Heaton’s estimate. Although it is higher than surveys that use simple averages without taking age into account, this rate is still well below the national estimates of around half of first marriages ending in divorce.<sup>21</sup>

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21. Arun S. Hendi, “Proximate Sources of Change in Trajectories of First Marriage in the United States, 1960–2010,” *Demography* 56, no. 3 (2019): 835–62, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-019-00769-3>.

**Table 3. Average Divorce Percentages by Temple Marriage Status, Former Members**

|              | <b>Mailer (Latter-day Saint corridor)</b> | <b>Facebook (Latter-day Saint corridor)</b> | <b>Facebook (Non-Latter-day Saint corridor)</b> |
|--------------|---|---|---|
| Sealed First | 34% (n=136)                               | 29% (n=156)                                 | 32% (n=151)                                     |
| Sealed Later | 18% (n=16)                                | 44% (n=17)                                  | 68% (n=26)                                      |
| Never Sealed | 54% (n=64)                                | 71% (n=28)                                  | 77% (n=27)                                      |

The former-member summary statistics interestingly suggest that there is a divorce-protective effect for temple marriages—even among former members—with the sealed-first divorce rates in the 30s, and the never-sealed rates in the 50s–70s. Of course, the numbers involved are quite small. However, a simple T-test (or a comparison-of-mean test) performed among former members shows statistical significance ( $p = .002$ ) when “never sealed” (54% divorce rate) are compared to “ever sealed” (34%). There was also statistical significance ( $p = .03$ ) when those married first in the temple (34%) are compared to everyone else (46%).

To test predictors of marital stability, we also performed a simple logistic regression with sociodemographic variables such as education, age, and gender.

Per table 4, model 1, members who are married but never sealed have a higher divorce probability, but there are no statistically significant differences between members who were initially married and sealed in the temple and those who were married first and sealed later. However, when the sealed-later and never-sealed groups are combined in table 4, model 2, the sealed-first group shows significantly more stability. When the sealed-first and sealed-later groups are compared to the never-sealed group in table 4, model 3, it becomes clear that being sealed, whether first or later, is significantly related to a lower risk of divorce.

In other words, while we find that temple marriages are indeed less likely to end in divorce, the survey results show that what prevents a higher risk of divorce is that the marriage is eventually sealed in the temple. It is likely that previous data papered over relevant differences between those who are initially sealed and those who are sealed later through dichotomizing the data.

How big are these differences? When the formula derived from model 1 in table 4 is used to create predicted probabilities using R's *ggpredict* command, assuming the averages and reference groups in the regression model, the probability of first-marriage divorce for a

**Table 4. Marital Stability and Temple Marriages (Logistic Regression) of Ever-Married Members Who Married a Member**

| <i>Dependent variable: Not divorced, first marriage</i> |                     |                     |                     |
|---|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
|   | <b>Model 1</b>      | <b>Model 2</b>      | <b>Model 3</b>      |
| Sealed Later  | −0.2<br>(0.2)       | Omitted Ref.        | 1.7***<br>(0.3)     |
| Never Sealed  | −1.9***<br>(0.3)    | Omitted Ref.        | Omitted Ref.        |
| Sealed First  | Omitted Ref.        | 0.8***<br>(0.2)     | 1.9***<br>(0.3)     |
| Did Not Attend Church School                            | 0.04<br>(0.1)       | 0.04<br>(0.1)       | 0.04<br>(0.1)       |
| Education   | 0.03<br>(0.1)       | 0.03<br>(0.1)       | 0.03<br>(0.1)       |
| Income  | 0.2***<br>(0.05)    | 0.2***<br>(0.05)    | 0.2***<br>(0.05)    |
| Female  | −0.3<br>(0.1)       | −0.3*<br>(0.1)      | −0.3<br>(0.1)       |
| Other gender  | −1.0<br>(1.2)       | −1.0<br>(1.2)       | −1.0<br>(1.2)       |
| White non-Hispanic                                      | 0.2<br>(0.3)        | 0.1<br>(0.3)        | 0.2<br>(0.3)        |
| Age   | −0.03***<br>(0.005) | −0.03***<br>(0.005) | −0.03***<br>(0.005) |
| LGBTQ+  | −0.2<br>(0.3)       | −0.2<br>(0.3)       | −0.2<br>(0.3)       |
| Latter-day Saint Corridor                               | −0.2<br>(0.2)       | −0.2<br>(0.2)       | −0.2<br>(0.2)       |
| Mailer (v. Facebook)                                    | 0.3<br>(0.2)        | 0.2<br>(0.2)        | 0.3<br>(0.2)        |
| Constant  | 2.1***<br>(0.6)     | 1.3*<br>(0.6)       | 0.2<br>(0.6)        |
| Observations  | 1,675               | 1,675               | 1,675               |
| Log Likelihood  | −656.3              | −668.8              | −656.3              |
| Akaike Inf. Crit.                                       | 1,338.7             | 1,361.7             | 1,338.7             |

*Note:* \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001

**Education:** What is the highest education degree you have earned? 1 = Less than high school, 2 = High school, 3 = Associate/Jr. College, 4 = Bachelor’s, 5 = Graduate

**Income:** What is your total household income? 1 = <\$15,000, 2 = Between \$15,000 and \$29,999, 3 = Between \$30,000 and \$49,999, 4 = Between \$50,000 and \$74,999, 5 = Between \$75,000 and \$99,999, 6 = Between \$100,000 and \$150,000, 7 = Over \$150,000



never-sealed member who married a member is 53%. This is close to the national risk for a first marriage ending in divorce. In contrast, the probability of divorce for a sealed member is 14%. It is worth noting here that this prediction uses average age and should not be interpreted as a final, lifetime divorce rate. However, when we use the age covariate to predict the rates for a sixty-year-old, the predicted numbers are 58% for never sealed (CI = 43%–71%) and 17% for a sealed member (CI = 14%–20%). Consequently, the numbers derived from the predicted probabilities tell the same story as the simple, age-specific divorce probabilities calculated above, which show a divorce rate from the mid-teens to low twenties.

When the regressions in table 4 are used on the former-member sample, temple marriage status is not related to divorce risk probability in any of the models except, interestingly, the later sealed coefficient in the appendix (model 3). Consequently, while the summary statistics suggest that former members are less likely to be divorced if they were married in the temple, the supporting evidence from the regression analysis is weak.

## Conclusion

Are temple marriages less likely to end in divorce? Yes. While a large bevy of data from the twentieth century answers that question in the affirmative, more recent data testing this question has been unavailable until now. Based on the 2023 CFLDS Survey, the temple-marriage divorce rate is in the mid-teens to low twenties, while marriages between members that are not sealed in the temple are closer to the national rate of about half of marriages ending in divorce. There is some suggestive, but not definitive, evidence for this temple-marriage effect among former members as well.

However, there are several limitations inherent in this study. We do not specifically test causality, and there are a number of theoretically plausible explanations for these patterns. It could be that there is more pressure to keep a temple-sealed marriage together. A temple sealing might be proxying for more generic religiosity—not just at the moment the survey was taken but across the life course of a marriage. Selection effects could also be operating, with couples less likely to divorce more likely to enter into a temple marriage. Ultimately, to truly test causality about temple sealings, people would have to be randomly assigned to be married in the temple or not, and that is obviously not feasible. Another limitation is that the data these results are based on largely come out of the Latter-day Saint corridor region. While table 1 and table 2 both

suggest that being inside or outside the Latter-day Saint corridor does not matter much for divorce rates, it is worth noting that these data only apply to a small portion of the highly diverse Latter-day Saint experience.

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## Appendix

### Marital Stability and Temple Marriages (Logistic Regression) of Ever-Married Former Members Who Married a Member

*Dependent variable: Not divorced, first marriage*

|                              | Model 1            | Model 2            | Model 3            |
|------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Sealed Later                 | 0.5<br>(0.4)       | Omitted Ref.       | 1.1*<br>(0.5)      |
| Never Sealed                 | -0.6<br>(0.3)      | Omitted Ref.       | Omitted Ref.       |
| Sealed First                 | Omitted Ref.       | 0.2<br>(0.3)       | 0.6<br>(0.3)       |
| Did Not Attend Church School | 0.01<br>(0.2)      | -0.02<br>(0.2)     | 0.01<br>(0.2)      |
| Education                    | 0.3*<br>(0.1)      | 0.3*<br>(0.1)      | 0.3*<br>(0.1)      |
| Income                       | 0.2*<br>(0.1)      | 0.2*<br>(0.1)      | 0.2*<br>(0.1)      |
| Female                       | 0.5*<br>(0.2)      | 0.5*<br>(0.2)      | 0.5*<br>(0.2)      |
| Other gender                 | -0.4<br>(0.9)      | -0.3<br>(0.9)      | -0.4<br>(0.9)      |
| White non-Hispanic           | 0.9<br>(0.5)       | 0.7<br>(0.5)       | 0.9<br>(0.5)       |
| Age                          | -0.05***<br>(0.01) | -0.04***<br>(0.01) | -0.05***<br>(0.01) |

Dependent variable: Not divorced, first marriage

|                           | Model 1         | Model 2         | Model 3         |
|---------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| LGBTQ+                    | -1.0**<br>(0.3) | -1.0**<br>(0.3) | -1.0**<br>(0.3) |
| Latter-day Saint Corridor | -0.3<br>(0.3)   | -0.3<br>(0.3)   | -0.3<br>(0.3)   |
| Mailer (v. Facebook)      | 0.1<br>(0.3)    | 0.03<br>(0.3)   | 0.1<br>(0.3)    |
| Constant                  | 0.1<br>(0.9)    | -0.1<br>(0.9)   | -0.5<br>(0.9)   |
| Observations              | 441             | 441             | 441             |
| Log Likelihood            | -255.7          | -258.7          | -255.7          |
| Akaike Inf. Crit.         | 537.3           | 541.4           | 537.3           |

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

**Education:** What is the highest education degree you have earned? 1 = Less than high school, 2 = High school, 3 = Associate/Jr. College, 4 = Bachelor's, 5 = Graduate

**Income:** What is your total household income? 1 = <\$15,000, 2 = Between \$15,000 and \$29,999, 3 = Between \$30,000 and \$49,999, 4 = Between \$50,000 and \$74,999, 5 = Between \$75,000 and \$99,999, 6 = Between \$100,000 and \$150,000, 7 = Over \$150,000

## Sariah's Sons

*And they did murmur because  
they knew not the dealings of that God  
who had created them.*

*1 Nephi 2:12*

Tumbling 'cross the tent flap,  
panting, laughing, foreheads beading—  
they scrap and roll together,  
half in jest and half in rage.  
They can't perceive their beauty,  
how their strong-young backs  
move lithely. Not like mine, their  
creaking mother as I watch them from the shade.

How I've watched their boyish struggles  
from the time they rocked and scooted,  
grasping, stretching for some destiny  
beyond, just out of reach.  
First they crawled and then they toddled,  
now they run and dodge and scatter.  
How could they know what wondrous works  
they are to Thee and me?

The God who lights their bright eyes  
and who heals their scraped-up elbows—  
He sees the grand design beyond  
the crest of yonder hill.  
But will you, darling children,  
push your curls from your vision?  
And see  
For me  
The One who guides you still?

—Rachel Terry

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This poem was a finalist in the 2024 BYU Studies Poetry Contest.

# Book of Mormon Grammar and Translation

*Stanford Carmack*

This paper discusses some of the Book of Mormon's nonstandard grammar, showing how in many cases it was not the kind of grammar that Joseph Smith would have been expected to produce, since it was neither his native usage nor a presumed biblically influenced English. In these contexts, if he had been in control of the wording of the text, it is highly likely that he would have expressed things differently. Quite a few examples are provided in support of this claim, along with additional matching examples found in early modern texts.

The purpose of this paper is to increase understanding of Book of Mormon grammar and to dispel some commonly held misunderstandings. It is time to go beyond earlier, unstudied views of the Book of Mormon's nonstandard grammar—to improve on opinions that have been based on limited preparation, inadequate comparative study, and hasty analysis. In this paper, which is based on extensive preparation and work, I will show how various aspects of the Book of Mormon's nonstandard grammatical usage support the view that Joseph Smith dictated a revealed text in 1829.<sup>1</sup>

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1. In this paper, I will avoid using the terms *loose control* and *tight control* (as well as *iron-clad control*), since too often loose control is confused with nonliteral language translation. These terms can be found in a 1998 paper by Royal Skousen, "How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 (1998): 24. To be clear, loose control is not the same as a loose (nonliteral) translation. Loose control means that the Book of Mormon was revealed to Joseph Smith as ideas—that is, the text was only loosely controlled, since he would have had great leeway in choosing the words. Tight control means that words were given to Joseph.

Among researchers who believe that the Book of Mormon was the result of revelation, the position of most has been that the original grammar of the Book of Mormon supports the view that Joseph Smith's dictation in 1829 was the result of revealed ideas, not revealed words.<sup>2</sup> Yet my careful study of the issue leads me to believe that it is precisely the opposite.

Many have believed that Joseph was the one responsible for the bad grammar<sup>3</sup> of the original text, since there *is* plenty of bad grammar from the perspective of a prescriptive standard of American English usage in 1829, when he dictated the language. But it turns out that quite a few types of grammar—just as in the broader category of syntax—support the view that the Book of Mormon, as dictated, came to Joseph Smith as revealed words.

In general, there has been a lack of study of Joseph Smith's own grammatical tendencies, biblical imitation tendencies, King James grammar, early modern grammar, and late modern grammar. Because most researchers have had very little knowledge of early modern grammar, usually being very familiar only with the consciously regularized and edited grammar of the King James Bible, they (1) have missed potential links between original Book of Mormon usage and early modern grammar and (2) have wrongly thought that language variation that appears in the Book of Mormon is a mixture of early and late modern grammar that Joseph was responsible for. For some, any variation found in the Book of Mormon, even if it's also found in the King James Bible, has meant that Joseph was responsible for it.

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2. One recent comment on Book of Mormon grammar is found in Grant Hardy, "The Book of Mormon Translation Process," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2021): 206. This is a repeat of past unstudied views, with no mention of nonstandard grammatical usage that Joseph Smith didn't know about in 1829 and therefore could not have been responsible for. B. H. Roberts's well-known position on Book of Mormon grammar—that Joseph was directly responsible for it—is found in several earlier publications of his, including in *Defense of the Faith and the Saints*, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1907), 294. Roberts listed twenty examples of possible grammatical errors found in the first edition of the Book of Mormon. These fall into about ten subtypes, the precise number depending on how finely we wish to differentiate the language. Almost all of these are fully accounted for from a rich, early modern perspective.

3. In this paper, I will often use the simple terminology "bad grammar" to refer to three types of Book of Mormon grammar: (1) non-English bad grammar, (2) prescriptive bad grammar, and (3) in-between cases that many think of as possibly acceptable pseudo-archaic grammar, since they might sense that the usage is a possible type of archaic grammar. Examples of the latter are "he can cause the earth that it shall pass away" (1 Ne. 17:46) and "the children of the multitude, of whom hath been spoken" (3 Ne. 26:14).



## Syntactic Evidence Points to Early Modern Grammar

The perspective offered in this paper is that several types of Book of Mormon nonstandard grammar should be viewed as early modern grammar. This perspective is based on the grammar itself and the broader domain of syntactic evidence. There are at least three distinct reasons to look to the early modern period for analogs or syntactic matches:

- The verbal system of the Book of Mormon fits early modern usage well; it does not fit late modern usage well.<sup>4</sup>
- The original text has many archaic syntactic patterns that are non-biblical.
- The original text has non-biblical, archaic lexical usage.

Consequently, it is reasonable to consider whether questionable grammar in the Book of Mormon might be early modern usage. The case for seeking analogs in the late modern period is much less compelling.

A substantial amount of earlier usage that isn't biblical or pseudobiblical in nature argues for treating most<sup>5</sup> of the Book of Mormon's grammar as early modern (pseudobiblical authors attempted to imitate King James English both before, during, and after Joseph Smith's time). Examples of non-biblical and non-pseudobiblical archaic syntactic usage include, but are not limited to, (1) the distinctive pattern of personal relative pronoun use, (2) the pervasive finite verb complementation, (3) the past-tense syntax heavy in nonemphatic periphrastic *did*, (4) the frequent use of *shall* in nonindicative contexts, (5) the prevalent use of the archaic subordinate *that* after subordinators like *after* and *because*, and (6) the frequent use of the conjunction *save* in pro-clausal constructions (for example, "save it be/were") and with nonindicative *shall* and *should* (for example, "save he shall prepare a way for them," 1 Ne. 3:7).<sup>6</sup>

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4. To be clear, neither my position nor Royal Skousen's position has ever been that the English usage of the Book of Mormon is completely early modern. Indeed, in my first published paper on the topic of Book of Mormon English—"A Look at Some 'Nonstandard' Book of Mormon Grammar," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 11 (2014): 239–40—I mentioned a pattern that was late modern: auxiliary selection in the perfect tenses of unaccusative verbs. And Skousen has also indicated the varied nature of the language through the years in his analyses.

5. See note 4 herein.

6. Various articles of mine are relevant to these syntactic topics; for a listing, see "Our Authors: About Stanford Carmack," The Interpreter Foundation, last modified January 7, 2022, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/author/stanfordc/>. All emphasis in quoted text in this article are the author's.

In short, the personal relative pronoun usage of the Book of Mormon shows a pattern that occurred in the development of English during the second half of the 1500s and the first decade of the 1600s, just before and during Shakespeare's time. The heavy finite complementation of the text, after high-frequency verbs of influence and in many other constructions, is closest to late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century English usage, and certainly not like eighteenth- and nineteenth-century usage, which is almost exclusively infinitival.<sup>7</sup> The past-tense syntax is most like the middle and second half of the 1500s. The frequent use of subjunctive *shall* is also most like sixteenth-century usage, as is the subordinate *that* usage. Finally, the Book of Mormon's heavy, distinctive use of the conjunction *save* is early modern in character and analogous to usage with the synonymous conjunction *except*.

The first two syntactic items mentioned above—along with non-biblical, archaic lexical usage like *but if* for 'unless,' *depart* for 'divide,' and *whereby* for 'why?'—are among the strongest pieces of evidence that Joseph Smith did not choose the words of the Book of Mormon.

### Combined Archaism

Because the Book of Mormon has a large amount of archaic syntax, there are many combinations of archaic syntax that aren't found in either the King James Bible or pseudobiblical texts. Consequently, such combined linguistic evidence argues against Joseph Smith being the one who worded the text. For example, the original Book of Mormon text has more than 110 subordinate clauses that begin with the biblical, archaic subordinator "after that." Such a clause occurs twelve times with a verb in the past perfect tense ("had <past participle>"), followed closely by a past-tense main clause that has an archaic periphrastic *did* (nonemphatic, noncontrastive), as in this example:

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7. I still have not encountered another text with this pattern extending to so many verbs, especially the verbs *cause*, *suffer*, and *make*. At most, the preferential finite pattern can be seen after the verb *command* in some very early texts published by Caxton, and with the verb *desire* in specific contexts, and in stretches of other texts where there is clumping of finite complementation. Yet virtually all the usage is attested in the early modern period, so all of it is well formed; however, predominantly finite usage in so many contexts and after so many verbs is yet to be found outside of the Book of Mormon.

## 1 Nephi 8:25

And *after that* they *had* partook of the fruit of the tree,  
they *did* cast their eyes about as if they were ashamed.<sup>8</sup>

“After that” usage is early modern syntax, and so is nonemphatic “did cast” (even “had partook” is potentially early modern).<sup>9</sup> Although neither the King James Bible nor pseudobiblical texts have this combined archaism, there are dozens of examples in early modern texts, and most of them are found in the middle of the early modern period. If we say that the period spans the 225 years between 1475 and 1700 (the years covered by the EEBO database),<sup>10</sup> then most examples that are like 1 Nephi 8:25 (one of twelve in the text) are found in the middle third of the period, between 1550 and 1625. In recent searches, the text that had the most instances of this combined syntax (seven) was published in 1550.<sup>11</sup>

The closest case in the Bible combines “after that” with the simple past, followed closely by periphrastic *did*:

## Jeremiah 31:19

Surely *after that* I was turned, I *repented*;  
and *after that* I was instructed, I *smote* upon my thigh:  
I was ashamed, yea, even confounded,  
because I *did* bear the reproach of my youth.<sup>12</sup>

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8. For the readings shown in this paper, see Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), which tracks the language that Joseph Smith dictated in 1829. This edition of the Book of Mormon is used for all Book of Mormon references in this article, including, in most cases, line breaks used in that text. All italic formatting in Book of Mormon excerpts is emphasis added by the author.

9. The following four texts have instances of the past participle *partook*; they are part of the Early English Books Online database (EEBO) in the University of Michigan Library Digital Collections. Robert Walwyn, *A View of Fundamental Principles* [. . .] (Robert Walwyn, 1660), 262, <https://name.umd.umich.edu/A67475>; Paul Lathom, *Christ Crucified* [. . .] (Tho. Milbourn, 1666), 245, <https://name.umd.umich.edu/A49697>; William Sixmith, *A Testimony* [. . .] (n.p., [1678?]), 23, <https://name.umd.umich.edu/B10044>; Thomas Worden, *The Leper, and the Leper's House* [. . .] (William and Joseph Marshal, [1695?]), 5, <https://name.umd.umich.edu/A67066>.

10. Early English Books Online, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebogroup>.

11. Thucydides, *The hystory* [. . .] *of the warre, whiche was betwene the Peloponesians and the Athenyans* [. . .], trans. Thomas Nicolls (n.p., 1550), <https://name.umd.umich.edu/A13758>.

12. Emphasis added and biblical italics eliminated.

Another example of combined archaism in the Book of Mormon is this:

Ether 11:5

And it came to pass that the brother of Shiblon *did* cause  
that all the prophets *which* prophesied of the destruction of the people  
*should* be put to death.<sup>13</sup>

Nonemphatic “did cause,” a finite causative with a subjunctive *should*, and personal *which* are grammatical features that are primarily early modern in character. The King James Bible comes closest to having this combination of features in John 11:37, which lacks “did cause.”<sup>14</sup> In contrast, periphrastic “did cause” is found forty-seven times in the Book of Mormon and more than two thousand times in EEBO, in about 1,300 texts. The twenty-five pseudo-archaic texts examined for this study<sup>15</sup> don’t have any instances of finite causative syntax and very little personal *which* and hardly any “did cause” (four instances total in two pseudoarchaic texts).<sup>16</sup> In these ways and more, the Book of Mormon’s syntax is archaic but non-biblical and non-pseudo-biblical.

### Study Relevant to Book of Mormon Grammar

Because there has been a lack of comparative study of the Book of Mormon’s bad grammar,<sup>17</sup> I have made a particular point of studying the subject: analyzing Joseph Smith’s own grammatical usage and tendencies, searching many large corpora containing texts that span centuries, and expanding the research to include pseudo-archaic writings. I have personally made a very large database of eighteenth-century English (9.4 billion words), a very small database of Joseph’s earlier writings (11,000 words), a somewhat larger corpus of twenty-five pseudo-archaic texts (whose writers were attempting to imitate King James English or archaic English: 582,500 words), and a large database of early modern

13. All italics formatting in Book of Mormon excerpts is emphasis added by the author.

14. “Did cause” is not found in the King James Bible at all, only “didst cause” twice (in Ps. 76:8 and Ps. 80:9). “Didst cause” was used in place of disyllabic *causedst*, thereby avoiding the rare syllable-final English consonant cluster [tst].

15. Freely available as a WordCruncher ebook, titled *Pseudo-archaic Texts* (n.p., n.d.), available at <https://wordcruncher.com>. The pseudoarchaic English corpus consists of twenty-five texts and has about 582,500 words.

16. [Roger] O’Connor, *Chronicles of Eri* (Sir Richard Phillips and Co., 1822); and [Philemon Stewart], *A Holy, Sacred, and Divine Roll and Book* [. . .] (United Society, 1843).

17. See note 3 herein.

English (1.4 billion words). I have also tagged Joseph Smith's 1829 dictation language for parts of speech (about 270,000 words).<sup>18</sup> In doing this comparative research, I have found that there are quite a few types of bad grammar in the original Book of Mormon text that Joseph was unlikely to produce based on his own dialect, since they were not part of his own native usage and not attested as pseudo-archaic production at the time.

## On Grammaticality in the Book of Mormon

Here are some points to bear in mind on grammaticality in the Book of Mormon.

1. The original text has many kinds of nonstandard grammar, most of them with varying characteristics.
2. A limited amount of bad grammar is not known to have been English usage of any period; these are clear-cut, nonsubjective cases of bad grammar.
3. Most of the bad grammar was acceptable usage earlier in time—that is, perceptions of grammaticality have varied with time.
4. While some of the bad grammar was part of Joseph Smith's American dialect, some of it was not part of his dialect or doesn't appear to have been.
5. Some of the grammar that was generally considered to be nonstandard by the nineteenth century co-occurs with "good grammar" that was archaic, formal, or noncolloquial.

The first point means that the study of ungrammaticality in the Book of Mormon requires some preparation, focused study, and analysis. The second point argues for the text being revealed to Joseph Smith. The third point speaks to most of the grammar fitting quite nicely among early modern grammar; this gains strong support from the fact that the Book of Mormon has quite a few pervasive syntactic patterns that are archaic but non-biblical and non-pseudo-biblical (some of these mentioned above). Two examples of the fourth point are that much of the use of plural *was* in the Book of Mormon was part of Joseph's dialect, but much

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18. Eighteenth-century English works database compiled from Gale digital collection Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO), <https://www.gale.com/primary-sources/eighteenth-century-collections-online>; *Joseph Smith's Early Writings [1829–1833]: Ten Early Letters and His 1832 Personal History* (n.p., n.d.), WordCruncher ebook; *Pseudo-archaic Texts*; *Early English Books Online* (n.p., n.d.), WordCruncher ebook; *Book of Mormon: Original Text, with Grammatical Tagging* (n.p., n.d.), WordCruncher ebook.

of the use of plural *is* was not. And the fifth point means that even some types of bad grammar that seem directly assignable to Joseph Smith, such as plural *was* usage, at times immediately co-occur with other textual usage that he probably wasn't responsible for wording.

### Non-English Extra *and* Usage

Returning to the second point, I would like to emphasize that the extra *and* usage in the Book of Mormon after complex subordinate clauses is a prime example of non-English bad grammar that Joseph Smith wasn't responsible for. This grammatical type has been known since at least 1992, when Skousen first mentioned the usage in a publication.<sup>19</sup> It occurs more than forty times in the original Book of Mormon text. Here is an example of this non-English usage after the subordinator *when*:

Ether 15:30

*when* Coriantumr had leaned upon his sword, *that he rested a little, and* he smote off the head of Shiz.<sup>20</sup>

The italicized phrase “that he rested a little” adds complexity to the subordinate clause, leading to the extra *and* at the beginning of the main clause. There are ten instances of the extra *and* in the original text after the subordinator *when*. Most other examples occur after the subordinator *if*.<sup>21</sup>

Another kind of non-English bad grammar is “a descendant” used in plural contexts:

1 Nephi 6:2

For it sufficeth me to say that *we are a descendant* of Joseph.

2 Nephi 30:4

And then shall the remnant of our seed know concerning us, . . . and that *they are a descendant* of the Jews.<sup>22</sup>

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19. Royal Skousen, “Piecing Together the Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Today* 46, no. 3 (May 1992): 20.

20. The extra *and* was removed for the 1830 edition, marked by the compositor John Gilbert in the printer's manuscript.

21. Another example of nonsubjective bad grammar is the occasional dropping of the (italicized) verb *be* in Isaiah passages. For example, it is dropped once in 2 Nephi 16:5 (“I a man”; “woe me” has sufficient precedents) and also five times in the phrase “his hand [ø] stretched out still” (2 Ne. 15:25; 19:12; 19:17; 19:21; 20:4).

22. There are four instances total; see also Alma 56:3 and 3 Nephi 10:4.



Currently, there are no known precedents of this usage before the year 1829.<sup>23</sup> If any turn up in the future, they will be rare instances, and then the Book of Mormon's usage of "a descendant" in plural contexts could be thought of as a marginal case of prior English usage, though still usage that Joseph Smith might not have been familiar with when he dictated the text.

## Complementation Switching

The fourth and fifth points about grammaticality in the Book of Mormon also mean that some of its bad grammar is solid evidence for the text being revealed. One example of nineteenth-century nonstandard grammar that probably wasn't part of Joseph Smith's dialect, although it is attested early modern grammar, is this:<sup>24</sup>

1 Nephi 1:3

And I know *that* the record which I make *to* be true.

This is a switch from finite complementation after the verb *know* to an infinitival complement. Here is a sixteenth-century example of this usage:

Thomas Becon, 1566

But he understandeth *that* the salvation and health which he now asketh *to* be such as touching that which he cannot allege the absolute will of God.<sup>25</sup>

In both cases, there is an intervening relative clause headed by *which*: "which I make" and "which he now asketh." Texts from the first half of the early modern period have more examples of this variation, including one by Thomas More.<sup>26</sup>

23. This grammatical usage is covered in Royal Skousen, *The Nature of the Original Language* (Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and BYU Studies, 2018), 497–502. As of now, the earliest known example outside of the Book of Mormon is dated 1897.

24. There are two other instances of this type of bad grammar; see Mormon 6:6 and Moroni 4:1. These were dictated before 1 Nephi 1:3.

25. Thomas Becon, *A New Postil* [. . .] (Thomas Marshe, 1566), 98, <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A06932>, emphasis added, text modernized.

26. See Royal Skousen, *Grammatical Variation* (Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and BYU Studies, 2016), 451.

### Three Instances of Mixed Grammar

Three examples of nineteenth-century bad grammar co-occurring with archaic or noncolloquial grammar are these:

1 Nephi 22:11

in bringing about his covenants and his gospel  
unto *they which* are of the house of Israel

1 Nephi 5:11

And he beheld that they did contain the five books of Moses,  
which gave an account of the creation of the world  
and also of Adam and Eve, *which was* our first parents,

4 Nephi 1:17

There were no robbers *nor no* murderers,  
neither were there Lamanites *nor no* manner of ites,

Only the last one occurs in any pseudoarchaic texts—a single time.

In 1 Nephi 22:11, “unto they” (object *they*) was considered to be bad grammar in the nineteenth century, but “they which” was archaic grammar that was rare in pseudobiblical texts. In 1 Nephi 5:11, *which* referring to Adam and Eve is biblical usage, but the use of *was* with a plural subject isn’t biblical, and it was generally considered to be nonstandard before the 1800s. In 4 Nephi 1:17, “no manner of X” is noncolloquial grammar, and the double negative “nor no” was considered by many in the 1820s to be nonstandard,<sup>27</sup> although still in use at that time among the educated in both the United States and Great Britain.<sup>28</sup>

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27. For example, syntax rule 16 of Lindley Murray, *English Grammar* [. . .] (Wilson, Spence, and Mawman, 1795), 121, states that “two negatives, in English, destroy one another.” (Murray seems to have copied this expression from the earlier grammarian Robert Lowth.) In later editions of Murray’s grammar, expressions given for the reader to correct include an example with “nor no.” (Murray was a lawyer born in 1745 in Pennsylvania, later settling in England. His *English Grammar* was perhaps the foremost guide of its day, used in both Great Britain and the United States.)

28. “Nor no” can be found in British parliamentary proceedings in the 1820s, showing it was used by highly educated lawmen. See two examples of “nor no other Person” in House of Lords, *The Sessional Papers, 1801–1833*, vol. 239 (n.p., 1828), 164, 318, <https://books.google.com/books?id=BMhbAAAAQAAJ>. As an example of 1820s American usage (from Buffalo, New York), see “nor no other general resurrection” in Thomas Gross, ed., *The Gospel Advocate* 1, no. 51 (January 2, 1824), 406, <https://books.google.com/books?id=xTsrAAAAYAAJ>.

## Object “They Which”

In 1 Nephi 22:11, the grammatical construction is “<preposition> *they* <relative pronoun>”; this was occasional grammar of the early modern period. During this time, when a third-person plural pronoun was closely governed by a preposition or verb, and the pronoun was followed by a relative clause, the use of the pronoun *they* was possible. This object *they* usage later fell out of the mainstream and was nonstandard by 1830.

Besides the object *they* usage, the relative pronoun *which* in “they which” is archaic, biblical grammatical usage that wasn’t Joseph’s native usage. In his own writing, and in accordance with the times, Joseph didn’t use the relative pronoun *which* after personal pronouns; he used *who* or *that*. In searching for “they which” in twenty-five pseudoarchaic texts written between the years 1740 and 1888, I found that only one text, written by a Shakespearean scholar in 1863, had examples of “they which” (six instances).<sup>29</sup> In contrast, the Book of Mormon has one hundred instances of personal “they which” in non-biblical sections.

There were more than five other options that were more likely for Joseph to have used in this syntactic context, with “those who” being his most likely usage. Here are two examples of “those who” and “those that” in object position from one of his early letters: “*Fear not those who* are making you an offender for a word” and “for God will not always be mocked, and not pour out his wrath *upon those that* blaspheme his holy name.”<sup>30</sup>

All these things taken together mean that it is unlikely that Joseph chose the wording for this grammatical type in the Book of Mormon. It has twenty-three instances of object “they which” referring to persons (thirty-seven total instances of object *they*),<sup>31</sup> so the usage isn’t textually rare and is known to those who carefully study and edit the original language of the text.

The non-English extra *and* usage and the early modern object *they* usage (about eighty instances total) cast doubt on Joseph Smith being responsible for the Book of Mormon’s bad grammar.

29. [Richard Grant White], *The New Gospel of Peace, according to St. Benjamin* (Sinclair Tousey, 1863), <https://archive.org/details/newgospelofpeace5537whit/page/n7/mode/2up>.

30. Joseph Smith and John Whitmer, “Letter to the Church in Colesville, 2 December 1830,” 203, 205, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 25, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-the-church-in-colesville-2-december-1830/8>, emphasis added.

31. These constructions are covered in detail in the text-critical publication Skousen, *Grammatical Variation*, 700–767 in a section titled “Pronominal Determiners.”

## Personal “Which Was” in Plural Contexts

In 1 Nephi 5:11, there is a case of archaic grammar: *which* referring to two persons, Adam and Eve. The *which* in this context is biblical usage, and it wasn’t Joseph’s native usage: he used *who* in nonrestrictive relative clauses to refer to named persons. In contrast, the use of plural *was* referring to Adam and Eve was part of his native usage.<sup>32</sup> If this plural *was* language came from him, then Joseph mixed biblical *which* with non-biblical plural *was*. *Who* usage was much more likely for him in this context.

Here is an early modern instance that is like 1 Nephi 5:11, from the same author who employed the grammar of 1 Nephi 1:3:

Thomas Becon, 1566

and that not after the manner of Adam and Eve,  
*which was* [‘who were’] made of the ground,<sup>33</sup>

## Extra Negation

In 4 Nephi 1:17, the phraseology “no manner of X” is noncolloquial grammar.<sup>34</sup> And the double negative “nor no,” occurring twice in this excerpt, doesn’t appear to have been Joseph’s native usage. His early writings indicate that he would have used *or* in this context, not “nor no.”

The double negative “nor no” was, first and foremost, an early modern grammatical usage, but the textual record shows that it persisted at a low rate in *educated* speech and writing throughout the 1700s and into the early 1800s in both British and American English. In addition, original examples of the specific phraseology “nor no manner of X” (occurring four times in the Book of Mormon) rarely occur in the eighteenth-century textual record.<sup>35</sup> And it didn’t occur frequently

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32. Yet Joseph Smith didn’t always use *was* in plural contexts; he varied his usage, using *were* as well. The original text also has *were* used in singular contexts, much of which he would have been unlikely to produce. See note 82 herein for some examples.

33. Becon, *New Postil*, 27, emphasis added, text modernized.

34. The innovative use of *-ites* in 4 Nephi 1:17 is currently first attested elsewhere in 1852, twenty-two years after the Book of Mormon’s publication.

35. Searches for original eighteenth-century usage of “nor no manner of X” were originally made in June 2018 and rechecked on July 25, 2024; four examples were found.

Two examples—“nor no manner of danger / connexion”—are from ECCO: Archibald Campbell, *The Doctrines of a Middle State* [. . .] (printed by the author, 1721), 135, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CW0120685264/ECCO>; George Brewer, *The European Magazine* [. . .] 38, no. 23 (August 1, 1800), 245, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc>

in the early modern period<sup>36</sup> (it might have been primarily used in the late middle period, as seen in old statutory language), yet the usage rate of the late 1400s and the 1500s dwarfs the rate of the 1600s and 1700s.<sup>37</sup> So this phraseology is sixteenth-century (and earlier) in character. The Shakespearean scholar Richard Grant White used it once in his late pseudobiblical text,<sup>38</sup> probably because he was aware, at least at a sub-conscious level, that Shakespeare frequently employed the double negative “nor no” in his writings (forty times).

Overall, the extra negation of the original Book of Mormon text is not the type of negation that Joseph Smith might have produced. The following type was characteristic of the sixteenth century and before: “I will *not* have *none* of thy capons”;<sup>39</sup> compare “and that they should *not* do *none* of these things” (2 Ne. 26:32). But this next kind persisted more strongly and was used by the educated in the late modern period: “I hope . . . that you’ll *never* have *no* cause to repent your goodness”;<sup>40</sup> compare “the devil would *never* have *no* power over the hearts of the children of men” (Alma 48:17). But it was also used in the early modern period: “the godly shall *never* have *no* more suffering.”<sup>41</sup>

### Archaic *-(e)th* Inflection Used in Non-Third-Person-Singular Contexts

The most frequent type of nonstandard grammar in the Book of Mormon is verbs ending in *-(e)th* inflection when the grammatical subject isn’t third-person singular (3sg). In 2018, Royal Skousen counted

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/CB0130967234/ECCO. The last example is by an earl, occurring in a personal letter and dating from about 1760.

Two other examples—“nor no manner of ill usage / thought”—are from Gale Primary Sources, found in their digital *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection: Daily Courant*, June 9, 1705, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2000170215/GDCS>; and *Daily Gazetteer*, July 16, 1735, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2000223621/GDCS>.

36. In June 2018, I noted thirty-seven original early modern instances in four databases: EEBO, ECCO, Gale Primary Sources, and Google Books.

37. The rate of usage in the 1400s and 1500s is seven times the rate of the 1600s.

38. [Richard Grant White], *The New Gospel of Peace according to St. Benjamin* (Sinclair Tousey, 1863), 12, <https://archive.org/details/newgospelofpeace5537whit>.

39. [John] Skelton, *Merie Tales* [ . . . ] (Thomas Colwell, 1567), book 12, <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A12301>, emphasis added, text modernized.

40. Maria Edgeworth, *The Parent’s Assistant*, vol. 2, *The Birth-day Present* [ . . . ], 3rd ed. (J. Johnson, 1800), 217, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CW0116716980/ECCO>, emphasis added, text modernized.

41. Edward Bury, *A Sovereign Antidote* [ . . . ] (Thomas Parkhurst, 1681), [27], <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A30678>, emphasis added, text modernized.

183 instances of these in the original text. The King James Bible does have a handful of potential cases of verbs with *-(e)th* inflection whose subjects are third-person plural (3pl), but *-(e)th* inflection in the biblical text is virtually always clearly confined to 3sg contexts, as in this simple example: “among all the sons whom *she hath* brought forth” (Isa. 51:18).<sup>42</sup>

While there is some limited pseudobiblical support for the use of 3pl *-(e)th* inflection, there is no such text that exhibits the sustained use in the Book of Mormon (without any exaggerated or parodic overuse). Moreover, verbal *-(e)th* usage in first- and second-person contexts is not a known feature of pseudoarchaic texts, although it does infrequently occur in both the Book of Mormon and early modern texts. The following are three examples of first- and second-person *-(e)th* inflection, shown with three early modern examples:

Mormon 8:3

And I, even I, *remaineth* alone to write the sad tale of the destruction of my people.

Ether 3:3

Behold, O Lord, *thou* hast smitten us because of our iniquity and *hath* driven us forth.

Helaman 13:34

Behold, *we layeth* a tool here and on the morrow it is gone.

John Preston, 1639

Thus Paul argues this, *I saith* that every one of you saith,  
I am Paul, I am Apollo, I am Cephas, and I am Christ<sup>43</sup>

Valentine and Orson, 1555

I know well that *thou* hast wrought here and *hath* enchanted the paynims [‘pagans’]<sup>44</sup>

42. Emphasis added, biblical italics eliminated; compare 2 Ne. 8:18.

43. John Preston, *Grace to the Humble* [. . .] (Michael Sparke Junior, 1639), 77, <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A09971>, emphasis added, text modernized.

44. *The Hystory of* [. . .] *Valentyne and Orson* [. . .] (John Walley, 1555), [189], <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A14257>, emphasis added, text modernized.



Arthur Golding, tr., 1574

when *we suffereth* us ['ourselves'] not to be deaf to his doctrine,  
but *giveth* it entrance into us, to the end we may receive it and be  
moved with it<sup>45</sup>

In Mormon 8:3, the *-(e)th* inflection helps to emphasize and heighten the emotion of the statement. Ether 3:3 is one of two with “thou hast . . . and hath” inflectional variation (the other is Helaman 10:4), and there are quite a few examples of exactly this kind of variation in the early modern textual record, where *-(e)th* verb inflection occurs in the conjoined clause after an initial “thou hast.”

## Plural *Was* Usage

The second most frequent type of bad grammar in the Book of Mormon is plural *was*; there are 142 instances of this in the original text. Of these, 57 occur right after a relative pronoun, either *which*, *that*, or *who* (in that order of frequency), and 13 of these 57 relative pronouns refer to persons. Only 1 of these 13 is “who was,” even though this would have been Joseph Smith’s first choice and the prevailing usage of 1820s America. Three are “that was,” and 9 are “which was,” the latter being his least preferred usage. Therefore, the Book of Mormon distribution of plural *was* after a personal relative pronoun is the reverse of what we would expect if Joseph had worded this construction—namely, 9 or 10 instances of “who was,” 3 of “that was,” and 1 or no instances of “which was.”

As indicated, 44 instances of plural *was* in the Book of Mormon come right after a nonpersonal relative pronoun, all of them being *which*. The consistent use of *which* in this context is also different from Joseph Smith’s native usage and from 1820s American English usage. His early writings show a preference for *which* but include a substantial amount of *that*: two-thirds *which* and one-third *that*. Looking at the year 1830 in the Ngram Viewer (using the American English database),<sup>46</sup> the

45. *Sermons of Master Iohn Caluin [John Calvin]* [. . .], trans. Arthur Golding (Lucas Harison and George Byshop, 1574), 720, <https://name.umd.umich.edu/A69056>, emphasis added, text modernized.

46. Google Books Ngram Viewer, <https://books.google.com/ngrams>. See also Google Books Ngram Viewer Release Notes, July 2024, <https://books.google.com/ngrams/info>; and Jean-Baptiste Michel et al., “Quantitative Analysis of Culture Using Millions of Digitized Books,” *Science* 331, no. 6014 (December 16, 2010): 176–82, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1199644>.

phrase “things *that* are/were” is roughly equal in occurrence rate with “things *which* are/were.” Based on this Ngram Viewer data, as well as Joseph Smith’s early writings, the conclusion is that if Joseph had worded phrases like “things <relative pronoun> was” for the Book of Mormon, there would *not* have been forty-four instances of “which was” and no instances of “that was.”

One final instance of plural *was* I will mention here is the specific wording in this Book of Mormon passage where the personal *which* occurs right after the pronoun *few*:

Alma 46:35

And there *was* but few *which* denied the covenant of freedom.

Personal *which* usage peaked in English during Shakespeare’s time, toward the end of the 1500s and the beginning of the 1600s. (But for most early modern writers, personal *that* was dominant, as it is in the King James Bible.) As mentioned, Joseph Smith rarely used personal *which* after noun phrases, strongly preferring *who(m)*, followed by *that*. And pronouns show no usage of personal *which* in his writings, since they are high on the personhood spectrum. In most modern English dialects, including Joseph Smith’s, personal *which* usage with pronominals was very rare. Joseph’s own usage profile (derivable from his early writings), combined with pseudo-biblical evidence, indicates that he didn’t produce the Book of Mormon’s personal relative pronoun pattern. This supports the conclusion that it is unlikely that he produced the above language with personal *which*.

There is only one currently known precise match with this syntactic combination of Alma 46:35 (“there was but few *which*”):

Hugh Latimer, 1555 (or earlier)

In the primitive church, when there *was* but few *which* believed.<sup>47</sup>

This rare match of Book of Mormon language with an early modern instance is consistent with quite a few large-scale syntactic patterns and lexical items.

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47. Hugh Latimer, *Certayn Godly Sermons* [ . . . ] (John Day, 1562), 83, <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A05143>, emphasis added, text modernized.

When I checked in January 2024, neither ECCO nor Google Books had any independent examples of “there *was* but few *which*.” See note 18 herein for ECCO; Google Books, [https://books.google.com/advanced\\_book\\_search](https://books.google.com/advanced_book_search). The phrase was also absent from Evans Early American Imprints Online, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans> (this resource is also freely available as a WordCruncher ebook).

All of the above linguistic data demonstrate the clarity and power of syntactic and grammatical analysis in relation to the question of Book of Mormon translation and authorship. Linguistic data is objective, strong evidence.

## Plural *Is* Usage

The third most frequent type of bad grammar in the Book of Mormon is plural *is* usage. The tagged text currently indicates that there are sixty-eight of these, thirty-nine occurring right after a relative pronoun. In looking at Joseph Smith's early writings, there are no clear cases of plural *is* besides existential usage. One possible case occurs in a broken sentence in an 1832 letter to Emma: "things I cannot [—] is not prudent for me to write."<sup>48</sup> Either an *it* is missing before *is* or *is* agrees with *things*; but it isn't possible to be sure. As for existential usage, there are three instances of "there is <plural noun phrase>" in Joseph's writings: "there is really books," "there is but few cases of the cholera," and "there is about 100 boarders."<sup>49</sup> The original Book of Mormon text has only one of these, in a negative context, which tends to diminish the plurality of the noun phrase: "there is no revelations nor prophecies" (Morm. 9:7).

Interestingly, the Book of Mormon has one case of "there are" used with a following, coreferential "which is": "For there *are* many promises which *is* extended to the Lamanites" (Alma 9:16, emphasis added). This kind of variation was found in earlier English, as in the Earl of Monmouth's "there *are* some errors, which *is* easilier [*sic*] persuaded unto than to some truths."<sup>50</sup> Late modern English could have begun preferring "there is" varying with "that/which/who are," as in "there *is* many ministers now, who *are* saying,"<sup>51</sup> or "yet there *is* many things there contain'd that *are* not to be used in Christian worship."<sup>52</sup>

48. Joseph Smith, "Letter to Emma Smith, 6 June 1832," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 25, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-emma-smith-6-june-1832/3>.

49. Joseph Smith, "Letter to Oliver Cowdery, 22 October 1829," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 25, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-oliver-cowdery-22-october-1829/1#full-transcript>; Joseph Smith, "Letter to Emma Smith, 13 October 1832," Joseph Smith Papers, accessed July 25, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-emma-smith-13-october-1832/1#full-transcript>.

50. J. F. Senault, *The Use of Passions* [...], trans. Henry, Earl of Monmouth (John Sims, 1671), 267, <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A59163>, emphasis added, text modernized.

51. Richard Cameron, *Good News to Scotland* [...] (Daniel Reid, 1776), 15, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CB0126756380/ECCO>, emphasis added, text modernized.

52. Peter Smith, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* [...] (John Dean, 1787), iv, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CW0119507821/ECCO>, emphasis added, text modernized.

The following are other examples of plural *is*:

Mosiah 24:14

And I will also ease the *burdens* which *is* put upon your shoulders,  
that even you cannot feel them upon your backs,

Jeremiah Burroughs, 1646 (or earlier)

The consideration of little *burdens* which *is* upon us to what might be,  
should cause us to turn to God.<sup>53</sup>

In early modern English, the relative pronouns *which* and *that* made the use of *is* with a plural antecedent more likely. The Book of Mormon text shows this tendency, since most examples of plural *is* are of the above form: “<plural antecedent> <relative pronoun> *is*.” The following are three early modern examples, two from the middle of the period:

Thomas Lodge, tr., 1602

they endured all the *miseries* that *is* possible for man’s nature  
to abide.<sup>54</sup>

William Symonds, 1605

This external face is compared to the *courts* which *is* without  
the temple.<sup>55</sup>

Francis Howgill, 1661

and such will not heed the *qualifications* which *is* laid down  
by them that were ministers of Christ.<sup>56</sup>

The third example dated 1661 shows immediate verb agreement variation with “them that were,” illustrating the fluidity of early modern expression and natural language production.

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53. Jeremiah Burroughs, *An Exposition* [. . .] of *Hosea* [. . .] (Peter Cole, 1650), 68, <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A30574>, emphasis added, text modernized.

54. *The Famous and Memorable Workes of Iosephus* [. . .], trans. Tho. Lodge (G. Bishop, S. Waterson, P. Short, and Tho. Adams, 1602), 75, <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A04680>, emphasis added, text modernized.

55. William Symonds, *Pisgah Evangelica* [. . .] (Edmund Weauer, 1605), 65, <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A13288>, emphasis added, text modernized.

56. Francis Howgil, *The Glory of the True Church* [. . .] (Giles Calvert, 1661), 151, <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A44790>, emphasis added, text modernized.

Here is a different kind of plural *is* found in the Book of Mormon, co-occurring with object “they which”:

2 Nephi 10:21

But great *is* the *promises* of the Lord  
unto *they which* are upon the isles of the sea.

In this passage, the plural *is* probably occurs because the agreement controller, *promises*, follows the verb. The Book of Mormon has two other examples that are syntactically just like this one: “how strict *is* the *commandments* of God” (Alma 37:13) and “for great *is* the *words* of Isaiah” (3 Ne. 23:1). Along with object “they <relative pronoun>,” this kind of plural *is* was also a syntactic feature of early modern English. Here are four examples spanning more than 150 years with “great *is* <plural noun phrase>”:

John Fisher, 1532

Great *is* the *pains* that they there endure.<sup>57</sup>

Richard Robinson, tr., 1591

Great *is* the *sorrows* which the bodies . . . do feel.<sup>58</sup>

Gary William, 1649

Since which time, great *is* the *privileges*  
that kings and princes hath endowed this town with.<sup>59</sup>

John Seller, 1685

so great *is* the *advantages* these provinces receive by the sea.<sup>60</sup>

Unlike what might be commonly thought and occasionally asserted, most (not some) of the Book of Mormon’s bad grammar was acceptable in the early modern era.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the best fit for its nonstandard

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57. John Fyssh, [. . .] *Two Fruytfull Sermons* [. . .] (W. Rastell, 1532), book 1, <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A00789>, emphasis added, text modernized.

58. Victorinus Strigelius, *A Proceeding in the Harmonie of King Davids Harpe* [. . .], trans. Richard Robinson (John Wolfe, 1591), 134, <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A13065>, emphasis added, text modernized.

59. Gary William, *Chorographia* [. . .] (S.B., 1649), 19, <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A42127>, emphasis added, text modernized.

60. John Seller, *A New Systeme: of Geography* [. . .] (n.p., 1685), 46, <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A59140>, emphasis added, text modernized.

61. See, for example, Hardy, “Book of Mormon Translation Process,” 210.

grammatical usage is found in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writings; some examples have been shown above. To these we may add quite a few other types, including the twenty-six instances of “more part” phraseology and thirteen instances of “had (been) spake,” neither of which is found in pseudobiblical texts.<sup>62</sup>

### On “More Part” Phraseology and “Had Spake”

The use of “more part” phraseology, though biblical, was pointed out as somehow wrong by Cornelius Blatchly in 1830 and as overused by Edward Spencer in 1905.<sup>63</sup> Their comments are examples of a persistent tendency to hastily criticize the text’s grammatical usage. But this Book of Mormon grammar is neither wrong nor overused (although one-half of the examples do occur in the book of Helaman). It constitutes additional evidence that Joseph Smith wasn’t the author, since the overall usage is systematically different from the two examples found in the King James Bible (“the more part” versus “the more part of X”), and it wasn’t employed by pseudobiblical authors. Furthermore, the text has two rare early modern variants: “a more part of it” with an indefinite article and “the more parts of the Nephites” and “the more parts of his gospel” with plural *parts*.<sup>64</sup>

The leveled<sup>65</sup> past participle *spake*—occurring twelve times in the text as “had spake” and once as the passive “had been spake”—is most frequently attested in the textual record of the 1600s, including one instance by the poet and clergyman John Donne (1572–1631).<sup>66</sup> Again, this is not pseudobiblical or biblical usage, but it *is* sixteenth- and seventeenth-century in character. The Book of Mormon comes in at number two in terms of texts with the most instances of past-participial

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62. For pseudoarchaic texts, see note 15 herein. This general assessment on usage is made based on rates that occur in the databases of EEBO and ECCO (see notes 10 and 18 herein).

63. C. C. Blatchly, “Caution against the Golden Bible,” *New-York Telescope*, February 20, 1830, 150; Edward B. T. Spencer, “Notes on the Book of Mormon,” *Methodist Review* 87 (January 1905): 37.

64. These are found in Helaman 6:32; Helaman 6:21; and 4 Nephi 1:27, respectively. “A more part (of X)” is the rarest variant. See also Stanford Carmack, “The More Part of the Book of Mormon Is Early Modern English,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 18 (2016): 33–40.

65. The past tense verb form used for the past participle.

66. “When he *had spake* of light and a firmament and earth and sea.” John Donne, *Fifty Sermons* [. . .], vol. 2 (M. F. J. Marriot and R. Royston, 1649), 93, <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A36296>, emphasis added, text modernized.

*spake*, right behind a text published in 1646.<sup>67</sup> And the passive usage “been spake” was very uncommon, currently attested before the Book of Mormon only four times, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>68</sup>

The Book of Mormon has much more “had spoken” than “had spake,” making it in this regard like an early modern text that employs both verb forms. This variation is *not* good evidence of Joseph Smith mixing usage, nor is it a case of mixing early modern usage with late modern usage. Both “had spake” and “had spoken” were used in the early modern period, and all early modern authors who used “had spake” also used “had spoken” (and sometimes “had spoke”).

## On Joseph Smith’s Editing

It is also commonly thought that Joseph Smith’s willingness to correct the style and grammar of the Book of Mormon for the 1837 second edition and the 1840 third edition means that he worded the text.<sup>69</sup> Yet this does not constitute clear evidence for this, since his editing shows that there were various aspects of the text he dictated that he didn’t understand very well.

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67. The only text with more instances of the past participle *spake* than the Book of Mormon is John Bastwick, *The Utter Routing* [. . .] (John Macock, 1646), <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A26759>.

68. The leveled passive “had been spake” occurs in Alma 6:8. The earliest example of “been spake” found so far is by the playwright Thomas Kyd, who died in 1594 (see M. J. Trow and Taliesin Trow, *Who Killed Kit Marlowe?* [Sutton, Stroud, 2002], 237). After that, there is one example each dated 1646, 1659, and 1699 respectively: Bastwick, *Utter Routing*, 634; Jeremiah Burroughs, *Christ Inviting Sinners* [. . .] (Peter Cole, 1659), 348, <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A30566>; *A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend* [. . .] (n.p., 1699), 13, <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A48010>. After those three from the seventeenth century, there are currently none that come up in the largest databases until 1907. (There is also a mistranscription of “been spoke” as “been spake” in Henry Yelverton, *The Reports* [. . .], 4th ed. [Elizabeth Lynch, 1792], 104, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CW0124366906/ECCO>.) As of now, the evidence suggests that “been spake” was principally confined to the early modern period, without any sign of its use between 1699 and 1829. Of course, another example closer in time to the Book of Mormon could turn up in improved databases, which would overturn this observation.

69. Brant A. Gardner, “Translating the Book of Mormon,” in *A Reason for Faith: Navigating LDS Doctrine and Church History*, ed. Laura Harris Hales (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2016), 21–32; Hardy, “Book of Mormon Translation Process,” 207. Based on limited focused study of the English usage, Gardner stated that Joseph Smith understood the language he dictated very well. And Hardy apparently decided to follow the underinformed consensus in stating that Joseph Smith’s editing suggests his authorship. This did help him present a balanced list, if inaccurate.



As Joseph carried out this difficult task, he made many unnecessary edits (such as changing *hath* to *has*) and various mistakes while attempting to change the style and grammar for these editions. He was also inconsistent. For example, of the over 110 instances of archaic, biblical “after that S” usage, he emended only about ninety percent of them. Similarly, in the case of changing personal *which* to *who(m)*, he varied his rate of editing, sometimes skipping quite a few instances in a row. (None of these edits had to be made on prescriptive grounds, since they were known to be frequent biblical usage.) In addition, he only emended some of the nonstandard past-participial forms. (Almost all of these edits could have been made on prescriptive grounds.) Thus, the majority of his edits were meaning-neutral, such as changing *hath* to *has*, deleting subordinate *that*, changing *which* to *who(m)*, and changing the past participles *took* and *gave* to *taken* and *given* (the original text has eleven of these).

What Joseph did in his editing shows that he sometimes imperfectly understood linguistic aspects of the text he had dictated. Indeed, as an editor, he apparently struggled with some of the wording. This suggests that as he dictated the text to scribes in 1828–29, he didn’t absorb various aspects of it. Therefore, it can be argued that his work in this regard points to a revealed text as well.

Here are four examples of his imperfect editing and some brief discussion, along with an aside on the phrase “save it were.”

As a first example, Joseph Smith overedited *which* to *who* for the 1837 edition eight times, incorrectly changing instances of nonpersonal *which* to *who*. Most of these edits were rejected at the typesetting stage.<sup>70</sup> The one that was missed at the typesetting stage was the second *who* in this passage:

Alma 51:7

the voice of the people came in the favor of the freemen;  
and Parhoron [*sic*] retained the judgment seat,  
*which* caused much rejoicing among the brethren of Parhoron [*sic*]  
and also among the people of liberty,

1830► *which* also put the kingmen to silence,

1837► *who* also put the kingmen to silence,

that they durst not oppose  
but were obliged to maintain the cause of freedom.

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70. Skousen, *Grammatical Variation*, 1209–10.

The *also* after the second *which* links it to the first sentential *which*, thus indicating a nonpersonal reading.<sup>71</sup>

A second example is Joseph's emending of 1 Nephi 13:34 by changing plural *hath* to singular *has*:

1 Nephi 13:34

the most plain and precious *parts* of the gospel of the Lamb

1830► which *hath* been kept back

1837► which *has* been kept back<sup>72</sup>

Internal textual evidence argues that this emendation to the singular is wrong; the head noun, which prescriptively the verb should agree with, is *parts*.<sup>73</sup> In view of the fact that even the King James Bible has some rare marginal cases of plural *-th* usage,<sup>74</sup> keeping the *hath* after an intervening singular noun phrase and a relative pronoun would have been scripturally acceptable, along with standard *have*. So the simplest and best option would have been not to make any edit at all. And even though *has* was used in some plural contexts in early modern English, if a prescriptive edit was going to be made, then *have* was certainly the one to make.

Another example of imperfect editing is his emendation of Alma 17:38, where he inserted "with his sword" at the end of the *save*-clause:

Alma 17:38

Now six of them had fallen by the sling,

1830► but he slew none save it were their leader.

1837► but he slew none save it were their leader *with his sword*.

2009► but he slew none *with the sword* save it were their leader.

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71. See Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, 2nd ed., 6 vols. (Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies; Brigham Young University Studies, 2017), 4:2643 (hereafter cited as ATV); and Skousen, *Grammatical Variation*, 1217.

72. 1 Nephi 13:34. See Skousen, ATV, 1:299.

73. The relevant part of 1 Nephi 13:26 reads, "they have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many *parts* which *are* plain and most precious", emphasis added.

74. For example, "thy wisdom and prosperity *exceedeth* the fame which I heard" (1 Kgs. 10:7, emphasis added); "as a dew from the Lord, as the showers upon the grass, that *tarrieth* not for man, nor *waiteth* for the sons of men" (Micah 5:7, emphasis added); "where moth and rust *doth* corrupt" (Matt. 6:19, emphasis added); "And now *abideth* faith, hope, charity, these three" (1 Cor. 13:13, emphasis added).

Contextually speaking, it is clear that an important, clarifying element is missing in the original, and that is what Joseph supplied. But internal textual evidence argues that his emendation is slightly off. First, it should have been “with *the* sword,” and second, the prepositional phrase should have come after “he slew none,” before the *save* clause.<sup>75</sup>

### On “Save It Were”

Consider in this passage the short, distinctive phrase “save it were”—a phrase that occurs seventy-seven times in the text! There is no other text that has even five of these.<sup>76</sup> Historically speaking, this was Scottish English usage, first attested in the middle of the seventeenth century in a poem.<sup>77</sup> So far, five distinct examples before 1830 have been verified, all of them by authors from the British Isles. It is after 1830 that rare American examples begin to appear, including two in Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter* (1850). Similar to how “except it were” is used in the Book of Mormon, the synonymous phrase “save it were” is almost always the beginning of a pro-clausal construction in the subjunctive mood (this grammatical mood is triggered by the conjunction *save*).

Joseph Smith was more likely to use “except it were,” but “save it were” dominates in the text. And of note is that not even “except it were” (which occurs only twice in the King James Bible) is found in pseudo-biblical texts,<sup>78</sup> yet Joseph dictated fifteen of these. So even the phrases “save it were” and “except it were” provide additional evidence that the Book of Mormon is a revealed text.

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75. See Skousen, ATV, 3:2049–52.

76. This is a current assessment, subject to update, and based on repeated searches of many large corpora of English.

77. “Their bodies wounded all were glad to cry . . . *save it were* those priests and Jesuits”. C. W. Mercer, *Angliae Speculum* [. . .] (Tho. Paine, 1646), <https://name.umd.umich.edu/A89059>, emphasis added, text modernized. After this, there is a prose example found in James Canaries, *A Discourse* [. . .] (the Heir of Andrew Anderson, 1684), 213–14, <https://name.umd.umich.edu/B18463>, emphasis added, text modernized: “and so leave us nothing to expect more beyond this life, *save it were* a new reiteration of its own self.” Both authors were from Scotland. The next known example is found in a Scottish folk song or poem titled “Will You Go and Marry, Kitty” that was printed many times in the eighteenth century, first found in *The Charmer* [. . .] (J. Yair, 1749), 311, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CW0116065661/ECCO>.

78. One instance of present tense “except it be” does occur in twenty-five pseudoarchaic texts, in Richard Snowden, *The American Revolution* [. . .] (W. Pechin, [1802]), 17, <https://archive.org/details/americanrevoluti00snow/page/n21/mode/2up>. “Except it be” occurs five times in the King James Bible (all in the New Testament) and nine times in the Book of Mormon.

As a fourth example of imperfect editing, consider this excerpt:

1 Nephi 15:13

And now the thing which our father meaneth . . . is that in the latter days, *when* our seed *shall* have dwindled in unbelief, yea, for the space of many years and many generations,

1830► *after* that the Messiah *hath manifested himself*

1837► *after* the Messiah *shall be manifested*

Alt.► *after* that the Messiah *shall have manifested himself*

in body unto the children of men,  
then shall the fullness of the gospel of the Messiah come unto the Gentiles,

In 1837, Joseph unnecessarily changed the active, reflexive verb phrase “hath manifested himself” to the passive “shall be manifested.”<sup>79</sup> He might have wanted to create a *shall* parallel with the *when*-clause, or he might have been influenced by the following *shall* (indicative, in the main clause), but the passive switch goes against textual usage. The passive only occurs once elsewhere in relation to the Lord, at Ether 2:12, with an agentive *by* phrase.<sup>80</sup> Twenty-three other times, the Lord is the one who manifests himself. An acceptable edit, showing an understanding of internal textual usage and syntax, would have been “after (that) the Messiah *shall have* manifested himself,” matching the “shall have” of the preceding *when* clause. Yet the original tense variation in the *when* and *after* clauses—“shall have” varying with *hath*—isn’t ungrammatical. It is found often enough during the early modern period that it was clearly an optional tendency of that time, as in this example:

John King, 1599

But when the Lord *shall have* set thine heart at liberty, then run,  
when the Lord *hath* quickened and rubbed up thy memory, then remember him.<sup>81</sup>

79. For this verse, see Skousen, ATV, 1:331–32.

80. “If they will but serve the God of the land, which is Jesus Christ, which *hath been manifested by* the things which we have written” (Ether 2:12, emphasis added).

81. John Kinge, *Lectvres vpon Ionas* [. . .], corr. ed. (Joseph Barnes, 1599), 379, <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A04845>, emphasis added, text modernized.

## Conclusion

In summary, “it were exceeding improbable” (to use an early modern expression;<sup>82</sup> compare Alma 55:23) that Joseph Smith should produce from his own native usage the wide variety of nonstandard grammar we find in the original Book of Mormon text. Based on focused study, my position is that almost all the nonstandard grammar in the Book of Mormon should not be attributed to him. Only those cases where he might have inadvertently imposed his own grammatical usage on the revealed text are to be assigned to him.

The syntax and grammar of the text provide some of the most important evidence pointing to the Book of Mormon being the result of a revelation of words to Joseph Smith. The text provides a large amount of objective syntactic evidence and complex semantic evidence: these mutually support each other and lead to the conclusion that extensive knowledge of early modern English must have informed the English-language translation—knowledge that Joseph didn’t have.

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82. Language taken from [Henry Hallywell], *A Discourse of the Excellency of Christianity* (Walter Kettily, 1671), 43, <https://name.umd.umich.edu/A45356>. Compare also the original language of Mosiah 1:4; Alma 20:17; Alma 53:5; 3 Nephi 7:18; Mormon 2:16; and Ether 15:14.

# Making Mistakes

*Shamae Budd*

My four-year-old son is not a quiet child. He is the kind of child that people call “spirited,” “high energy,” or “all boy.”

His enthusiasm for the beautiful, rare cosmic bliss of living seems limitless. His zeal exists in all directions, at all times of day, and in all seasons and sizes and shapes and colors. It is technicolor joie de vivre. As an illustration, he recently spent the morning stomping from room to room in cowboy boots, a tutu, and a yellow construction hat while he held a tambourine and a rainbow sparkle wand, chanting, “CHAOS! CHAOS! CHAOS!” at the top of his lungs. After several minutes, he paused, looked in my direction, and asked with earnest curiosity, “Mom, what’s chaos?”

I should have known then not to expect him to be quiet.



For a year, during his second hurtling trip around the sun, we lived in my parents’ basement. It was a beautiful year—Edenic—with raspberries bursting on the old canes in springtime and our little boy furtively climbing the stairs on Saturday mornings, whispering, “Pop pop,” hoping for pancakes.

A year after we moved out, my youngest brother moved in, along with his fiancée and their new baby. My little son and I were in the habit of visiting his grandparents regularly, and I did not anticipate that this habit would change. But simple logistics were against us: babies need sleep; sound travels easily in old houses; and if there’s anything my little chaos machine knows how to make, it’s *sound*.

Even at his most reserved, he is a loudly whispered, “Chaos, chaos, chaos,” shivering with energy, ready to burst at the smallest spark. All it took was an enthusiastic superhero’s leap, a full-throttled run down the hall, a jubilant whoop—and then a baby’s cry. Another mother’s frustrated plea: “I know it’s hard, but can you please try to keep the noise down?”

The first time it happened, I felt sick to my stomach. The second time, I bundled us into the car and drove home. I couldn’t stand being at fault—being blamed for another’s inconvenience and frustration. After the third time, I felt I could no longer visit my parents’ home.

When I expressed my concerns, Mom told me not to worry, and Dad only shrugged.

“Babies get woken up early from their naps sometimes,” he said. “That’s just life.”

So it was with great trepidation I knocked on their door one Saturday afternoon, unannounced.

My new baby (born a matter of days after my brother’s) needed to nurse, and the three of us were out running errands. My parents’ house was the most logical pit stop. They didn’t answer the door, but I knew the code to the garage. So we pressed the buttons and tiptoed together into the living room. As we did, I said with hushed and disproportionate urgency, “We *have* to be quiet. Your cousin might be sleeping downstairs.”

“Okay, Mom!” my four-year-old whispered, putting a finger to his lips and smiling good-naturedly.

He ran heavily across the room to the big cedar trunk full of toys, and I winced. “Hey, buddy. Try to walk. Okay? Running is too loud.”

“Okay! Sorry!”

He started playing with the cars, but what started as sedated *vrooms* and little back-and-forth movements on the floor quickly escalated to unmuffled monster truck noises and joyful S-curves and leaps and heavy landings, the sound of the grippy rubber wheels and his boyish enthusiasm echoing through the quiet house. My stomach constricted. I thought, “We’re going to wake the baby.” I could feel a rising panic in my gut. Coming here had been a mistake, but I was already nursing. We had to see it through. We *had* to be quiet. *He* had to be quiet.

“Buddy, can you find something else to play with? Those are too loud.”

He shrugged and settled cross-legged with a puzzle on the rug. He pushed the pieces around on the floor half-heartedly, then sighed. He looked at the drum in the corner with longing but did not play it. Instead, he wandered over to the kid easel, picked up a piece of yellow chalk, and began drawing big, irregular circles.



“Look, Mom. This is *so* quiet!”

“Wow, buddy. That *is* so quiet!”

He beamed and continued drawing circles. Then he picked up the plastic-backed eraser, scrubbed at the chalkboard, and dropped the eraser onto the floor. *Thunk.*

It wasn’t a particularly loud sound, but at that point, any sound seemed loud to my hypervigilant ears.

“*Buddy! Please* try not to drop things on the wood floor. We *have* to be quiet. Okay?”

I could feel the anxiety welling in my throat, strangling my words, making me feel that the need for quiet was a matter of life and death. I knew I was being unreasonable, but I couldn’t get control of the feeling that silence was imperative—that if we were not silent, the baby would wake, and the mother would be angry, and I would be to blame.

His shoulders drooped, his head hung low, and he spoke quietly to the floor. “I am a bad person. I shouldn’t have dropped that.”

The tightness in my stomach turned sour. “You’re not a bad person, buddy!”

I wanted to get up and give him a hug, but I still had my second baby tucked in my arms.

“Yes, I am. I keep dropping things while the baby is sleeping. Why do I keep dropping things when the baby is sleeping? I’m a bad person.”

“Honey, you are not a bad person.”

He did not look up.



As I write this scene line by line, I feel ashamed. Even before I get to those softly spoken words, “I am a bad person,” I feel uncomfortable watching the way I needled him and expected him to be somebody different for the convenience of others—to appease *my* anxiety. It is a worthy goal not to wake another person’s baby. But I was so fixated, so afraid of making somebody angry, that I lost sight of my son—my beautiful little chaos machine, this boy who *loves* living.

I never heard a sound from the basement, never found out if they had been at home or whether the baby had been sleeping. And the truth is, it didn’t matter who was downstairs or what they were doing. My son should have mattered more. And in that moment, something became suddenly, shockingly clear: My child is learning things from me that I do not intend. He is intuitive. He *infers*. He does not require my words to grasp my mindset, and this revelation came as a terrible blow.

I suppose I believed up until that moment that if I *did everything right*, if I read all the right books and said all the right things, I could parent him perfectly. I believed I could keep him from becoming like me, from inheriting my perfectionism, my conflict avoidance, my people-pleasing. But no. I was already giving him what I carried inside me. Because he loves me, trusts me, and exalts me, he had already begun internalizing my beliefs and making them his own.



As we drove away from my parents' house that afternoon, I tried to reframe.

I said, "This was not about you. This was about me. Mommy was scared. Mommy made a mistake."

He said, "Okay, Mama," from his car seat, his feet dangling a full two feet off the floor.

Watching his beautiful baby-plump cheeks and long eyelashes in the rearview mirror, I felt hopeless. That he would grow up to feel relentless pressure and fear and guilt seemed inevitable; that it would be my fault seemed abundantly clear.

A few days later, sitting across from a grandmotherly therapist-turned-friend, I wept over my son's words: "I am a bad person."

"This is my fault," I told her. "I have done this to him with my high expectations and my worry and my conflict avoidance. I have failed my son. I am a bad mother."

She smiled at me gently, and I laughed at the irony of my words before she could even point it out. Here I was, stuck in the very same loop I wanted him to avoid, confirming to myself the very thing I wanted desperately for my son *not* to believe: *I am not allowed to make mistakes. I can and should be perfect.* My gut response to this irony was, perhaps unsurprisingly, to beat myself up for beating myself up.

She tried to pull me in a different direction. "Do you *really* believe you're a bad mother?"

I thought for a moment and answered honestly. "No."

"Hmm." She bobbed one leg up and down and said nothing.

"I'm a great mom." Somehow, I believed both things. Could both be true?

"Yes. I think you *are* a great mom. I think you're doing your best."

My eyes stung as my thoughts bubbled up into words. "But what if my best isn't good enough? What if he grows up thinking he's a *bad person* because of me?"

“Well, you’re here, aren’t you? You’re trying?”

“Yes.” I knew where she was going. Somehow, this was where we always ended up.

“So that’s all anybody can really ask.”

I nodded, but I didn’t believe it.

“I wish I was somebody else,” I said. “I wish I could be a different sort of person. I think he would be better off.”

She smiled as if she saw something I couldn’t. She said, “I don’t know about that,” and shrugged.



I have long misunderstood something fundamental about myself and the nature of living. I have long believed—due to a complex combination of family culture, religious education, and individual biology—that I must “be ye therefore perfect” (Matt. 5:48). Not in the long run, but today. Not through the grace of Christ, but through my own tenacity and virtue. I believe that I am bad when I do badly. That when I fall short, I am worth less.

Of course, this is not what the scriptures say. But when you have a tendency toward unrelentingly high personal standards and an out-size fear of judgment or disapproval, it’s easy to become overwhelmed by words like these: “They shall be judged, every man according to his works, whether they be good, or whether they be evil. And if they be evil they are consigned to an awful view of their own guilt and abominations, which doth cause them to shrink from the presence of the Lord into a state of misery and endless torment, from whence they can no more return” (Mosiah 3:24–25).

It seems natural to read such a warning and grow to fear even the tiniest misstep.

Yet I know that waking a sleeping baby will not elicit misery and endless torment. I know that asking your child to be quieter than is reasonable probably doesn’t count as an abomination, even if it makes him feel like a bad kid as a result. (I am 97 percent sure that’s true.) Those words from the book of Mosiah were probably meant more for the people who rebel against goodness or shrug their shoulders at salvation—not the people who are trying very hard and still happen to be human. I understand this, but I don’t always feel it in my gut.

Perhaps more importantly, this fixation on judgment and whether my works are “good enough” completely ignores the larger context for those ominous lines. The first twenty-three verses of that chapter in

Mosiah speak of the angel's "glad tidings of great joy" (Mosiah 3:3) that were declared to King Benjamin so that he and his people might "rejoice" and "be filled with joy" (3:13). Only in the last four verses does the Lord speak of "fire and brimstone" (3:27).

I believe those verses were never meant to be a message of crippling fear and guilt. They were a celebration of the beautiful, rare cosmic bliss of living—something my son seems to grasp so intuitively—because we live in a world where growth and change and repentance are possible through Christ. But for some reason, the misery and torment were the only things I seemed to remember.



I called my husband's sister a few days later, looking for more practical advice.

"What do I do?"

"It seems like he has a problematic mindset around mistakes," she ventured.

"I know. So how do I fix it?"

She told me about a parenting book she'd read, where the authors recommended responding positively to mistakes.

"But I've already been doing that," I said. "I try not to make a fuss when I screw something up. I just say, 'Oops, I made a mistake! That's okay! Everybody makes mistakes!'"

"Right, but they say you should talk about mistakes like they're a good thing. Like, 'Oh, this is awesome! I made a mistake! Now I get to learn something new!'"

This advice puzzled me. I had always tried to foster a "growth mindset" in my child. I encouraged him to try new things, to keep going when he confronted a challenge, and to pick himself back up when he fell. But suddenly there was a wall—a mental block. How could spilled milk or burned bagels be *awesome*? How could I possibly frame peeing your pants, drawing on the furniture, or hitting your baby brother as *wonderful* events rather than as setbacks to be recovered from?

I worried that if I was too relaxed about my child's mistakes, he would just make more of them.

I also worried that if I was too stern, too quick to correct or disapprove of my child's behavior, he would learn that *he* is bad when he does badly. That when he falls short, he is worth less.

As with so many things in parenting, I worried that no matter what I did, I'd be doing it wrong.



I didn't know if I could execute this new strategy, but with the words "I am a bad person" still reverberating in my spine, I was willing to try.

I started small. My four-year-old accidentally stuck both legs into one pant-leg, and despite the fact that we were running late for preschool, I said, "You're so lucky! You made a mistake! What did you learn?"

He smiled goofily. "I learned that two legs don't fit in here!"

He hopped around the room like a fish, then eventually pulled his legs out and tried again. We were late to preschool, but he had his pants on.

My four-year-old bumped a roll of toilet paper into the (as yet unflushed) toilet. Gingerly plucking it from the bowl, I took a breath and said, "You're so lucky! You made a mistake! What did you learn?"

He glanced up, cautious. "I learned . . . I should be more careful. What did *you* learn, Mom?"

"Hmm . . ." I thought for a moment. "Well, I learned that the toilet paper is easy to bump right there. Should we put it over here instead?"

He looked both surprised and impressed by my clever solution. "Yeah! That's a good idea, Mom." He skipped away, and I felt something balloon inside me—something like hope.

My four-year-old came barreling around a corner with a long, pointy stick and jabbed me in the side. I groaned, "Wow, *you're so lucky!* You made a mistake! What did you learn?"

He looked ponderously at the stick, scratching his chin.

"I learned this stick can hurt people." And then, his brown eyes turned up toward mine. "Are you okay, Mommy? Maybe this is not a good inside-the-house stick."

"Maybe not," I agreed.

I said it over and over. "You're so lucky! You made a mistake!" I didn't believe what I was saying, but I wanted to. I hoped that might be good enough. I hoped that the words from the book of Alma might apply in this case too. "Yea, even if ye can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you, even until ye believe" (Alma 32:27).



Several months after the incident in my parents' living room, my four-year-old spilled an immense cup of juice. The puddle of orange liquid was surrounded by a circular firework of splatter marks across the floor.

I grabbed a couple dish cloths and said reflexively, "You're so lucky! You made a mistake!" as we started mopping up the mess together. But

then, suddenly, something clicked into place inside me. I was looking at all those orange speckles dotting the white table legs, and I *believed* what I was saying.

“We *are* lucky that we make mistakes, buddy!” I repeated.

He was humming to himself, but I kept going because saying it out loud felt important.

“Mistakes mean we’re *people*! We’re lucky because we still have things to learn and ways to grow. Otherwise, what’s the point of being here?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged and took a big bite of PB&J.

“The mistakes make us human, honey. And being human is a wonderful thing. That’s why we’re lucky.”

I knew he didn’t get it, but for that one little moment, I did. I *believed*.



These days, I can’t always access that epiphany, but it’s inside of me somewhere. When I start to feel the guilt or the dread, I remind myself that I am not a perfect mother, but I am a good one. I am lucky that I make mistakes because it makes me human. I think, “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief” (Mark 9:24).

To be honest, I don’t know whether I’m doing it “right.” More and more, I think that “right” doesn’t exist but “good enough” does. For now, I am trying to convince both of us that mistakes are not just fixable but wonderful. I am trying to love myself, and I am trying to embrace the beautiful, rare cosmic bliss of living an *imperfect* life.

At bedtime last night, out of the blue, my four-year-old said, “Mom, I love you one hundred, *two hundred*!” Then, without skipping a beat, he added, “And I love *myself* one hundred, *two hundred* too!”

For now, I count that as progress.

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This essay by Shamae Budd received second place in the 2024 BYU Studies personal essay contest.

# Tasting God's Light

## Saints and the Spiritual Senses

*Philip Abbott*

While many Westerners once assumed that sensory perception is more or less constant and universal, scholarship in the area of sensory studies has shown how volatile and diverse sensory discernment can be. For instance, though Western epistemology categorizes sensory knowledge into five senses, people across world cultures do not agree on the number of human senses that exist (some enumerate two, four, six, or seven senses), nor do they agree on how the senses function.<sup>1</sup> As anthropologists have illuminated, these various notions of sensory perception lead people to translate sensory experience into vastly different worldviews.<sup>2</sup> Thus, researchers have concluded that there is no such thing as “common sense,” as the senses are not universally common, nor do they function together to produce one shared understanding of how the world works.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Constance Classen, “Foundations for an Anthropology of the Senses,” *International Social Science Journal* 49, no. 153 (1997): 401. The Javanese, for instance, have five senses: “seeing, hearing, talking, smelling, and feeling.” Alan Dundes, *Interpreting Folklore* (Indiana University Press, 1980), 92, emphasis original. See also David Howes, ed., *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses* (University of Toronto Press, 1991).

2. Perhaps the most important work in launching the so-called “anthropology of the senses” is Paul Stoller, *The Taste of Ethnographic Things: The Senses in Anthropology* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989). See also Constance Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures* (Routledge, 1993); David Howes, *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader* (Routledge, 2004); and Mark M. Smith, *Sensory History* (Berg, 2007).

3. Michael Herzfeld, “Anthropology: A Practice of Theory,” *International Social Science Journal* 49, no. 153 (1997): 301. See also Jules B. Davidoff, *Differences in Visual Perception: The Individual Eye* (Academic, 1975).



In addition to highlighting cross-cultural differences, scholarship has demonstrated how sensory values and priorities shift within cultures over time. Changes in society often impact the “sense ratio,” or the conception and valuation of the different senses in a culture.<sup>4</sup> One example is the increased preoccupation in the West with the sense of sight over the past three hundred years. In medieval Europe, a variety of sense ratios reigned that did not always privilege sight over the other senses.<sup>5</sup> However, since the eighteenth century, the importance of vision has grown exponentially in Western epistemology, and the “medical gaze” has become intrinsically linked with scientific knowledge.<sup>6</sup> This emphasis on sight is evident in language about knowledge. For example, people often use the phrase “I see” to indicate “I understand,” as sight and knowledge are virtually one and the same in contemporary culture. But this oneness has not always been the case. To illustrate this point, consider the common phrase “Seeing is believing.” This phrase used to be “Seeing is believing, but feeling [is the] truth.”<sup>7</sup> With the rise of visual, scientific knowledge, however, the truth of feeling by touch or through emotion was no longer considered valid, so the latter part of the phrase was dropped.<sup>8</sup>

Culture-specific paradigms of sensory perception impact the way that people conceptualize and describe spiritual experience. That is, sensory perception shapes spiritual perception. As a religious educator, I have seen that one of the biggest challenges for Latter-day Saints

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4. The term “sense ratio” was coined by Marshall McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (University of Toronto Press, 1962). For more, see Howes, *Empire of the Senses*, 55–142; Richard Newhauser, *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Middle Ages* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

5. For the emergence of a variety of these sense ratios, see Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley, “Introduction,” in *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, ed. Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 8–9. See also Bissera Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium* (Penn State University Press, 2010).

6. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (Tavistock, 1973); Lissa Roberts, “The Death of the Sensuous Chemist: The ‘New’ Chemistry and the Transformation of Sensuous Technology,” in Howes, *Empire of the Senses*, 106–27.

7. Thomas Fuller, comp., *Gnomologia: Adagies and Proverbs; Wise Sentences and Witty Sayings, Ancient and Modern, Foreign and British* (B. Barker, 1732), 174.

8. Dundes, *Interpreting Folklore*, 86–92; David Howes, “Sensorial Anthropology,” in Howes, *Varieties of Sensory Experience*, 169. Similarly, Erlmann argues that scientific discoveries related to aurality in the twentieth century changed how Westerners ranked the sense of hearing in their sensory ratio—it went from the opposite of reason to part and parcel of reason. Veit Erlmann, *Reason and Resonance: A History of Modern Aurality* (Zone Books, 2010).

is recognizing spiritual communication, which could be partially due to how members of the Church pigeonhole the Spirit into a specific sensorium. While Saints typically conceptualize spiritual promptings according to auditory or tactile models—*hearing* the still, small voice or *feeling* the Spirit—other cultures throughout history have understood spiritual communication differently. And just as scholarship on the physical senses has transformed the way anthropologists conceptualize sensory experience, exploring the spiritual sensoria of other peoples can open our eyes to the various ways that the Holy Ghost communicates. This article explores the sensory worlds of ancient Jews and Christians, focusing particularly on how these ancient believers portrayed spiritual experience by appealing to synesthesia, which is the phenomenon of sensory convergence (for example, hearing color, tasting sound, and so forth). Synesthetic descriptions of spiritual experience demonstrate not only the “divers manners” in which people perceive divine communication (Heb. 1:1) but also the unique, transcendent characteristics of such communication.

## Seers and Hearers

Spiritual experiences are impossible to adequately render into language. As the Apostle Paul explains, the Spirit communicates with “groanings too deep for words.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, humans must resort to employing inadequate metaphors to describe spiritual communication, metaphors that often limit the divine. To better understand this notion, we must explore recent advancements in metaphor theory.<sup>10</sup> While a metaphor has been traditionally understood as a simple substitution of meaning from X to Y, the scholar George Lakoff has recently demonstrated that the phenomenon is more complex than this simple equation. That is, a metaphor can be a matter of larger concepts, not mere words. For example, the metaphor “love is a journey” is a broader concept that assembles several subsidiary metaphors, like “we are at a crossroads,” “we are moving forward,” and so on.<sup>11</sup> These latter traveling metaphors are not discrete, independent verbal expressions but products of the larger notion of

9. Romans 8:26, NRSVUE: “στεναγμοῖς ἀλάλητοις.” See also 1 Corinthians 2:14.

10. I would like to thank my research assistant, Andrew Stewart, for his helpful research on metaphor theory.

11. George Lakoff, “The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor,” in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Andrew Ortony, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 206–11; George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, “Conceptual Metaphor in Everyday Language,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 77, no. 8 (August 1980): 453–86.

“journey.” They apply to the target domain of love wherein “the lovers are the travelers, love is the vehicle, and mutual goals are the destination.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, the larger concept of “journey”—which Lakoff calls a “conceptual metaphor”—permits humans to conceptualize the abstract notion of love in the more concrete terms of traveling.<sup>13</sup>

In contemporary Latter-day Saint discourse, spiritual communication operates primarily within the conceptual metaphor of hearing: heeding the whisperings of the Spirit, listening to the voice of the Spirit, and so on. While members of the Church are not typically referencing an actual voice, they conceptualize spiritual promptings as messages to be heard. Consider, for example, Gerald N. Lund’s practical guide on how to receive revelation, *Hearing the Voice of the Lord*, or Tom Mould’s study of Latter-day Saint folklore related to spiritual experience entitled *Still, the Small Voice*.<sup>14</sup> While Lund’s work is devotional, and Mould’s is academic, both books clearly situate spiritual experience within the conceptual metaphor of aurality—the Spirit functions like a voice to be heard. Admittedly, Latter-day Saints employ other sensory metaphors for spiritual communication. The notion of “feeling” the Spirit is particularly prevalent in the Church, as promptings are likened to touch. But this tactile metaphor is not conceptual in the way that the auditory is. In other words, “feeling” the Spirit is not a larger concept that provides a map of correlated, subsidiary metaphors for spiritual touch. But the auditory model is just that.

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12. Emily Cain, *Mirrors of the Divine: Late Ancient Christianity and the Vision of God* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 8.

13. Since Lakoff’s influential studies, scholars have nuanced his observations by pointing out that different types of conceptual metaphors exist: (1) active/alive and (2) inert/dead. The inert metaphors are so common that people do not even realize they are metaphors to begin with (such as a “deadline,” which originally referred to a physical line in the Civil War beyond which prisoners were shot), but active metaphors surprise the listener with the combination of “nonsensical” components. Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (University of Toronto Press, 1977), 95. See John Sanders, “Metaphors and Other Conceptual Structures,” in *Theology in the Flesh: How Embodiment and Culture Shape the Way We Think about Truth, Morality, and God* (Fortress Press, 2016), 45–78.

14. Gerald N. Lund, *Hearing the Voice of the Lord: Principle and Patterns of Personal Revelation* (Deseret Book, 2007); Tom Mould, *Still, the Small Voice: Narrative, Personal Revelation, and the Mormon Folk Tradition* (Utah State University Press, 2011). Despite describing the Spirit as a voice, Mould begins his book by clarifying the diversity of spiritual promptings: “Personal revelation can be as subtle as a nagging thought or vague feeling, or as dramatic as a booming voice or vision” (ix).

The recent #HearHim initiative is a good example.<sup>15</sup> In 2020, President Russell M. Nelson invited members of the Church to consider the “insistent and consistent” call by God to “Hear [Christ].” Thus, President Nelson issued the following charge: “I invite you to think deeply and often about this key question: How do you hear Him? I also invite you to take steps to hear Him better and more often.”<sup>16</sup> The Church subsequently produced a number of videos highlighting the various ways that Church leaders “Hear Him.”<sup>17</sup> In these brief video clips, Apostles and other leaders employ a variety of auditory metaphors to explain the different ways they hear the Spirit in their lives. Thus, according to this larger conceptual metaphor of hearing, spiritual communication functions as an auditory phenomenon.

Like most figurative language, the metaphor of “hearing” the Spirit bleeds into the nonmetaphorical realm of Church culture. When Saints worship at church or at the temple, they practice reverent devotion by engaging in silent meditation; only whispering is appropriate when communication is necessary. Implied is the notion that loud noises prevent members of the Church from “hearing” the still, small voice of the Holy Ghost.<sup>18</sup> To a large degree, this notion has guided the construction of Latter-day Saint meetinghouses. In a 1943 *Improvement Era* article, Franklin Y. Gates—an acoustic consultant at KSL broadcasting and for Church construction projects—wrote, “Noise means confusion, quiet is associated with rest and composure. To reduce the noise and create a peaceful atmosphere, we use as much sound absorption material as is

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15. For another example, see “Voice of the Spirit” (video), Media Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed June 10, 2024, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media/video/2010-08-0016-voice-of-the-spirit?lang=eng>; see also James E. Faust, “Voice of the Spirit,” *Ensign* 36, no. 5 (June 2006): 3–6.

16. “#HearHim: President Nelson Invites Us to Hear the Voice of the Lord” (video), Media Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed June 10, 2024, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media/video/2020-02-1000-hearhim-president-nelson-invites-us-to-hear-the-voice-of-the-lord?lang=eng&alang=eng&collectionId=f3ee71a22eaa47608f71479976bda74e>.

17. “Hear Him,” Media Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed June 10, 2024, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media/collection/hear-him?lang=eng>.

18. “From 1965 to 1975 alone, the LDS organized seven conferences devoted to exposing the threat of rock music because they considered its loud noise harmful to the spiritual body,” Amanda Beardsley, “The Female Absorption Coefficient: The Miniskirt Study, Gender, and Latter-day Saint Architectural Acoustics,” *Technology and Culture* 62, no. 3 (July 2021): 664.

practical.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, Church buildings are designed to dampen noise that could drown out the whisperings of the Spirit.

While such notions of quiet piety might seem natural, they are not, even within the Christian tradition. In a work examining the soundscape of early America, Leigh Eric Schmidt surveys rambunctious Christians whom he calls “sound Christians.”<sup>20</sup> Among these were noisy Evangelicals of the early American republic, who worshiped in a manner that was anything but conducive to hearing a still, small voice. Furthermore, the famous cathedral Hagia Sophia, constructed in the sixth century, is renowned for its unparalleled reverberation.<sup>21</sup> Designed by architects known for producing acoustic “special effects”—including replicating the sound of thunder—the enormous cathedral was constructed with marble and other hard surfaces that reflect sound, making Hagia Sophia likely the most reverberant building in the ancient world.<sup>22</sup> One effect of this reverberation is that it blurs semantic speech, swallowing up individual syllables in the resonance of the church.<sup>23</sup> Especially when hymns are sung, the cathedral’s reverberation “relativizes time” as reverberated sounds collide or harmonize with newly sung pitches, creating the impression of endless omnipresence.<sup>24</sup> In an edifice built to honor the eternal and “uncontainable” divine wisdom,<sup>25</sup> as one early observer of the cathedral noted, the seemingly endless reverberation conveys the greatness of God through its unparalleled sound.<sup>26</sup> In fact,

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19. Franklin Y. Gates, “Hearing Is Believing: The Story of Architectural Acoustics,” *Improvement Era* 46, no. 3 (March 1943): 184. See also Beardsley, “Female Absorption Coefficient,” 666–68.

20. Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Harvard University Press, 2000), 38–77.

21. As one modern acoustician observes, “The audible presence of reverberation is the hallmark of Hagia Sophia.” Wiesław Woszczyk, “Acoustics of Hagia Sophia: A Scientific Approach to the Humanities and Sacred Space,” in *Aural Architecture in Byzantium: Music, Acoustics, and Ritual*, ed. Bissera V. Pentcheva (Routledge, 2018), 179.

22. Bissera V. Pentcheva, *Hagia Sophia: Sound, Space, and Spirit in Byzantium* (Penn State University Press, 2017), 113. See also Anthony Kaldellis, “The Making of Hagia Sophia and the Last Pagans of New Rome,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 347–66.

23. Pentcheva, *Hagia Sophia*, 73.

24. Pentcheva, *Hagia Sophia*, 100; Woszczyk, “Acoustics of Hagia Sophia,” 179.

25. *Kontakion for Hagia Sophia* 4: ἀχώρητος. See translation in Andrew Palmer, “The Inauguration Anthem of Hagia Sophia in Edessa: A New Edition and Translation with Historical and Architectural Notes and a Comparison with a Contemporary Constantinopolitan Kontakion,” *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 12 (1988): 117–68, especially 140–48.

26. Bissera V. Pentcheva and Jonathan S. Abel, “Icons of Sound: Auralizing the Lost Voice of Hagia Sophia,” *Speculum* 92, no. S1 (October 2017): S352–56.





FIGURE 1. Interior view of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul from the balcony. Tinted lithograph with hand-coloring from a series of twenty-five lithographs by Louis Haghe after Gaspard Fossati, published in 1825 with title “Aya Sofia, Constantinople, as recently restored by order of H.M. the sultan Abdvl-Medjid.” © The Trustees of the British Museum, released as CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 (original in public domain), lightened.

one sixth-century writer likens the cathedral to Solomon's temple but argues that the cathedral is superior to the ancient temple largely due to its grander sound.<sup>27</sup>

This type of resonant worship is foreign to Latter-day Saints, who are accustomed to straining to hear the whisperings of the Spirit. But like medieval worshippers at Hagia Sophia, the auditory metaphor of a soft voice leads members of the Church to place inordinate stress on acoustics (though in the opposite direction). Compare norms of sound control in the Church to other sensory parameters. No regulation about vision exists, for instance. Is there ever a concern that the fluorescent lights are too bright in a church building, preventing a person from "seeing" what the Spirit has to show? Is this perhaps because contemporary members of the Church almost never conceptualize the Spirit as something to be "seen" or "watched"? Similarly, are Latter-day Saints ever concerned with diminishing the aromas of a church building, so the Spirit can be properly smelled? These questions seem absurd, but we will see that such sensory preferences are particular to our culture's "sensory textures."<sup>28</sup>

To better understand our sensory preferences, we must explore our past. One could trace the Latter-day Saint preoccupation with "hearing" the Spirit to the Protestant milieu in which the Church emerged. Protestants of the sixteenth century equated the sensory-rich mass of traditional Christianity with the "flesh" of the Old Testament, and they identified the simple

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27. Brian Croke, "Justinian, Theodora, and the Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 60 (2006): 57. Hagia Sophia's sonority surpassed the great edifices of the past, according to the *Kontakion for Hagia Sophia*. The *Kontakion* culminates with an emphasis on the sonic transcendence of the great church, dedicating five of its last six verses (vv. 13–17) to Hagia Sophia's sonic elements. In these verses, the *Kontakion* remarks that Solomon's temple was inaugurated with similar impressive sonority: with "sacrifices [and] in hymns, [the whole people of Israel solemnized] the inauguration" of the temple; at this joyous occasion, "the sound of musical instruments accompanied the odes-[with] a many-voiced harmony" (12–13). However, the inauguration of Hagia Sophia transcended Solomon's temple (14) due to its sonic superiority (16). Rather than being a place where instruments rang out, Hagia Sophia was home to "the voice [of joyfulness] and salvation and the sound of those making festival in the Spirit, a sound composed in human souls by God." Such a place was "known to bear the impression of the liturgy of those on high" (17). By reflecting the celestial liturgy, Hagia Sophia occupied a privileged position vis-à-vis Solomon's temple, or any other terrestrial place. And it is important to note that the *Kontakion* frames this superiority in the context of sound. Hagia Sophia was on a higher sonic plane than Solomon's temple; it was a *metaxu*, or bridge, between celestial and terrestrial sonority. Palmer, "Inauguration Anthem of Hagia Sophia," 140–48.

28. Mark M. Smith, "Making Sense of Social History," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (Autumn 2003): 165–86.



word with the pure Christianity of the New Testament.<sup>29</sup> In other words, they preferred the simplicity of the written or spoken word to the multi-sensory tradition of “bells and smells.”<sup>30</sup> This sensory preference, which emerged with the Reformation, transformed Christian piety in a rapid fashion.<sup>31</sup> For example, the visual presentation of the Eucharist, which was the focal point of the medieval mass for centuries, lost preeminence in the early sixteenth century. As one scholar points out, while worshippers in 1515 wanted to “see” the Eucharist host, worshippers in 1525 wanted to “hear the plain word of God.”<sup>32</sup> Such a dramatic fluctuation in religious sensibility certainly reverberated in the metaphorical realm. As hearing the word became the dominant medium of worship, hearing the Spirit became the dominant metaphor for perceiving divinity in many circles. Thus, one could plausibly argue that Latter-day Saint preferences for auditory spiritual metaphors stem from this Protestant cultural transformation.

However, Joseph Smith throws a wrench into this simple equation. In a recent monograph, Mason Allred traces a narrative of visual piety from Joseph Smith's First Vision through the first two decades of the restored Church's existence. Joseph's numerous visitations from Moroni—more than twenty in number<sup>33</sup>—represent a visual experience that Allred describes as “not only repetitious but repeatable.”<sup>34</sup> In addition to the three witnesses of the Book of Mormon, scores of others—including Mary Whitmer, Zera Pulsipher, and Oliver Granger—testified of seeing angels or other celestial phenomena, essentially “repeating” Smith's visual experience.<sup>35</sup> Like Joseph the Seer, Saints were invited

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29. Jacob M. Baum, *Reformation of the Senses: The Paradox of Religious Belief and Practice in Germany* (University of Illinois Press, 2019), 108–9.

30. Chris Matthews, *Tip and the Gipper: When Politics Worked* (Simon and Schuster, 2013), 330.

31. While sensory scholarship has cautioned against accepting uncritical binary oppositions of “more” or “less” sensual cultures, a definitive shift in sensory preferences certainly occurred during the Protestant Reformation. Smith, “Making Sense,” 165–86; Baum, *Reformation of the Senses*, 5.

32. Peter Blickle, “Die Reformation vor dem Hintergrund von Kommunalisierung und Christianisierung: Eine Skizze,” in *Kommunalisierung und Christianisierung: Voraussetzungen und Folgen der Reformation 1400–1600*, ed. Peter Blickle and Johannes Kiu-nisch (Duncker und Humblot, 1989), 24, author's translation.

33. H. Doni Peterson, “Moroni—Joseph Smith's Tutor,” *Ensign* 22, no. 1 (January 1992): 22–29.

34. Mason Kamana Allred, *Seeing Things: Technologies of Vision and the Making of Mormonism* (University of North Carolina Press, 2023), 37.

35. Allred, *Seeing Things*, 37–39. For more, see Trevan G. Hatch, *Visions, Manifestations, and Miracles of the Restoration* (Granite, 2008).

to see spiritual phenomena.<sup>36</sup> In fact, Allred identifies a key difference between scriptural reading practices of Latter-day Saints and their Christian neighbors in the 1830s and 1840s: “Where Evangelical print culture . . . was a sustained attempt to use the Word to transform the world,” early Latter-day Saint scriptural practice endeavored “to see *through* the word into the spiritual realm that was material and ever present.”<sup>37</sup> For Latter-day Saints, scripture functioned like the seer stone, offering views of spiritual reality beyond the text. This notion of looking at scripture and seeing something yonder—what Allred describes as “becoming a visionary observer by turning natural vision into spiritual vision”—was a harbinger for realities in the hereafter.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Joseph Smith taught that all exalted residents of the celestial kingdom would one day possess a white stone, or “Urim and Thummim,” wherein they would see all things.<sup>39</sup>

Since Joseph’s day, however, the Church has experienced a shifting sensorium. Despite the marked visibility of the Restoration—not only the First Vision but the entire visionary mission of the latter-day Seer—twenty-first century Saints typically focus on the auditory command uttered in the First Vision, “Hear Him.” Thus, rather than underscoring the invitation for all to be seers like the Seer, the contemporary Church invites all to be hearers. What caused this sensory transformation? An adequate answer to this question would require extended analysis and is beyond the scope of this article. But one component could be the misuse of spiritual sight in the early restored Church. For example, Hiram Page, one of the eight witnesses of the gold plates, required correction of his visionary powers when he began seeing problematic visions in a seer stone.<sup>40</sup> Ultimately, misguided spiritual viewing like Page’s led Joseph Smith to feel the need to delineate true visions from counterfeit ones.<sup>41</sup> Apparently, seeing spiritual truths in the early Church was just as difficult as hearing the still, small voice is for many in the modern Church.

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36. Nonetheless, sound was still prominent. Harris and McMurray explain, “From the very first moment, Mormonism has been produced *through* sound while simultaneously theorizing *about* its relationship to sound.” Sharon J. Harris and Peter McMurray, “Sounding Mormonism,” *Mormon Studies Review* 5 (2018): 34, emphasis original.

37. Allred, *Seeing Things*, 29, emphasis original.

38. Allred, *Seeing Things*, 18.

39. David W. Grua and others, eds., *Documents, Volume 12: March–July 1843*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2021), 141; Allred, *Seeing Things*, 44.

40. See discussion in Allred, *Seeing Things*, 41.

41. See Doctrine and Covenants 129; Allred, *Seeing Things*, 42–43.

To be clear, this discussion of shifting senses is not a call for the Church to return to visual-based spirituality. Any historian of the senses recognizes that sensoria—both physical and spiritual—change over time. This is to be expected. Modern prophets, who we sustain ironically as “seers,” have invited the world to “hear” God, as audition is the primary conceptual metaphor for contemporary spirituality in the Church. Nonetheless, members of the Church would do well to recognize that the discourse of spiritual hearing was not always dominant.

Throughout history, God has communicated with people via different spiritual media. Nephi teaches this principle when he asserts that God “speaketh unto [humankind] according to their language, unto their understanding” (2 Ne. 31:3). Commenting on this notion, Mark Alan Wright observes that “language is not limited to the words we use” but also “entails signs, symbols, and bodily gestures that are imbued with meaning by the cultures that produced them.”<sup>42</sup> I would also add that “language” includes a culture’s sensorium. And just as we should learn new grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation when we wish to understand a foreign tongue, we should also learn the sensory realities of other cultures when we wish to understand their spirituality. If we impose our sensorium—and especially our spiritual metaphors—on others, we risk elevating our “blindness or dumbness to a universal rule of perception,” to use Roland Barthes’s expression.<sup>43</sup> In other words, we fail to recognize that our spiritual metaphors are not normative for all human spirituality, and we essentially limit God’s communicative power. However, by interrogating the sensory realities of others, we can better understand spiritual communication across time and space.

## Synesthesia of Scripture

Ancient Jews inhabited a different sensorium than we do, and learning about their sensory notions can be challenging. Researchers of ancient Jewish senses have limited data, as ancient Hebrew has no verbal category that parallels the modern term “sense” or “sensorium,” and no extant Hebrew writing overtly theorizes about the senses.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless,

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42. Mark Alan Wright, “‘According to Their Language, unto Their Understanding’: The Cultural Context of Hierophanies and Theophanies in Latter-day Saint Canon,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 3 (2011): 51–52.

43. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (Cape, 1972), 34.

44. Yael Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture: Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible* (T&T Clark, 2012), 66–67.

researchers can glean an ancient Jewish sensorium based on the linguistic associative patterns in the Old Testament. Employing this methodology, one study identifies seven different senses among ancient Jews: sight, hearing, kinaesthesia, speech, taste, touch, and smell.<sup>45</sup>

Scholars of the Old Testament have traditionally understood ancient Jewish culture as one that privileged hearing over all other senses, including vision. This preference for the auditory is particularly evident in accounts of perceiving the divine.<sup>46</sup> Deuteronomy, for instance, preaches an audiocentric God who is encountered sonically rather than visually (see Deut. 4:12).<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, prophetic books include a large “number of verbal oracles which attest no visual component.”<sup>48</sup> And when visions do occur, they are often reliant on auditory explanations (for example, Zech. 4; Dan. 10–12). Thus, ancient Hebrew revelation was, according to the traditional scholarly narrative, primarily an acoustic phenomenon.

But recent scholarship challenges this notion, arguing that sight was the preeminent sense in the ancient Jewish sensorium.<sup>49</sup> Simply put, according to one recent study, “sight leads to knowledge” in the Hebrew tradition.<sup>50</sup> A number of biblical passages pair the verb “to see” with “to

45. Avrahami, *Senses of Scripture*, 65–112.

46. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Biblisch-theologische Aufsätze* (Neukirchener Verlag, 1972), 84–101.

47. Stephen Geller, *Sacred Enigmas: Literary Religion in the Hebrew Bible* (Routledge, 1996), 30–61; Andrei Orlov, *The Glory of the Invisible God: Two Powers in Heaven Traditions and Early Christology*, Jewish and Christian Texts in Context and Related Studies (T&T Clark, 2019), 39–45.

48. George Savran, “Seeing is Believing: On the Relative Priority of Visual and Verbal Perception of the Divine,” *Biblical Interpretation* 17, no. 3 (2009): 323 n. 7.

49. On sight as the privileged sense, see Avrahami, *Senses of Scripture*, 3, 223–76; Michael Carasik, *Theologies of the Mind in Biblical Israel*, Studies in Biblical Literature, vol. 85 (Peter Lang, 2006), 32–43; Cain, *Mirrors of the Divine*, 34–39; Talia Sutskov-Stadler, *Sight and Insight in Genesis: A Semantic Study* (Sheffield Phoenix, 2013); Patrick Hunt, “Sensory Images in Song of Songs 1:12–2:16,” in “Dort ziehen Schiffe dahin . . .”: *Collected Communications to the XIVth Congress of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament*, ed. Matthias Augustin and Klaus-Dietrich Schunck (Peter Lang, 1996), 69–78. Wilson notes, “At times, visually perceiving the divine is the preferable mode over hearing, and even texts that elevate the import of hearing, such as Deuteronomy, can suggest that seeing God is an ideal.” Brittany Wilson, “Seeing Divine Speech: Sensory Intersections in Luke’s Birth Narrative and Beyond,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 42, no. 3 (2020): 253. By contrast, Malul suggests the sense of touch, taste, and smell are part of the “multi-sensorial” process of knowing in the Hebrew Bible. Meir Malul, *Knowledge, Control and Sex: Studies in Biblical Thought, Culture and Worldview* (Archaeological Center, 2002), 125–50.

50. Avrahami, *Senses of Scripture*, 238.

know,” exhibiting close connection between the two.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, proof of God’s miracles are attested in the visual arena, and divine reality is visually perceived by prophetic “seers.”<sup>52</sup> “Seeing God” is also central in cultic ritual, as “viewing” Yahweh is the “preeminent image for the experience of God in the temple.”<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, without divine aid, limited human vision results in error and madness in the Old Testament.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, the hallmark of divine punishment is blindness, which is directly associated with lack of knowledge and understanding.<sup>55</sup> Drawing on this tradition of visual knowledge, several Second Temple and rabbinic writers hypothesize that the name “Israel” (יִשְׂרָאֵל) stems from the Hebrew verb “to see” (רָאָה), rendering the Jewish people “a nation of lookers.”<sup>56</sup> And as one study demonstrates, rabbinic writers of late antiquity sought to establish themselves as the ultimate arbiters of vision; rabbis taught that only those who looked on the radiant face of a righteous rabbi could receive Torah knowledge.<sup>57</sup>

Despite this newly recognized Jewish ocularcentrism, Latter-day Saints typically do not focus on the visual when they discuss spiritual communication in the Old Testament. Instead, they refer to the soft-spoken Holy Ghost in 1 Kings 19, in which Elijah journeys to Mount Horeb (Sinai), the place where Moses received the Ten Commandments. There, Elijah recognizes messages from God not in the traditional signs of theophany associated with the holy mountain—fire, “great wind,” and earthquake—but in a voice that is either soft or silent, translated in the

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51. Avrahami, *Senses of Scripture*, 240–48. Frisch has demonstrated that narratives surrounding Saul tend to employ the verb “to hear” (שָׁמַע), whereas stories about David typically use the verb “to see” (רָאָה). This literary distinction favors David over Saul; David is a mighty seer, whereas Saul is a mere hearer. Amos Frisch, “r’h and šm’ as a Pair of Leading Words,” *World Congress of Jewish Studies* 12 (1997): 89–98.

52. Avrahami, *Senses of Scripture*, 238–48, 266–69. Elisha, for instance, demonstrates his prophetic prowess when he “sees” heavenly hosts who are protecting him against the bellicose king of Syria. 2 Kings 6:14–17.

53. Mark S. Smith, “The Psalms as a Book for Pilgrims,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 46, no. 2 (1992): 62. See also Mark S. Smith, “‘Seeing God’ in the Psalms: The Background to the Beatific Vision in the Hebrew Bible,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (April 1988): 171–83; Simeon Chavel, “The Face of God and the Etiquette of Eye-Contact: Visitation, Pilgrimage, and Prophetic Vision in Ancient Israelite and Early Jewish Imagination,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 19 (2012): 1–55.

54. Cain, *Mirrors of the Divine*, 38; Avrahami, *Senses of Scripture*, 265–66.

55. Avrahami, *Senses of Scripture*, 197, 219.

56. Chavel, “Face of God,” 51–53.

57. Rachel Neis, *The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture: Jewish Ways of Seeing in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 18.

King James as a “still small voice.”<sup>58</sup> This depiction of God is quite rare in the Hebrew Bible, however. As one scholar notes, this passage is “almost alone” in its portrayal of God as “accessible to neither the eye nor the ear but evident to an inward sense that can hear silence.”<sup>59</sup> Despite Latter-day Saint preference for this unique passage, one can imagine worshippers at Hagia Sophia gravitating more toward biblical passages depicting the theophanic hubbub associated with Moses receiving the law at Sinai (for example, Judg. 5:4–5; Ps. 18; Ps. 29). For them, the thundery manifestation of the divine—who spoke with thunder and a remarkably resonant trumpet—resonated with their own experiences (Ex. 19:16–19).

While Latter-day Saints often reference Elijah’s experience with the still, small voice, a different sensory notion prevails in scriptural accounts of God communicating with ancient Israelites: synesthesia, which is defined as the convergence of sensory faculties or when “the senses touch one other.”<sup>60</sup> Sensory scholars typically distinguish two types of synesthesia. The first is a neuropsychological phenomenon, wherein “a stimulus in one sensory modality triggers an automatic, instantaneous, consistent response in another modality (e.g., sound evokes color) or in a different aspect of the same modality (e.g., black text evokes color).”<sup>61</sup> The second is verbal synesthesia that joins “*terms* derived from the *vocabularies* of the various sensory domains,” such as a “loud perfume.”<sup>62</sup> The Old Testament employs both of these forms of synesthesia, typically when it describes a vivid experience with divinity. As we shall see, God was known to evoke the neuropsychological phenomenon of blurring sensory modalities (seeing words, and so on). This notion likely inspired the broader conceptual metaphor of verbal synesthesia that pervades written accounts of divinity.<sup>63</sup> Thus, while

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58. 1 Kings 19:12, קוֹל דְּמָמָה רַחֵק. Translators often render this phrase as “gentle breeze” or “sound of sheer silence.” The Septuagint renders it as a the “sound of a gentle breeze” (φωνή αἰῶρας λεπτής).

59. Benjamin D. Sommer, “Revelation at Sinai in the Hebrew Bible and in Jewish Theology,” *Journal of Religion* 79, no. 3 (1999): 443. Though also see Job 4:16.

60. Sean Alexander Gurd, *Dissonance: Auditory Aesthetics in Ancient Greece* (Fordham University Press, 2016), 84.

61. Reuven Tsur, “Issues in Literary Synaesthesia,” *Style* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 30.

62. Tsur, “Issues,” 30, 39, emphasis original.

63. Consider, for example, Psalm 19, which employs verbal synesthesia. In this Psalm, vocal terminology conveys visual ideas and vice versa, as the text asserts that the *visible* sky above *audibly* “declare[s] the glory of God” and “pours out speech day by day” (vv. 2–3, author’s translation). Conversely, according to the Psalm, “The [audible] commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes” (v. 8, author’s translation). In

contemporary Latter-day Saints operate within the conceptual metaphor of spiritual hearing, ancient Jews operated within the conceptual metaphor of divinely inspired synesthesia.

The emphasis on synesthesia does not mean, however, that sensory mingling was the only conceptual metaphor for divine communication. As discussed above, scholars debate the degree to which Jews operated within conceptual metaphors that were primarily auditory or primarily visual. Nonetheless, synesthesia is a paradigm for divine communication that is prevalent not only in the Old Testament but also in the Book of Mormon, New Testament, and other early Christian and Jewish sources, as we will see below.<sup>64</sup> Divine presence was often recognizable due to its sensual alterity.

The ancient emphasis on synesthesia should not be surprising, as the phenomenon is relatively common in descriptions of heavenly encounters across an array of religious traditions. Broadly speaking, the merger of sensory perception underscores the convergence of human and divine. In the *Symposium*, for instance, Plato describes the process of approaching pure, divine beauty in its totality. The penultimate step before ascending to this transcendent experience is synesthesia, where sensory experiences are unified.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, in the medieval Christian liturgy, sensory commingling serves to “transfigure at once the things perceived, and the subject perceiving them, and to unite them through the ‘immutation’ of the senses which conforms them to, rather than extrinsically representing, the [divine] objects of perception.”<sup>66</sup> In other words, synesthesia represents transformation and ultimately union with God.<sup>67</sup>

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this Psalm, the vocal and the visual switch roles and ultimately work together to form a complete revelation of God. Sheri L. Klouda, “The Dialectical Interplay of Seeing and Hearing in Psalm 19 and Its Connection to Wisdom,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 10, no. 2 (2000): 181–95.

64. For synesthesia in the ancient world, see especially Shane Butler and Alex Purves, eds., *Synaesthesia and the Ancient Senses*, *The Senses in Antiquity* (Acumen, 2013).

65. Ralph Rosen, “Plato, Beauty and ‘Philosophical Synaesthesia,’” in *Synaesthesia and the Ancient Senses*, 89–102.

66. Catherine Pickstock, “Spiritual Perception and Liturgy,” in *Perceiving Things Divine: Towards a Constructive Account of Spiritual Perception*, ed. Frederick D. Aquino and Paul L. Gavrilyuk (Oxford University Press, 2022), 121–22.

67. Speaking of epiphanies in the Greco-Roman world, Verity Platt observes, “Ritual invocations of divine presence frame climactic moments of visual revelation synaesthetically, combining the aromas produced by incense and burning offerings with the sonic effects of vocal or musical performance and tactile engagement with the paraphernalia of cult (not to mention the gustatory aspects of sacrificial feasting).” Verity Platt, “Sight



## Old Testament Synesthesia: Seeing Smells and Sounds

In the Old Testament, synesthesia very often involves the combination of vision and other senses.<sup>68</sup> In these instances, the merger of sensory modalities indicates divine presence and confirms the execution of God's will. Genesis 27, for example, recounts a very sensory story of birthright inheritance.<sup>69</sup> Isaac, whose "eyes were so dim that he could not see" (Gen. 27:1), tells his eldest son, Esau, to go hunt game and prepare "tasty" food for him to eat before he blesses the potential heir with a ritual of inheritance (Gen. 27:4).<sup>70</sup> Overhearing this, Rebekah hatches a plan with Esau's younger brother Jacob for him to deceptively take the place of his older brother. But Jacob is concerned with touch—what if Isaac feels his smooth skin that doesn't resemble Esau's hairy body? Assuaging his concerns, Rebekah cooks tasty food with Jacob for his father, dresses the boy in Esau's clothes, and places the skins of goats on his hands and neck. When Jacob approaches his father and claims to be Esau, inquisitive Isaac wonders how his son has the voice of Jacob but the hands of Esau. Nonetheless, Isaac eats the meal prepared for him and asks Jacob to come close to kiss him. It is at this suspenseful moment when synesthesia confirms Jacob's birthright. So far, the story has incorporated all the Hebrew senses except smell—sight (or lack thereof, blindness), hearing, kinaesthesia (going out to hunt), speech, taste, and touch. When Jacob comes near his father, however, Isaac's doubts are put to rest as he smells the garments of his son—this is the divinely ordained heir. The patriarch exclaims: "See, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed."<sup>71</sup> Blind Isaac ironically now knows, or "sees," that the smell of Jacob's clothing has the aroma of a blessed field.<sup>72</sup> In this case, the sense of smell confirms true birthright and functions like authorizing vision.

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and the Gods: On the Desire to See Naked Nymphs," in *Sight and the Ancient Senses*, ed. Michael Squire (Routledge, 2016), 169.

68. The Hebrew Bible also often blurs the senses of hearing and sight. Avrahami, *Senses of Scripture*, 69–74.

69. On the sensory overload in this story, see Sutskovier-Stadler, *Sight and Insight*, 116–18.

70. Author's translation. The word "tasty" (מִטְעָמִים) is a lexeme based on the word "to taste" (טָעַם).

71. Gen 27:27, רָאָה רִיחַ בְּנֵי קְרִיחַ שְׂדֵה אֲשֶׁר בָּרַכְוּ יְהוָה, author's translation.

72. See also Exodus 5:21, where the Israelites complain to Moses that he "made us stink in the eyes of Pharaoh" (הִכְבֵּאֲשָׁמָם אֶת־עֵינֵי פַרְעֹה), author's translation.

Interestingly, several rabbinic commentaries on this text compare the scent of Jacob to other sacred fragrances. According to one rabbinic opinion, recorded between AD 300 and 500, "When our patriarch Jacob entered to his father, the Garden of Eden entered with him."<sup>73</sup> That is, Isaac smelled the pungent aromas of Eden in Jacob's garment, aromas that were known in ancient Jewish sources to have inordinate power. In fact, in first-century versions of the *Life of Adam and Eve*, the only items that Adam takes from the Garden of Eden upon his expulsion are spices and aromatic plants. Thus, these fragrances become the "one element in the inhabited world that had its direct source in Eden's splendor."<sup>74</sup> By smelling Eden, Jacob links heaven and earth, the human and the divine.

Another rabbinic opinion connects Jacob's clothes to a different holy scent. According to some late ancient rabbis, the smell of Jacob prefigured the fragrant incense that would burn in the Israelite temple centuries in the future.<sup>75</sup> One rabbinic work even claims that God let Isaac see the future temple of Israel, with its pungent incense, when he smelled the garment of his blessed son.<sup>76</sup> Ultimately, regardless of what Isaac smelled and saw in Jacob's clothes, divine favor was sanctioned in synesthetic sight and smell.<sup>77</sup>

73. Bereshit Rabbah 65:22, ר' עקיבא אצל אביו נקנסה עמו גן עדן, author's translation. Bereshit Rabbah is a Jewish commentary on the book of Genesis.

74. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination*, (University of California Press, 2015), 48–53. Divine odor is explicitly linked to the Garden of Eden in 1 *Enoch* and the *Life of Adam and Eve*. The text of 1 *Enoch* explains that the remarkable fragrances of the trees in the Garden of Eden were the original source of life and will be again at the end of time. In first-century versions of the *Life of Adam and Eve*, Eden is saturated with divine fragrance, the same fragrance which cloaks the cherubim who worship God in heaven. After being told to leave the Garden, Adam begs God to let him "take fragrance from paradise" (51). God relents, so Adam takes spices and aromatic plants, which were the one element on earth of heavenly origin. Harvey explains, "In their fragrances, the spices of paradise joined heaven and earth, mortality and immortality, alienation and reconciliation, human and divine" (52).

75. See discussion in Benjamin Kedar-Kopfstein, "Synästhesien im biblischen Alt-hebräisch in Übersetzung und Auslegung," *Zeitschrift für Althebraistik* 1 (1988): 47–60, especially 55.

76. Bereshit Rabbah 65:23.

77. Many ancient Jews saw continuity between Eden and the Temple. See Alex Douglas, "The Garden of Eden, the Ancient Temple, and Receiving a New Name," in *Ascending the Mountain of the Lord: Temple, Praise, and Worship in the Old Testament* ed. David R. Seely, Jeffrey R. Chadwick, and Matthew J. Grey, 42nd Annual Brigham Young University Sidney B. Sperry Symposium (Deseret Book, 2013), 36–48.

Throughout the Old Testament, synesthesia is a hallmark of biblical theophanies. In these accounts of divine encounters, hearing and seeing typically complement one another.<sup>78</sup> Ezekiel 43:1–5, for instance, employs visual and verbal descriptions of the “glory” of God; the presence of the almighty Jehovah is like the rising sun from the east combined with the sounds of many waters. Speaking of Ezekiel’s synesthetic description, Mark Smith observes, “By combining two types of natural phenomena, this passage may be suggesting that the nature of God is so great that it incorporates aspects of both types. It may also indicate that God’s appearance was considered so great that it could not be identified easily with, or reduced to, one natural phenomenon. In effect, God is above the language of natural phenomena; God is truly ‘super-natural.’”<sup>79</sup> Thus, by transcending one sensory mode, God demonstrates that he is beyond terrestrial perception.

God’s supernatural nature is also revealed at Sinai, which is the most famous instance of synesthesia in the Old Testament. When Moses is on the mount receiving the Ten Commandments, “all the people see the voices” of thunder that God articulates.<sup>80</sup> Enigmatically, God’s speech is something to see, not hear. This defining moment for the people of Israel—the divine bestowal of their law that sets the precedent for all subsequent relations with God to a large degree—occurs in a mysterious, synesthetic fashion of visible speech.

For millennia, this passage has inspired Jewish interpreters to theorize about the nature of God’s visible voice.<sup>81</sup> For example, according to one ancient Jew named Philo of Alexandria (around 20 BC–AD 50), God’s words at Sinai are words of light, not sound. Moses sees them; he does not hear them.<sup>82</sup> On the contrary, the idolatrous golden calf represents the inferior sense of hearing (as it was made from the golden

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78. Savran, “Seeing Is Believing,” 320–61. According to Savran, vision and audition are the primary modes of divine communication found in the Bible. See also Malul, *Knowledge, Control, and Sex*, 144–51.

79. Smith, “Seeing God,” 179.

80. Exodus 20:15, כָּל־הָעָם רָאוּ אֶת־קוֹלֵי הָאֵשׁ. Exodus 20:18, LXX, καὶ πᾶς ὁ λαὸς ἑώρα τὴν φωνήν, author’s translation.

81. See especially Sommer, “Revelation at Sinai,” 422–51; Elliot R. Wolfson, “The Hermeneutics of Visionary Experience: Revelation and Interpretation in the *Zohar*,” *Religion* 18, no. 4 (October 1988): 313; Michael Carasik, “To See a Sound: A Deuteronomic Rereading of Exodus 20:15,” *Prooftexts* 19, no. 3 (September 1999): 257–65; Stephen A. Geller, “Fiery Wisdom: Logos and Lexis in Deuteronomy 4,” *Prooftexts* 14, no. 2 (May 1994): 103–39.

82. Philo, *De decalogo* 46–47 (LCL 320:28–30).

earrings of the Israelites).<sup>83</sup> Thus, God is experienced in the visual realm.<sup>84</sup> Significantly, however, according to Philo, the divine and the human merge when God descends via the verbal to his prophets, who ascend via the visual. God speaks luminosity, and prophets experience synesthesia to symbolize the coming together of human and divine, the auditory and the visual.<sup>85</sup>

Jewish writers throughout the ages have similarly theorized about the Sinai revelation, though they have not found widespread agreement about the nature of this synesthetic encounter with divinity. A near contemporary of Philo, Rabbi Akiva (around AD 50–135), taught that the Israelites saw the fiery word extend from the mouth of God and strike the Ten Commandments onto the tablets. On the contrary, Rabbi Judah the Prince (around AD 135–217), argues that the notion of seeing the word of God refers to the Israelites' miraculous ability to immediately visualize and interpret the divine voice, which was originally auditory.<sup>86</sup> The medieval Jewish mystical work called the *Zohar* includes several other rabbinic opinions about the nature of the visible speech on Sinai, with each interpretation underscoring the transcendent nature of the synesthetic voice.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, one fifteenth-century rabbinical commentary on Exodus teaches that each word that God uttered at Sinai took on physical form and could be seen in the air as floating letters.<sup>88</sup> Ultimately, no matter how these Jewish readers interpreted the Exodus passage, they understood the revelation of God as something that occurred in a manner that differed from standard sensory experience. The synesthetic description of Sinai inspired these interpreters to conceptualize divine communication as otherworldly.

83. Philo, *De posteritate Caini* 165–167 (LCL 227:424–26).

84. The following description of Philo is a summary of David Chidester, *Word and Light: Seeing, Hearing, and Religious Discourse* (University of Illinois Press, 1992), 30–43.

85. In this experience, the visionary/luminous aspect of divine words always remain, however. See discussion in Chidester, *Word and Light*, 39–42.

86. For the arguments of Akiva and Judah, see Jacob Z. Lauterbach, ed., *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, 9th ed. (Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933), 2:266–67.

87. Rabbi Abba “suggests that the . . . voices of divine speech were embodied in the . . . darkness, cloud, and thick fog.” Rabbi Jose claims that the voices were “the potencies of God, which shone forth.” Rabbi Eleazar believes that “Sinai Israel had a vision of Shekhinah.” Wolfson, “Hermeneutics of Visionary Experience,” 313.

88. *Kli Yakar* commentary on Exodus 20:15:1. “We have to understand how they could see the sounds. . . . It sounds reasonable that each word the God spoke became palpable and tangible to the extent that it took on physical form and could be seen in the air as floating letters as if they were written in front of them.” Josh Fleet, trans., “Seeing Sound: Making Sense of Sinai,” *Sefaria*, May 21, 2019, <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/174978?lang=bi>.

## Book of Mormon Synesthesia: A Delicious Word, Tasting Light, and a Piercing Voice

Like many writers of the Old Testament, Nephi conceptualizes divine communication as a combination of the visual and verbal. He explains that while the “words of Christ will *tell* you all things what ye should do,” the Holy Ghost “will *show* unto you all things what ye should do” (2 Ne. 32:3, 5, emphasis added). Various figures in the Book of Mormon also resemble Old Testament writers in their descriptions of sight-based synesthesia. For instance, in 1 Nephi 8, Lehi is journeying in a “dark and dreary waste” (1 Ne. 8:4) when he sees a tree bearing fruit that is not only the sweetest that he has ever tasted but the whitest thing that he has ever



FIGURE 2. *Fruit of Life* by Megan Rieker, oil on canvas, 2017, by permission of the artist.

seen. When Nephi sees the same tree in a vision a few chapters later, he remarks that it exceeds “the whiteness of the driven snow” (1 Ne. 11:8). The fruit of this tree is so white that it is essentially light—this is at least how Alma the Younger interprets the vision. In his discourse on planting the seed of the tree of life in Alma 32, Alma compares the process of cultivating the growing tree to tasting its luminous fruit.<sup>89</sup> He asks, “After ye have tasted this light is your knowledge perfect?” (Alma 32:35). How can a person taste light? Normal sensory functions render this notion impossible. But the love of God, represented in the fruit, is otherworldly—it is perceived differently.

This notion of tasting light gains more significance when we consider that Alma’s discourse on growing the seed of the tree of life was originally in the same

89. Alma identifies the tree as the tree of life in Alma 32:40–42.

chapter as his rebuttal of the antichrist Korihor. Thus, as Grant Hardy argues, we should read these passages in light of one another.<sup>90</sup> Korihor is fundamentally ocularcentric, arguing that humans cannot know of things they cannot “see” (Alma 30:15). He denies traditions about God who “never has been seen or known,” unless Alma will “show” him a (presumably) visible sign.<sup>91</sup> Ironically, Alma conjures an auditory sign, striking the visually oriented Korihor dumb. While this ostentatious display silences Korihor in a flurry, the narrative does not provide a fleshed-out rebuttal of Korihor’s epistemology until Alma discourses on the seed of the tree of life a little while later. There, Alma explains that spiritual knowledge functions differently than Korihor’s visually oriented paradigm. Rather than the result of standard eyesight, sure knowledge, or “light,” is the product of eating the fruit that is “white above all that is white” (Alma 32:42). In other words, light and knowledge are the result of eating the metaphorical fruit, not seeing with the literal eye. This synesthesia of tasting light reinforces the notion that spiritual knowledge cannot be perceived the same way as physical knowledge.

The counterintuitive connection between tasting and seeing is prevalent in the Book of Mormon. In this regard, Nephite prophets echo the sentiments of the Psalmist, who states, “Taste and see how good the Lord is.”<sup>92</sup> In Alma 36, for instance, Alma tells his son Helaman how he came to know Christ, “not of the temporal but of the spiritual, not of the carnal mind but of God” (Alma 36:4). Then, outlining his conversion, Alma speaks of “the exceeding joy” which he “did taste,” as well as the many converts who also “have tasted as I have tasted, and have seen eye to eye as I have seen” (Alma 36:24, 26). Being “born of God” permitted Alma and his subsequent missionary converts to experience spiritual knowledge in the form of delicious vision. Similarly, King Benjamin and Mormon also draw on the discourse of spiritual taste to describe their

90. Alma 30–35 in the current chapter divisions originally comprised one chapter: Alma 16. Grant Hardy, *The Annotated Book of Mormon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 400.

91. See Alma 30:28, 43–45. Korihor plausibly used the word אֹת for “sign,” which bears visual connotations. See Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Clarendon Press, 1974), 16, s.v. “אֹת.” For more on a “sign” for knowledge, see Joseph Spencer, “Is Not This Real?” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (2019): 87–104, especially 95.

92. Author’s translation. Psalm 34:8–9, הִנֵּה, יְהוָה טוֹב וְרָאוּ כָּל-עַיְנַיִם. See also the account of Jonathan’s eyes being enlightened when he eats: 1 Samuel 14:24–30.

knowledge of divine truths.<sup>93</sup> Thus, just as the contemporary Church maintains the spiritual injunction to “Hear Him” from its founding story, the Nephites draw on the synesthetic combination of taste and light from their founding story: the famous account of the tree of life.

The climactic theophany of the Book of Mormon is also rich with synesthetic themes and resembles Old Testament revelations. In 3 Nephi 8, the most terrible storm in Nephite history announces the death of the Messiah. With thunder, lightning, and earthquakes, the tempest evokes the divine demonstration at Sinai. But 3 Nephi includes an even more overt reference to the events of the Exodus: a “thick darkness” comes upon the land so that all the inhabitants of the Nephite lands “*feel* the vapor of darkness” for three days (3 Ne. 8:20, emphasis added). While many readers explain this tangible darkness as the likely result of volcanic ash, it also recalls the ninth plague of Egypt where God curses the Egyptians with “darkness” so thick “it can be felt.”<sup>94</sup> Following this synesthetic darkness in Egypt, which lasts three days, the Lord slays the firstborn Egyptians, and the Israelites flee Egypt to Sinai, where they experience a synesthetic theophany and see the sound of God’s voice. Likewise, in 3 Nephi, the three-day tangible darkness comes in the wake of the death of the Firstborn Son, and the people subsequently experience a synesthetic theophany when Jesus appears. Just as the Israelites at Sinai had seen divine words, the Nephites see the Word.<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, these Nephite witnesses of Christ later testify that they “*saw and heard* Jesus speak” (3 Ne. 17:16–17, emphasis added), combining the visual and aural like the account of the famous theophany of Exodus. Clearly, Christ is the synesthetic “God of Israel,” the title he uses to introduce himself to the people of the Americas (3 Ne. 11:14).

Another central component of this Book of Mormon theophany is the voice that comes from heaven. In the darkness, the people hear a loud declaration that echoes “upon all the face of [the] land, crying” woes and repentance (3 Ne. 9:1). Then, about a year later, the people at

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93. King Benjamin follows the paradigm of the tree of life, whose fruit is the love of God, when he speaks of those who “have known of [God’s] goodness and tasted of his love” (Mosiah 4:11). Likewise, Mormon describes his younger self as someone who “tasted and knew of the goodness of Jesus” (Morm. 1:15). Clearly, taste, which is often connected to sight, is a primary sensory model for depicting spiritual experience in the Nephite record.

94. Exodus 10:21, רָאָה חֹשֶׁךְ, author’s translation.

95. While Jesus does not explicitly refer to himself as the Word (John 1:1), he describes himself with Johannine language in 3 Nephi 9:15–18.



the temple of Bountiful hear a “small voice” announcing the arrival of Christ (3 Ne. 11:3). Thus, like Sinai—where God’s thundery presence is experienced by liberated Israelites, and his still, small voice is heard by Elijah—the divine voice in the Book of Mormon resounds at opposite ends of the decibel scale. And when it announces the arrival of Christ in a quiet tone, the voice bears synesthetic properties. The people are physically affected by it— “[the voice] did pierce them that did hear to the center,” causing their frames to “quake” and their “hearts to burn” (3 Ne. 11:3). Furthermore, the Nephites and Lamanites are unable to understand the voice until they look “towards the sound thereof” (3 Ne. 11:5). Similar to Sinai, there is a synesthetic nature to the voice.<sup>96</sup>

### New Testament Synesthesia:

#### See the Word; Jesus Narrates the Father

Like the Book of Mormon and Old Testament, the New Testament often employs synesthetic descriptions for divine phenomena. It almost goes without saying that Christ’s incarnation represents an anomaly in history, as divinity “was made flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).<sup>97</sup> Even though there was “nothing [special] in his appearance that we should desire him” (Isa. 53:2, NIV), there was something unique, even synesthetic, about his presence. For instance, in a recent analysis of divine speech in Luke’s nativity account, Brittany Wilson notes the significance of seeing, not just hearing. “For Luke,” Wilson observes, “there is something important to ‘seeing’ divine speech.”<sup>98</sup> This sensory merger is evident in the shepherds’ reaction to the angelic annunciation of Christ’s birth: “Let us *see this word* which the Lord revealed to us.”<sup>99</sup> Like the

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96. Touch is also emphasized in this account. At his initial descent among the people, Jesus commands them to come forth and “feel” the nail prints in his hands and feet, that they “may know” who he is (3 Ne. 11:14). Only after they “did feel with their hands” did they “know of a surety” and “bear record” that this was the prophesied Christ (3 Ne. 11:15). While worldly-minded people like Korihor prized vision as the preeminent sense of knowledge, touch functions like truth-confirming eyesight here. In fact, Jesus himself explains that he came to the Nephites for them to “feel and see” that he is “the light” (3 Ne. 18:24–25). Just as the Nephites had felt the tangible, deathly darkness at the death of the Messiah, when Christ appears, they feel the wounds of the “light and the life of the world” (3 Ne. 9:18). While seeing might be believing, touching is the truth here.

97. Author’s translation.

98. Wilson, “Seeing Divine Speech,” 254.

99. Luke 2:15, emphasis added, ἰδωμεν τὸ ῥῆμα τοῦτο τὸ γεγονὸς δὲ ὁ κύριος ἐγνώρισεν ἡμῖν. While ῥῆμα can also mean “thing,” Wilson argues convincingly for rendering it as “word” here. Wilson, “Seeing Divine Speech,” 258–60.

Israelites who see the divine words at Sinai, the shepherds go to see the divine word recently spoken to them. This notion recalls the synesthetic statement of Jesus in Luke 8: “Watch how you listen.”<sup>100</sup>

A similar synesthetic description is found at the beginning of the Gospel of John. The fourth gospel is perhaps the most ocularcentric text in the New Testament. In this account, Christ is the “light of all humanity” who invites potential disciples to “come and see” where he dwells.<sup>101</sup> When Nathanael answers the call to see Jesus in John 1, the Lord informs him, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree” (John 1:48, NIV). Christ’s visionary power leads Nathanael to dub Jesus the “King of Israel.”<sup>102</sup> Potentially drawing on the tradition of Israel as a “nation of lookers,” Nathanael recognizes Jesus as the king of seers. But Christ overlooks this acclaim and promises Nathanael grander vistas than Christ himself just witnessed: “You will see greater things,” Jesus informs Nathanael. “You will see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”<sup>103</sup> Then, throughout the fourth gospel, the disciples see the incredible views promised by Jesus, including the Father himself in Christ. As Jesus states, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9, NIV). Christ is the ultimate theophany, revealing even the Father.

Despite this overtly visual witness, Christ inspired notions of synesthesia in John. The Gospel’s prologue (John 1:1–14) declares Jesus to be “the Word” (*Logos*), which is a common title in ancient Greek writings for the divine reason that orders the cosmos. As this Word, Christ espouses a visual, luminary function: he is the “true light that gives light to everyone” (John 1:9, NIV). At the same time, however, Christ also resonates acoustically with Jewish tradition; John links Christ the Word to the Genesis account of God speaking a word “in the beginning” (Gen. 1:1; John 1:1). In this regard, Jesus embodies both the visual and the verbal simultaneously. This amalgam is particularly evident in the Johannine reference to Sinai. After outlining the wondrous sight of Christ incarnate—asserting “we viewed his glory”—John declares that “no one” had

100. Luke 8:18, βλέπετε οὖν πῶς ἀκούετε, author’s translation, emphasis added.

101. John 1:4, τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων; John 1:39, ἔρχεσθε καὶ ὄψεσθε, author’s translation.

102. John 1:49, ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, σὺ βασιλεὺς εἶ τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ, author’s translation.

103. John 1:50–51, NIV, μείζω τούτων ὅψῃ . . . ὄψεσθε τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀνεφρότα καὶ τοὺς ἀγγέλους τοῦ θεοῦ ἀναβαίνοντας καὶ καταβαίνοντας ἐπὶ τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, author’s translation.

previously “ever seen God” (John 1:14, 18).<sup>104</sup> This statement is almost certainly a reference to Exodus 33:18–23, where Moses is allowed only a partial view of God’s “glory.”<sup>105</sup> John distinguishes this partial view from the unobstructed divine revelation embodied in Christ and his visible “glory.” That is, John implies what is explicitly proclaimed later in the Gospel: “Anyone who has seen [the Son] has seen the Father” (John 14:9, NIV). But, curiously, John’s prologue uses a verbal word to convey this visual reality. The Gospel explains that Jesus, the Word, “exegeted” or “narrated” the Father, employing the verb ἐξηγέομαι, which denotes the dictation of words in a narrative. Thus, the prologue—which is filled with optical and luminous depictions of the Word—concludes with an auditory descriptor. Similar to, though grander than, Sinai, Christ’s revelation is a synesthetic combination of sight and hearing.

After the death of Jesus, his post-Resurrection appearances likewise trigger synesthesia. On the road to Emmaus, for instance, Jesus interprets scripture to his disciples and causes their hearts to “burn,” linking an oral interpretation to a physical sensation.<sup>106</sup> Then, when Jesus breaks bread, he causes their eyes to be “opened,” connecting the tactile breaking of bread to the notion of vision.<sup>107</sup> His other post-Resurrection appearances are likewise overtly sensory, combining visual, tactile, auditory, and gustatory phenomena. Ultimately, the Gospels bookend Christ’s earthly life with synesthetic descriptions of his birth and Resurrection. Jesus is revealed by synesthesia.

## Conclusion

Ancient scripture is replete with synesthetic descriptions of divinity. Transcending the standard sensory perceptions of everyday life, divine communication occurs beyond the discrete, terrestrial senses. The faithful see divine words, smell the promises of God, and taste heavenly light. These notions pervade ancient sacred texts, as synesthesia constituted a primary conceptual metaphor of divine phenomena. Though these notions were “foolishness” to the “natural [hu]man,” spiritual communication was known to be *sui generis*, or “spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14, KJV). It defied the sensory modalities of everyday life.

104. Author’s translation.

105. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Hendrickson, 2003), 1:410–12.

106. Luke 24:32, Οὐχὶ ἡ καρδία ἡμῶν καιομένη ἦν ἐν ἡμῖν, author’s translation.

107. Luke 24:31, αὐτῶν δὲ διηνοιχθησαν οἱ ὀφθαλμοί, author’s translation.

While the contemporary Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints inhabits a conceptual metaphor of auditory spirituality, members would do well to recognize that this notion is specific to our era. Studying other spiritual languages, so to speak, can inform learners about divine communication generally. Perhaps, as we respond to the call to “Hear Him,” we can recognize that his messages come in a variety of forms, including synesthesia. With the ancient faithful, we can taste the light or see the words of his love.

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# Preserving History

## The Progression of Recordkeeping in the Church

*Wayne Crosby and W. Tyson Thorpe*

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have a variety of experiences with living the gospel and coming closer to Jesus Christ. Where people live, what age they are, and what their family situations are can all impact how they see God's hand in their lives, as can a multitude of other factors. For this reason, it is important for historians examining the lived experiences of Latter-day Saints to have a variety of records to draw on in their analyses and explorations. Thankfully, the keeping of histories in Church units has been an important part of the Church since its organization. But the format of these histories has changed over time and continues to change today as Church leaders determine the best way to convey information about local units. This article examines a new tool developed by the Church History Department that units can use to submit histories, the reasons for its implementation, and ways that local unit records can help historians reconstruct the past.

On the day The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was organized, the Lord commanded, "Behold, there shall be a record kept among you" (D&C 21:1). This simple command is the genesis of the Church's recordkeeping tradition that has endured for nearly two hundred years. Toward the end of 1831, the Lord provided further instructions regarding the recordkeeping methodology. He said, "And also, my servants who are abroad in the earth should send forth the accounts of their stewardships to the land of Zion" (D&C 69:5). As the Church grew, Joseph Smith wrote an epistle to the Church (later canonized as D&C 128) that

added recorders to local congregations, increasing recordkeeping efforts among the Saints.

From the beginning of the Church, capturing local records, minutes, and historical accounts was a priority for Church leaders. Church units were encouraged to keep minutes of meetings (sacrament meetings, quorum meetings, Relief Society meetings, and so forth) and submit them to Church headquarters. In addition to sending in meeting minutes, staff from the Church Historian's Office (the precursor to today's Church History Department) would travel the world and compile scrapbook-style local unit histories. Beginning in 1925 and continuing to 1984, the Church standardized reporting, including historical reports. These reports were collected quarterly, then annually, and were added to the local unit histories compiled by the Historian's Office. In 1978, because of the size of the Church, the practice of submitting minutes to Church headquarters was discontinued, and a new approach was implemented. From 1978 through 1983, stakes, districts, missions, wards, and branches submitted annual reports. Beginning in 1984, wards and branches were no longer asked to submit reports. Adjustments were made yet again in 2000, when wards began sending reports to their stakes, with branches following the same pattern. Stakes and districts would then forward reports from all their units to Church headquarters as a single annual history. Participation rates for annual histories from 2000 through 2007 ranged from 51 to 58 percent, and while rates began to climb in 2008, they have settled at about 66 percent in recent years.

These minutes, histories, and reports are an indispensable source for understanding the history of the Church. They provide insight into the experiences of everyday Latter-day Saints as they live their religion. They include details about youth activities, camps, service projects, and ministering efforts. They also provide a voice to all members and their experiences in the Church. The records come from around the world and are an excellent source of information about how Church programs operate on a local level.

Notwithstanding their value, annual histories had several weaknesses. For instance, sometimes leaders and unit historians did not know what to write about or who their audience was, and they wondered if anyone would ever read the histories. In fact, annual histories, once submitted to Church headquarters, were rarely seen by local members. Furthermore, feedback received by the department stated that the process for submitting an annual history was cumbersome, and leaders desired a method for sending in histories electronically.

## New Local Unit History Tool

To address some of the weaknesses of annual histories, in January 2024, the Church History Department launched the latest worldwide approach for keeping a local unit record. For most local units, the new unit history tool will replace the annual history approach implemented in 2000.

The new tool shifts the focus from writing a report once a year to writing stories as things happen throughout the year. Unit leaders are encouraged to write narratives that strengthen faith, build unity, and show efforts to live the gospel. An online story template guides local leaders through the process. The author is prompted to enter a title and the date or date range for the story. They can then add tags identifying the organizations (Primary, Young Women, and so forth) associated with the story. These tags can be used in the future to filter a search within the tool and the Church History Catalog. For instance, a person can filter a search to only include stories tagged with “Relief Society.” Authors can also tag unit members mentioned or people outside their unit in the story. After the tags, there is then a section for entering a summary of the story. Finally, the template allows the contributor to attach photographs or documents. Additional file formats, such as video, will be added in future releases.

Under this new system, authors consist of local members serving in specific callings or positions in a unit. There are approximately thirty positions that can author stories, such as a counselor in the Young Women program or the ward mission leader. Once a story is written, the author submits it for review through the unit history tool. A local unit leader (the ward clerk, ward history specialist, or a member of the bishopric) then reviews and approves the story. Once approved, stories are visible to current members of that unit through [Churchofjesuschrist.org](https://Churchofjesuschrist.org). The intent is for local units to publish stories throughout the year, thus eliminating the annual submission process. Reminders will be sent to units who have not published a story recently, encouraging them to contribute. The Church History Department will capture published stories for preservation without further action by the local unit.


## Connecting Members through Stories

From the launch of the unit history tool in mid-January 2024 to the end of July, units from 91 different countries have published 56,704 stories. The length and topics of these stories vary greatly. The online training for the tool encourages authors to create stories that reflect on, recognize, or



# Unit History

Results (165)Filter BySort By




23 July 2024

Summer Barbecue

Rebecca Baker, Alexander Vance

Ward




29 July 2024

Soccer with the Youth

Rebecca Baker, Tony Collins, Will Harms, Alexander Vance

Ward




14 August 2024

Mission Prep Activity

Alexander Vance

Ward



6 August 2024

Ministering Visits in July

Rebecca Baker, Alexander Vance

Ward

Members of a unit can view all published stories from the Unit History landing page.

Ward

Edit Story

SubmitPreviewSave and Close

Story Creation Steps

Please share an event or reflection that relates to the ward on a community or spiritual level. All changes are **automatically saved** every 30 seconds.

Title (Required)

A Wonderful Service Project in May

Start Date (Required)

05/14/2024

End Date (If Applicable)

mm/dd/yyyy

Organization(s)

+ Add Organizations

Summary (Required)

Paragraph

**B****I**U

People Mentioned in the Story

Photos (Optional)

JPGs only (max size: 50MB each)

File Upload

Documents (Optional)

PDFs only (max size: 50MB each)

PDF Upload

The tool provides a simple story template to help guide an author when writing a story.

capture important experiences or events. In turn, these stories can help strengthen the authors' own faith as well as the faith of those who read them. The training suggests topics such as

- the goodness of God,
- bringing people closer to Christ,
- temple or family-history work,
- missionary or ministering efforts,
- acts of service, and
- strengthening the youth.

Marc Haws, a high councilor in the Ontario Oregon Stake, authored a piece that illustrates the type of stories the Church hopes to capture:

On short notice, the Ontario Stake was asked to cut down a plum orchard (50 chainsaws and operators with 100 volunteers to stack branches). The forecast for Saturday was heavy rain. People were asking, "Given the forecast for rain, is the project still on?" The response from the orchard leaders was "Our forecast is faith."

At 8:00 am, windshield wipers were on high speed, but workers traveled to the orchard from Fruitland, New Plymouth and Ontario. At Pear Lane, it stopped raining. We had more than the assigned numbers, and we got 3 hours of valuable work done. Adults ran chainsaws, kids picked up plum wood rounds for "widow wood," and everyone pitched branches into windrows. When the last volunteers left the orchard at noon, a heavy bank of clouds was coming in above the Snake River, and it began raining hard again.

Lesson learned. . . . We need to stop second-guessing outcomes, have faith, and let the Lord work little miracles in our lives. This orchard provides food for people around the world. It is a big part of the Lord's work. Thanks to all who had such faith.<sup>1</sup>

The stake president, Eric Dahle, also published a story about this service project. Having multiple perspectives recorded increases the value and richness of the historical record. While President Dahle's story includes similar information, it focuses more on the miracles witnessed:

As I pulled up, I was met by both a visually amazing massive number of trees that had already been cut and the debris stacked and by the amazing sound of about 35 chainsaws all working at one time! And then I

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1. Marc Haws, February 5, 2024, Ontario Oregon Stake, Church History Library, Salt Lake City. Minor edits have been silently made.

saw the 100 plus people! A veritable beehive of activity was happening! People cutting trees, people stacking limbs, people stacking and hauling firewood! . . . And everyone was happy! There was a unity and a purpose that can only be found in meaningful service! . . . 25 acres of trees to be removed, at 300 trees per acre, totaling about 7,500 trees to be removed! So miracle #1—On short notice the faithful Saints of the stake answered the call and came out and drove in and happily worked. Miracle #2—While everywhere in the Treasure Valley it was raining, generally quite hard, all morning, when I arrived at the orchard, it was *not* raining. This miracle was witnessed by all who participated. Their windshield wipers had been going at full speed as they approached the orchard, only to find it not raining at the orchard. And the rain held off until the project ended, when it again began pouring rain. I saw people from all walks and stages of life there working. I saw an EMT cutting and a dentist stacking. I saw an engineer cutting and a whole group of young people clearing the debris. I saw men in their 80s working; I saw primary children doing the same. I saw multiple bishops and elders quorum presidents and high councilors rubbing shoulders, working alongside, the least in his kingdom. So miracle #3—The miracle of service, bringing Saints together, and losing yourself briefly, in something much larger than yourself! I am so grateful I had the privilege of witnessing these miracles. As I departed, I wiped a tear from my eye, a tear of gratitude to God for being able to have witnessed these miracles.<sup>2</sup>

Shared memories help connect members with each other and with future generations. Alma said that while recordkeeping may seem like a small and simple thing, “by small and simple things are great things brought to pass. . . . And the Lord God doth work by means to bring about his great and eternal purposes; . . . it has hitherto been wisdom in God that these things should be preserved; for behold, they have enlarged the memory of this people, yea, and convinced many of the error of their ways, and brought them to the knowledge of their God unto the salvation of their souls” (Alma 37:6–8).

Not every story needs to focus on a unit event. Narratives can also highlight personal experiences of unit members. Verônica Moretti, Young Women president in the Itapuã Ward, Salvador Brazil Imbuí Stake, provided one such story (in one of 29 languages currently accepted by the unit history tool).

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2. Eric Dahle, February 5, 2024, Ontario Oregon Stake, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, emphasis in original. Minor edits have been silently made.

A few months ago, my youngest daughter fell ill and had to take antibiotics that were administered at exactly the right time. So, we woke up at 1:30 am, gave the first medicine and went back to sleep. At 2:30 am the alarm clock sounded, we got up again and administered the second medication. It was exhausting, but thankfully it ended and she was well again.

On one of those exhausting nights, between one administration of medication and the other, I had a dream that seemed very real, it seemed like I was still awake. I heard someone call me in the dream and I ran to the kitchen door. . . . I saw my mother and father leaving. . . . When I saw my father, I started pointing and shouting at him so he would look at me—“Dear Dad, Dear Dad, I see you!” And he looked at me with a sad expression. I asked if everything was OK? He told me no, and said the reason was because he wasn’t with his entire family. At that moment I also felt sadness. Shortly thereafter, the alarm clock rang, it was time to give my daughter her medication again.

I woke up with a strong feeling that I had just lived everything that happened. . . . After some research, I began to ponder and realized that I had not been sealed to my father. As the closest operating temple to our city is in Recife, it was difficult for us to go to the temple together when my father was alive and my daughters were young. I understood what we needed to do. We started preparing to go to the temple together (me, my husband, my mother, and my two daughters—now older). We saved and stayed faithful, waiting for the trip. After almost 16 hours by bus, we arrived at the House of the Lord. The entire time I felt the hand of Heavenly Father guiding us. It was an incredible experience! I could feel Heavenly Father’s love for our family and gratitude for giving us the opportunity to be an eternal family. We were sealed on January 30, 2024. The ordinance was beautiful and inspiring and with the wise words of the sealer I could feel that my father was now happy again, being reunited with his family.

I know this is the true gospel of Jesus Christ here on earth. I am grateful for the sealing power of the priesthood. I am grateful to Heavenly Father for providing unity between his children here on earth. I am grateful to be sealed to my parents and my husband. I know that families can be eternal, thanks to the ordinances that are performed in the temple of the Lord. I know this and I testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.<sup>3</sup>

As more and more stories from throughout the world are published through the unit history tool, experiences of faith and witnesses of the

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3. Verônica Moretti, February 15, 2024, Ala Itapuã, Estaca Salvador Brasil Imbuí, Church History Library, Salt Lake City. Translated by Jeremy Talmage. Minor edits have been silently made.

Savior are shared, enabling members to learn of his blessings and work among his children.

Resources for Individual Research

Capturing stories in the new history tool will provide future researchers with the content to create histories of units and the Latter-day Saints in those areas. For those currently writing a unit history, doing family history, or working on an academic project, the Church History Library provides additional resources and records from the past.

Collections related to branches, wards, or stakes (designated with the call number “LR” for “local record”) include the materials mentioned above, such as scrapbook-style manuscript histories, official quarterly and annual reports, and meeting minutes. These are all cataloged as different series by library staff. The manuscript histories, initially compiled by the staff of the Church Historian’s Office from reports, correspondence, newspapers, and other types of records, are designated “series 2.” Some examples are “LR 1140 2” for the British Mission and “LR 8961 2” for the Tarapaca District of the Chile Mission.

Other series are categorized through the criteria described in the table below:

Local Record Series Numbers

| Series           | Contents  |
|------------------|---|
| Series 3         | annual reports  |
| Series 11        | general minutes, such as sacrament meetings                 |
| Series 12        | Aaronic Priesthood minutes                                  |
| Series 13        | Melchizedek Priesthood minutes                              |
| Series 14        | Relief Society minutes                                      |
| Series 15        | Sunday School minutes                                       |
| Series 16        | Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association minutes          |
| Series 17        | Young Women’s Mutual Improvement Association minutes        |
| Series 18        | Primary minutes   |
| Series 19        | miscellaneous minutes                                       |
| Series 20        | publications and newsletters                                |
| Series 21 and up | unique items not categorized into the other previous series |

Researchers can search for these local records in the Church History Catalog at [catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org](https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org). They can start by searching for the name of the unit, or the unit number if available (a ward

or stake clerk can provide this). For example, searching for “Tokyo Branch,” “Spring Creek Ward,” or “Ashaiman Ghana Stake” brings up multiple collections for each. Researchers should keep in mind that unit names change, as do their boundaries, and recordkeeping practices have evolved over the years, so finding relevant records may take a little bit of legwork. As always, researchers can reach out to library staff directly through the “Ask Us” service for additional guidance. This service is on the library’s website, [history.churchofjesuschrist.org/landing/church-history-library](https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/landing/church-history-library), and in the upper right corner of the library catalog.

## Research Guides

Staff have also created two research guides to assist those researching local records and writing unit histories. The guides are titled “Local Unit Records” and “Writing a Local Unit History.” Both are available on the Research Guides page, along with over twenty others covering additional topics, at [history.churchofjesuschrist.org/collection/research-guides](https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/collection/research-guides). The first guide delves into the quirks and intricacies of the various types of local records and offers suggestions on how to best find them in the Church History Catalog. The writing guide provides question prompts to help inspire ideas on what to cover in a history and offers guidance when it comes to copyright and privacy.

It is important to keep a couple of characteristics of local records in mind. First, the records are not indexed and therefore not word-searchable, so it takes time to explore the pages and uncover the gems of insight desired. Second, records vary in detail and relevance depending on how well they were kept locally. Manuscript histories, historical reports, and minutes are useful for projects related to local history, family history, and scholarly research because of the broad spectrum of information they contain. Local records can include changes in callings, descriptions of events and local projects, mention of births and deaths, and who conducted, presided, or otherwise participated in meetings. Sometimes they even contain summaries or transcripts of talks and testimonies. Some of these local records, especially more recent stories, are restricted due to privacy or confidentiality, but most are open and available for anyone to use in research, regardless of membership in the Church or a specific unit.

## A Case Study from French Polynesia

Here is a single example of how local records can help in a history project. Latter-day Saint missionaries were first sent to French Polynesia in

1843 and arrived and established the Society Islands Mission in 1844.<sup>4</sup> Government restrictions eventually led to the mission closing in 1852.<sup>5</sup> After decades of absence, missionaries finally returned in early 1892 and reestablished the mission, which was later renamed the Tahitian Mission and is now known as the Tahiti Papeete Mission.<sup>6</sup>

According to the mission's manuscript history, when the missionaries arrived on the island of Takaroa in early November 1892, they found "the Saints on Takaroa by this time were engaged in building a new stone meeting house, [at] 79 x 33 feet."<sup>7</sup> The names of the missionaries, local members, and others are included.

A *Deseret News* article, also pasted into the mission history under February 1896, recounts Andrew Jenson visiting and finding Church members "engaged in erecting one of the finest Church buildings on the Tuamotu islands. The coral rock walls were completed in September last, and are now waiting for the roof. The building is 69 feet long by 34 wide, and 20 feet high to the square."<sup>8</sup>

Another entry from February 20, 1906, mentions that after a cyclone, "the village at Takaroa is all gone, the large stone church is the only building remaining."<sup>9</sup> A year later, on February 4, 1907, the mission history reports, "Today Elder Alma Elkins left for Takaroa to make our plans for the finishing of the big stone meeting house."<sup>10</sup>

Finally, in early 1910, the mission history reports that after arriving in Takaroa, "Pres. Seegmiller conducted the dedicatory services of the Takaroa Meeting house April 1, 1910. It was commenced in 1891.

4. "Tahiti Papeete Mission Manuscript History and Historical Reports, 1843–1978," vol. 2, 1844–1900, part 1, 1844–1847, 4, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/d9843dfb-d78e-4f53-8e67-ecb21b84bc6e/0/112>.

5. B. F. Grouard, "Local Correspondence," *Deseret News*, January 8, 1853, 118, <https://newspapers.lib.utah.edu/ark:/87278/s6t73bv/2579934>.

6. "Tahiti Papeete Mission Manuscript History," vol. 2, part 2, April 29, 1892, image 221, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/9b47e504-70a2-44a8-a65e-be71505bc88a/0/220>; "Names Changed," *Church News*, July 6, 1974, 5.

7. "Tahiti Papeete Mission Manuscript History," vol. 2, part 2, image 237, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/9b47e504-70a2-44a8-a65e-be71505bc88a/0/236>.

8. Andrew Jenson, "Jenson's Travels: Letter I.II," *Deseret News*, July 3, 1896, <https://newspapers.lib.utah.edu/ark:/87278/s6z32v27/1834639>.

9. "Tahiti Papeete Mission Manuscript History," vol. 3, 1901–1959, part 1, 1901–1939, February 20, 1906, 39, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/f9444d96-f0fa-4953-a235-6be29c100d32/0/38>.

10. "Tahiti Papeete Mission Manuscript History," vol. 3, part 1, February 4, 1907, 44, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/f9444d96-f0fa-4953-a235-6be29c100d32/0/43>.



Pres. Seegmiller offered the dedicatory prayer. It was a day of rejoicing [*sic*] and one long to be remembered.”<sup>11</sup>

A ward historian tracing the history of the meetinghouse for a unit history or an anniversary celebration might find this story and the local records from the mission useful. Someone doing family history may also find these details interesting if his or her ancestors lived in Takaroa and helped build the chapel or were some of the missionaries mentioned. A scholar may find them significant in detailing how Latter-day Saints in the Pacific worked to build a place of worship. Clearly, local records can provide an abundance of useful information to historians.

## Conclusion

With the new unit-history tool and its focus on events in the lives of Latter-day Saints, imagine the treasure trove of stories future historians will have access to. Individually, these stories help capture the religious experiences of tens of thousands of Latter-day Saints across the world. Together, the stories create an enormous mosaic that, when viewed from a sufficient distance, depicts a wonderful picture of Zion. Local records help us see God’s hand in the lives of individuals and the gospel of Jesus Christ in action. The Lord commanded that “there shall be a record kept among you” and these records stand as a witness to our commitment to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

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W. Tyson Thorpe is currently a reference librarian and research consultant at the Church History Library. He has authored several blog posts and articles intended to assist visitors to the library in their research. His research interests lie in the history of Church mission organizations and periodicals published by Latter-day Saints. He lives with his wife, Annika, and daughter in Bountiful, Utah.

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11. “Tahiti Papeete Mission Manuscript History,” vol. 3, part 1, March 10, 1910, 51, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/f9444d96-f0fa-4953-a235-6be29c100d32/0/50>.

## Ward Choir

We brought no gold to make an offering,  
no goat, no lamb, no blood on the lintel—  
only voices. Sopranos a little  
flat, basses consistently faltering  
at entrances, a lone tenor drowning  
out the others, altos slightly brittle,  
wavering through notes like shaking crystal,  
our music held in black binders falling  
apart at the seams. Still we sing praises  
to our God and King, and hold through the last  
chord's suspension, soft, steady, arriving  
finally far from the broken phrases  
where we began, our voices a prayer asked  
and answered, a sweet scent rising, rising.

—*John Alba Cutler*

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This poem won second place in the 2024 BYU Studies Poetry Contest.

# What Jesus Didn't Do

## The Disciplined Pursuit of Less

Greg McKeown

“The wisdom of life consists in the elimination of non-essentials.”

—Lin Yutang<sup>1</sup>

The soft, muted lighting reflected off wooden pews in a local church building, casting a glow on the faces of leaders gathered for a stake meeting. Among those on the stand was the young bishop of the Sixth-Seventh Ward in the Temple View Stake. Tall, with a commanding presence, he was known for his dedication, but tonight, he felt restless. He had promised to visit an older ward member in the hospital right after this stake meeting was over. As the meeting progressed, he felt a strong impression to leave the meeting and rush to the hospital. The feeling became urgent. However, the stake president was speaking, and this bishop worried his early departure would appear disrespectful.

After what must have felt an eternity, he couldn't ignore the prompting any longer. The moment the talk was over and before the benediction, he “bolted for the door” and drove to the hospital. When he arrived, he ran down the corridor. A nurse approached, recognizing him, and told him the patient had just passed away. She told this bishop that the patient was calling for him by name in his last moments. Devastated, Bishop Thomas S. Monson retreated into the night and wept.<sup>2</sup>

Who of us cannot empathize with this young bishop?

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1. Lin YuTang, *The Importance of Living* (John Day, 1937), 10.

2. Jeffrey R. Holland, “President Thomas S. Monson: Man of Action, Man of Faith, Always ‘on the Lord’s Errand,’” *Ensign* 16, no. 2 (February 1986): 11.

Have you ever felt the pressure to try to do it all? Have you ever felt being righteous means being stretched too thin at home, at church, or at work? Do you ever feel busy but not productive? Has your day ever been hijacked by other people's agenda for you?

If you answered yes to any of these, the way out is the way of the essentialist.

I learned this the hard way.

## The Way of the Nonessentialist

One bright, winter day in California, I visited Anna in the hospital. She lay propped up in the large, medical bed. I sat on the chair by the window. Even in the hospital, Anna was radiant. But I also knew she was exhausted. It was hours after our precious, healthy daughter was born.

Yet, what should have been one of the happiest, most serene days of my life was actually filled with tension. Even as my beautiful new baby lay in my wife's tired arms, I had my phone on and my laptop open. I was also feeling pressure to go to a client meeting. My colleague had written, "Friday between 1–2 would be a bad time to have a baby because I need you to come be at this meeting." It was now Friday, and though I was pretty sure (or at least I hoped) that the email had been written as a jest, I still felt pressure to attend.

Instinctively, I knew what to do. It was clearly a time to be with my wife and child. So when asked whether I planned to attend the meeting, I said "yes" with all the conviction I could muster. To my shame, while my wife lay in the hospital with our hours-old baby, I went to the meeting. Afterward, my colleague said, "The client will respect you for making the decision to be here." But the look on the clients' faces did not evince respect. Instead, they mirrored how I felt. *What was I doing there?* I attended the meeting simply to please, and in doing so, I hurt my family, my integrity, and even the client relationship.

As it turned out, exactly *nothing* came of the client meeting. But even if it had, surely I would have made a fool's bargain. In trying to keep everyone happy, I sacrificed what mattered most. On reflection, I discovered this important lesson: if you don't prioritize your life, someone else will. In the end, anything but a disciplined pursuit of the essential will lead to an undisciplined pursuit of the nonessential.

The difference between the way of the essentialist and the way of the nonessentialist can be seen in figure 1. In both images, the same amount of effort is exerted. In the image on the left, the energy is divided into many different activities. The result is our unfulfilling experience of making a one-millimeter progression in a million directions. In the

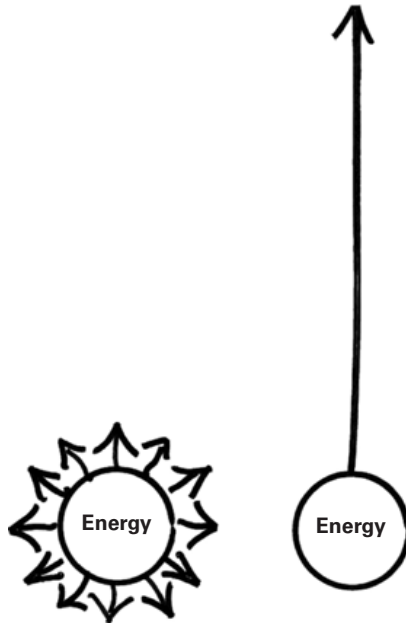


FIGURE 1. Choices

image on the right, the energy is given to fewer activities. The result of investing in fewer things is our satisfying experience of making significant progress in the things that matter most.

In my professional work, I have seen people all over the world who are consumed and overwhelmed by the social pressures around them. I have coached successful people in quiet pain as they try desperately to do everything perfect right now. I have seen people trapped by controlling managers, who are unaware that they do not have to do what they're doing. And I have worked tirelessly to understand why so many bright, smart, and capable individuals remain snared in the death grip of the nonessential.

I coined the term *essentialism* to define the discipline of discovering what is essential, eliminate what is not, and make it possible to do what matters most.<sup>3</sup> The word “discipline” partly stems from the Latin root *disciplina*, which means “instruction” or “teaching.”<sup>4</sup> The word “disciple” partly stems from the Latin root *discipulus*, meaning “pupil” or

3. See Greg McKeown, *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less* (Crown Business, 2014).

4. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “discipline,” Etymology, accessed August 1, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7730755958>.

“learner.”<sup>5</sup> Both words share the essence of learning and training. From a gospel perspective, we strive for the disciplined pursuit of less.

In this disciplined pursuit, how can we know what matters most? President Russell M. Ballard said, “What matters most is our relationships with Heavenly Father and His Beloved Son, our families, and our neighbors.” He described that when his wife passed away, one of the sayings engraved on her headstone was the following: “What matters most is what lasts longest.” Ballard claimed that nurturing eternal relationships “is a choice. A choice to be part of a family requires commitment, love, patience, communication, and forgiveness.” He adds that what matters most is “following the promptings of the Spirit in our most important relationships and in our efforts to love our neighbors as ourselves.”<sup>6</sup> With this as the basis for what is essential in our lives, I will show how we can decide what is nonessential and then choose the essential.

## The Disciplined Pursuit of Less

The disciplined pursuit of less is a systematic way to discern what is important, eliminate what is not, and make doing the essential as effortless as possible. You can think of this as doing for your life, family, and work what a professional organizer can do for your closet. Think about what happens to your closet when you never organize it. Does it stay neat and tidy with just those few outfits you love to wear hanging sparsely on the rack? Of course not. When you make no conscious effort to keep it organized, the closet becomes cluttered and stuffed with clothes you rarely wear. Sometimes it gets so out of control that you attempt to purge the closet. But unless you have a disciplined system, you will either (a) end up with as many clothes as you started with because you can not decide which to give away, (b) end up with regrets because you accidentally gave away clothes you wear and want to keep, or (c) end up with a pile of clothes you do not want to keep but never actually get rid of because you do not know where to take them or what to do with them.

The disciplined pursuit of less is not about just haphazardly saying “no,” but purposefully and deliberately asking for guidance from the Holy Ghost to eliminate the nonessentials. During this process, we can easily get rid of the obvious time-wasters, but cutting out some really terrific

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5. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “disciple,” Etymology, accessed August 1, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1014052012>.

6. M. Russell Ballard, “Remember What Matters Most,” *Liahona* 47, no. 5 (May 2023): 105–6. In this talk, President Ballard also relates a time when he wept because he missed an opportunity to serve a widow in his ward.

opportunities is where we need divine guidance. Instead of reacting to the social pressures pulling you in a million directions, we can learn a way to focus on what is personally essential and eliminate everything else.

Most well-intended commitments and activities we agree to do not come with an expiration date. Unless we have a system for purging them, once adopted, they can live on in perpetuity. In the same way that our closets accumulate clothes we never wear, so do our lives get cluttered as well-intended commitments and activities pile up. Here's how an essentialist would approach that closet.

## Explore

Instead of asking, "Is there a chance I will wear this someday in the future?" you ask these disciplined, tough questions: "Do I love this?" and "Do I look great in it?" and "Do I wear this often?" If the answer is no to any of these questions, then you know it is a candidate for elimination. Applied to your family, church, or professional life, you could ask yourself: "Will this activity or effort contribute to my eternal goal of relationships that last?" and "Does this activity or effort feed my relationship with God, or does it make God feel more distant?" and "Will this activity or effort build trusting, eternal relationships with the people around me?"

## Eliminate

Let's say you have your clothes divided into piles of *must keep* and *remove*. But are you really ready to stuff the *remove* pile in a bag and send it off? After all, there may be a feeling of sunk cost bias. If you have invested a lot of time and effort, even made sacrifices, for a particular activity or effort, it will be much harder to eliminate it because of the cost you have already invested. Studies have found that we tend to value things we already own more highly than they are worth, and thus, we find them more difficult to eliminate.<sup>7</sup> If you are still unsure, ask the powerful question: "If I didn't already own this, how much would I spend to buy it?" Applied to our life, we could ask, "If I had not already pursued this effort and invested this money, would I start pursuing it now?" Or, "If I had not already been doing this activity for this number of years, would I start this activity now?"

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7. Keith M. Marzilli Ericson and Andreas Fuster, "The Endowment Effect," *Annual Review of Economics* 6 (2014): 555–80; Sara Loughran Dommer and Vanitha Swaminathan, "Explaining the Endowment Effect through Ownership: The Role of Identity, Gender, and Self-Threat," *Journal of Consumer Research* 39, no. 5 (February 2013): 1034–50.



Asking these questions, we see that part of determining which activities and efforts will bring you closer to your eternal goals is to actively eliminate what takes you farther away or distracts you from your eternal goals. Why is it so hard for us to do this? Especially in Western cultures, material possessions and wealth are often intrinsically tied to one's sense of self—our self-image, self-efficacy, and authenticity.<sup>8</sup> In a real sense, we come to see the stuff in our closet as part of who we are.

Expanding the metaphor beyond the closet, it may be the case that in evaluating and reprioritizing our relationships, hobbies, goals, and work, we may feel like we are giving up parts of ourselves. It's not a coincidence that one of the hardest things for us to do—give up parts of ourselves—is exactly what being a disciple requires: “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it” (Matt. 16:25).

### Execute

If you want your closet to stay tidy, you need a regular routine for organizing it. You have one large bag for items you need to throw away and a very small pile for items you want to keep. You know the drop-off location and hours of your local thrift store. You have a scheduled time to go there. In other words, once you've figured out which activities and efforts to keep (the ones that help you focus on relationships), you need a system to make executing them as effortless as possible.

Of course, our lives aren't static like the clothes in our closet. Our clothes stay where they are once we leave in the morning. But in the closet of our lives, new clothes (or new demands on our time) constantly appear. Imagine if every time you open the doors to your closet, you find people shoving their clothes in there. Maybe you tidy it up every morning, but by every afternoon, it is messy again. Unfortunately, most of our lives are much like this. How many times have you started your day with a schedule, and by 10:00 a.m., you're already completely off track or behind? Or how many times have you written a to-do list in the morning, and by 5:00 p.m., the list is even longer? How many times have you looked forward to a quiet weekend at home with the family, but by Saturday morning, you're inundated with errands and playdates and unforeseen calamities? Here's the good news: there is a way out.

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8. Stephen Zavestoski, “The Social-Psychological Bases of Anticonsumption Attitudes,” *Psychology & Marketing* 19, no. 2 (January 2002): 149–65, <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.10007>.

Essentialism is about creating a system for handling the closet of our lives. This is not a process you undertake once a year, once a month, or even once a week, like organizing your closet. It is a *discipline* you apply each and every time you are faced with a decision about whether to accept or politely decline. It's a method for making the tough trade-off between lots of good things and a few really great things. It's about learning how to do less, but better, so you can successfully create eternal relationships, or do what matters most during these precious moments of your life.

## The Way of the Essentialist

There are three simple steps that comprise this method. Each are outlined below.

### Step 1. Explore: How to Discern the Trivial Many from the Vital Few

One paradox of essentialism is the idea that essentialists actually explore *more* options than their nonessentialist counterparts. Whereas nonessentialists commit to everything without ever saying no (see the “Non-essentialist” column in table 1), essentialists systematically explore and evaluate a broad set of options before committing to any. Because they will commit and go big on one or two ideas or activities, they explore more options at first to ensure they pick the right one.

### Step 2. Eliminate: How to Cut Out the Trivial Many

Many of us say yes to things because we are eager to please and make a difference. Yet, the key to eliminating what is nonessential will be saying no. Speaking of those who patiently wait for the right opportunities, Warren Buffett explained, “They say no more often than yes.”<sup>9</sup> To eliminate nonessentials means saying no often. It means pushing against social expectations. To do it well takes courage and compassion. We must have the mental and emotional discipline necessary to say no to social pressures and people pleasing.

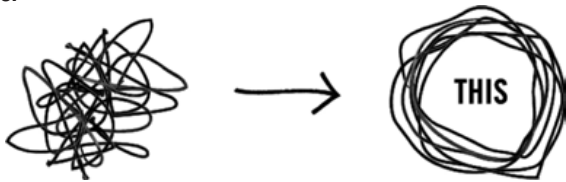
Given the reality of trade-offs, we can't choose to do everything. The real question is not how can we do it all, it is *who* will get to choose what we do and don't do. Remember, when we forfeit our right to choose, someone else will choose for us. So we can either deliberately choose what not to do, or we can allow ourselves to be pulled in directions we don't

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9. Robert G. Hagstrom, *The Warren Buffett Way*, 2nd ed. (John Wiley & Sons, 2005), 179.

**Table 1. What Matters Most**

The Model



|        | Nonessentialist  | Essentialist  |
|--------|--|---|
| Thinks | <b>All Things to All People</b><br>"I have to."<br>"It's all important."<br>"How can I fit it all in?"   | <b>Less but Better</b><br>"I choose to."<br>"Only a few things really matter."<br>"What are the trade-offs?"  |
|        | <b>The Undisciplined Pursuit of More</b><br>Reacts to what's most pressing.<br>Says "yes" to people without really thinking.<br>Tries to force execution at the last moment. | <b>The Disciplined Pursuit of Less</b><br>Pauses to discern what really matters.<br>Says "no" to everything except the essential.<br>Removes obstacles to make execution easy.                    |
|        | <b>Gets</b>  | <b>Lives a Life That Does Not Satisfy</b><br>Takes on too much, and work suffers.<br>Feels out of control.<br>Is unsure of whether the right things got done.<br>Feels overwhelmed and exhausted. |

want to go. Saying no to activities and efforts that will not allow us enough time for our relationships will earn us the time to achieve what is essential. The only way to effectively make these choices about the demands on our time is to follow the promptings of the Spirit. We must pause to discern before we decide (see the "Essentialist" column in table 1). Only then will correct execution be possible.

**Step 3. Execute: How to Remove Obstacles and Make Execution Effortless**

Whether our goal is to complete a project at work, reach the next step in our career, or plan a birthday party for a loved one, we tend to think of the process of execution as something hard and full of friction—something we need to use force to make happen. But the essentialist approach is different. Instead of forcing execution, it means making the right choice more easily. I have spent years teaching essentialism to businesses

and organizations all over the world. However, in my professional work, I can only teach people about essentialism from a telestial and terrestrial perspective.

### **Telestial Essentialism: Turning Away from What Matters Most**

Nonessentialism is the opposite of essentialism. It means we have fallen into the trap of doing more for its own sake. It means we have become blind to what matters and set our hearts upon things that do not matter from an eternal perspective.

In Lehi's vision of the tree of life, the people in the "great and spacious building" are telestial students of nonessentialism (1 Ne. 8:26). They "choose the mortal perks with their short shelf life."<sup>10</sup> Possibly, they believe false doctrines about what matters in life, such as pursuing personal gain or looking perfect. Nonessentialist people are often miserable because, to use President Jeffrey R. Holland's words, their thinking is "one life wide, one life deep."<sup>11</sup>

Nonessentialism can be a telestial mindset. In making choices, a telestial mindset only considers what affects them in this world. People may learn this mindset unknowingly. To use President Julie Beck's phrase, "it's just seeping in, almost through their pores."<sup>12</sup> Some may believe that the things that really matter are completely meaningless. Some may believe that what doesn't matter at all is what you should set your heart on. Nonessentialists are often confused about what matters most.

### **Terrestrial Essentialism: Blinded by Distractions**

Terrestrial thinking is the mindset of the good verses the better that Elder Dallin H. Oaks talked about.<sup>13</sup> It leads many to live a good life. It's good people doing good things. But doing good things is where some people get lost. It may be that some terrestrial thinkers do not stray from the straight and narrow path (1 Ne. 8:20) because they are doing bad things but because the distractions get in the way. They may know what matters most but get

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10. Neal A. Maxwell, "The Tugs and Pulls of the World," *Ensign* 30, no. 11 (November 2000): 37.

11. Jeffrey R. Holland, "'Mirror, Mirror, On the Wall': A Look at the 'Me Decade'" (forum address, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, February 20, 1979), BYU Speeches, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/jeffrey-r-holland/mirror-mirror-wall-look-me-decade/>.

12. Julie Beck, "Teaching the Doctrine of the Family" (Seminaries and Institutes of Religion satellite broadcast, August 4, 2009), [https://books.byui.edu/the\\_eternal\\_family/teaching\\_the\\_doctrin](https://books.byui.edu/the_eternal_family/teaching_the_doctrin).

13. Dallin H. Oaks, "Good, Better, Best," *Ensign* 37, no. 11 (November 2007): 104–7.

distracted. They may be so focused on the less important portions of their Church calling that they forget to foster relationships with their family. They may be so focused on a checklist of what to do that they forget to learn how to forgive their neighbor. It's the tyranny of the good that keeps many from discovering the Lord's higher ways and thoughts (Isa. 55:8–9). We may need to sacrifice good things in order to put our relationships first.

What concerns me is that the culture of doing more may be so pervasive that it can affect how we read or interpret scripture. If I put on non-essentialist glasses, I might read the scriptures through the lens that tells me, "You've got to do more," and I might ignore all of the scriptures that illustrate the necessity of choosing relationships. An example of this is JST Matthew 5:41. The King James Version of Matthew 5:41 reads "Who-soever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain." However, the JST makes a significant change. Joseph translated it as "And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him a mile; and whosoever shall compel thee to go with him twain, thou shalt go with him twain" (JST Matt. 5:43). For me the significance is straightforward. The Lord is not telling us to break our backs and go the extra mile all the time. Instead, he is telling us to simply do what matters most.<sup>14</sup>

## Celestial Essentialism: Christ Is The Way

In his teachings and actions, Christ demonstrates that we can "think celestial"<sup>15</sup> about essentialism. Christ gave us the perfect example of living an essential life. But Christ does more than show us the way of the essentialist. He is *the* essentialist; he is the way (John 14:6). Throughout his perfect life, I believe Jesus Christ modeled essentialism. He (1) always put his relationships with God and people first, (2) eliminated activities that would not feed those relationships, and (3) simplified his service. While we are familiar with what Jesus did, equally important to understanding his divine mission is to look at what Jesus did not do.

## Explore: How Jesus Learned What Was Essential

Jesus knew from a young age what was essential. The scriptures tell us that he "waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him" (Luke 2:40). How did he wax "strong in the spirit"?

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14. See also Robert A. Cloward, "The Sermon on the Mount in the JST and the Book of Mormon," in *The Joseph Smith Translation: The Restoration of Plain and Precious Truths*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Robert L. Millet (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1985), 163–200.

15. Russell M. Nelson, "Think Celestial," *Liahona* 47, no. 11 (November 2023): 117–20.

We are told one possible component in Doctrine and Covenants 121:45, which reads, “Let thy bowels also be full of charity towards all men . . . then shall they confidence wax strong in the presence of God; . . . the Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion.” To be strong in the Spirit, Jesus filled his heart and mind with charity for all people around him. Considering the warring factions of Jews,<sup>16</sup> the Roman occupation,<sup>17</sup> and the poverty of his family,<sup>18</sup> Jesus would have had ample opportunity to feel charity for different types of people and beliefs. His charity for all allowed him to easily prioritize relationships.

### Eliminate: What Jesus Did Not Do

Jesus Christ is everything to us because he did not try to be everything or do everything, despite being under extraordinary pressure to do what others expected him to do. With a perfect understanding of what was essential to his mission and purpose, Jesus knew exactly what to do and, equally important, what not to do.

Think for a moment about all the things Jesus did not do. In his mortal ministry, he did not succumb to the pressure to be the political messiah that so many expected him to be. He did not end Roman rule (Matt. 22:21).<sup>19</sup> He did not call down legions of angels (Matt. 26:53). He did not preach to everyone in Jerusalem, or Israel, or take the gospel to the whole world. He did not heal everyone. He did not find value in being busy. President Dieter F. Uchtdorf said it this way:

Isn't it true that we often get so busy? And, sad to say, we even wear our busyness as a badge of honor, as though being busy, by itself, was an accomplishment or sign of a superior life.

16. F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (Doubleday, 1969), 69–100.

17. Michael R. Trotter, “Judea as a Roman Province, AD 6–66,” in *New Testament History, Culture, and Society: A Background to the Texts of the New Testament*, ed. Lincoln H. Blumell (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2019), 141–59; see also Trevan G. Hatch, “Messianism and Jewish Messiahs in the New Testament Period,” in Blumell, *New Testament History, Culture, and Society*, 71–85.

18. “That Mary, and subsequently the holy family, lived in poor circumstances is made clear by Luke’s report of the temple offering made by Mary and Joseph when Jesus was presented in the temple at forty days of age ([Luke] 2:22–24). As provided by the Mosaic law, the poor who could not afford a larger animal for the sacrificial offering could give a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons (Leviticus 1:14; 5:7; 12:8).” Andrew C. Skinner, “The Life of Jesus of Nazareth: An Overview,” in Blumell, *New Testament History, Culture, and Society*, 247.

19. See John F. Hall, “The Roman Province of Judea: A Historical Overview,” in “Masada and the World of the New Testament,” ed. John W. Welch, special issue, *BYU Studies* 36, no. 3 (1996–97): 319–36.

Is it?

I think of our Lord and Exemplar, Jesus Christ, and His short life among the people of Galilee and Jerusalem. I have tried to imagine Him bustling between meetings or multitasking to get a list of urgent things accomplished.

I can't see it.

Instead I see the compassionate and caring Son of God purposefully living each day. When He interacted with those around Him, they felt important and loved. He knew the infinite value of the people He met. He blessed them, ministered to them. He lifted them up, healed them. He gave them the precious gift of His time.<sup>20</sup>

Jesus removed everything nonessential because he understood how important his mission was. As we seek wisdom and fill our hearts with charity, as we seek the Spirit's guidance, what is nonessential will become more and more clear.

### Execute: How Jesus's Way Is Light and Easy

Jesus said: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. *For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*" (Matt. 11:28–30, emphasis added). It is an extraordinary statement. Is "light" and "easy" how most people would describe their lives in the Church? If not, what do we need to change, to repent of?

It seems that many members, some who struggle with scrupulosity (being overly strict or obsessive about what is considered right or proper),<sup>21</sup> may think that *easy* equals *lazy*. It literally doesn't: *lazy* means not being willing to put in effort; *easy* means doing something that does not require great effort. Yet, in a nod to inherited Puritan thought, some overachieving disciples distrust the easy.

*Kim*

"4:00 a.m. and I'm up photoshopping pictures?? Really?!"

Kim Jenkins wanted to do what really mattered. But it was hard not to feel overwhelmed. For one thing, her organization was undergoing an

20. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Of Regrets and Resolutions," *Ensign* 42, no. 11 (November 2012): 21–24.

21. See Debra Theobald McClendon, *Freedom from Scrupulosity: Reclaiming Your Religious Experience from Anxiety and OCD* (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2023).



immense expansion. The client base had doubled in the last few years but they were operating with virtually the same staff and resources as before. With the expansion of the organization had come an expansion of complexity. There were new and confusing internal policies. There was a tedious new system for handling compliance. Processes had grown cumbersome and now all of their projects and programs took more effort and time. Well-intentioned people had added but never subtracted. They had taken work that used to be simple and made it maddeningly, unnecessarily complicated. As a result, the effort required to get her work done had become Herculean. And Kim had a tendency to be really hard on herself. She said, "I thought if I wasn't putting in tremendous effort, sacrificing any time for myself, then I was being incredibly selfish."

Meanwhile, Kim really wanted to make progress on earning her masters' degree. It was a goal she'd always dreamed of achieving. She believed it could catapult her to a new level in her career, and yet, she was under-investing in it. Between working sixty-plus hours every week and endless volunteer hours with a youth group she mentored, she would get to the end of the day so mentally exhausted that working on her thesis felt impossible to her.

Then one day, it hit her. This was all so much *harder* than it ought to be. And with that realization, she said, "I could see it all for what it was: layers and layers of unnecessary complexity. I could see how it was expanding all the time and how I was suffocating underneath all of it." She decided it was time to make some changes. Instead of skipping lunch almost every day because it felt "selfish," she made time for it. Instead of cramming her morning full of meetings, she shifted as many as possible to the afternoon. Instead of running her team the way she always had, she simplified their processes by removing several nonessential steps and authorizations. She added new routines that forced her to prioritize those tasks that always seemed to get harder the longer she procrastinated. She started delegating more and second-guessing herself less. When faced with an overwhelmingly complex project, instead of simply pushing through it, she would look for an easier, simpler way. Soon, her team was running better than ever, and she was leaving work at a more reasonable hour.

Instead of writing her thesis in sporadic spurts (hours in one day and then avoiding it for days), she vowed to work on the thesis for just thirty minutes every day—no more and no less. She started meeting with her advisor weekly. Each meeting took five to ten minutes but saved her hours of work. She started to make meaningful progress, which made it easier to keep going.

Pretty soon, it got easier to devote time and attention to the things that mattered beyond her career too. She was more present and at peace at home. She visited her grandmother, who was in the hospital, and was there to hold her grandmother's hand as she slept, just days before she died. "I'm so grateful I followed the inspiration I received that the most important thing I could do that week was to be with her," Kim said. "The burden of her death is lighter because I had that final goodbye."<sup>22</sup>



As you learn to trust what is easy and prioritize what is essential, consider whether you are making something harder than it needs to be. When the Lord sent flying serpents among the Israelites, he prepared a way for them to be healed. Note why many of them were not: "The labor which they had to perform was to look; *and because of the simpleness of the way, or the easiness of it, there were many who perished*" (1 Ne. 17:41, emphasis added). Invert your thinking by asking, "How could prioritizing this [essential thing] become light and easy?" Below are some practical and immediate ways to put the answer to this question into practice. There is no need to try to do all of them at once.

### *Define Your Priority*

The word "priority" came into the English language in the 1400s. It was singular. It meant the very first or priorist thing. It stayed singular for the next five hundred years. It was only in the 1900s that we pluralized the term and started talking about *priorities*.<sup>23</sup> What does this word even mean? Can we have many first priorities, before all other things? And yet, haven't you been to a meeting where someone said, "Here are my fifty-seven priorities!"<sup>24</sup>

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22. Kim's story is taken from Greg McKeown, *Effortless: Make It Easier to Do What Matters Most* (Currency, 2021), 27–28.

23. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "priority," 1.d, September 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1081178446>; for usage over time, see Google Books Ngram Viewer, "priorities," accessed July 3, 2024, [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=priorities&year\\_start=1500&year\\_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=priorities&year_start=1500&year_end=2019&corpus=en-2019&smoothing=3).

24. One study found the top five priorities for people were (1) finances and standard of living, (2) relationships with family and friends, (3) personal health, (4) the health of close others, and (5) social life and leisure activities. Ann Bowling, "What Things Are Important in People's Lives? A Survey of the Public's Judgements to Inform Scales of Health Related Quality of Life," *Social Science & Medicine* 41, no. 10 (Nov. 1995): 1447–62, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536\(95\)00113-L](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536(95)00113-L). See also Efua Poku-Amanfo, Jamie O'Halloran, and Chris Thomas, "What Are the People's Priorities?" in *Healthy Places*,

When we have a clear view of what to put first, everything else falls into place. As President Ezra Taft Benson said, “When we put God first, all other things fall into their proper place or drop out of our lives. Our love of the Lord will govern the claims for our affection, the demands on our time, the interests we pursue, and the order of our priorities. We should put God ahead of *everyone else* in our lives.”<sup>25</sup>

President Nelson has taught,

Part of this endeavor will require you to put aside many things of this world. Sometimes we speak almost casually about walking away from the world with its contention, pervasive temptations, and false philosophies. But truly doing so requires you to examine your life meticulously and regularly. As you do so, the Holy Ghost will prompt you about what is no longer needful, what is no longer worthy of your time and energy.

As you shift your focus away from worldly distractions, some things that seem important to you now will recede in priority. You will need to say no to some things, even though they may seem harmless. As you embark upon and continue this lifelong process of consecrating your life to the Lord, the changes in your perspective, feelings, and spiritual strength will amaze you!<sup>26</sup>

When we consistently put Christ's gospel and our relationship with him first, only a few things matter. Not everything that seems important today will still seem important a year from now. Even fewer of those things will matter one hundred years from now. Almost none of them will matter in a thousand years. All that matters eternally—the only thing—is our relationship with Christ. He leads us to our heavenly parents. He leads us and our relationships to transformation.<sup>27</sup>

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*Prosperous Lives* (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2024): 17–22, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep57154.5>.

25. Ezra Taft Benson, “The Great Commandment—Love the Lord,” *Ensign* 18, no. 5 (May 1988): 4, emphasis original.

26. Russell M. Nelson, “Spiritual Treasures,” *Ensign* 49, no. 11 (November 2019): 76–80.

27. Perhaps a key purpose of Jesus's Atonement was to create and heal relationships. Eugene England said that *atonement* means “a bringing to unity, a reconciliation of that which is estranged: man and man, man and God, or man and himself.” England further stated, “We have no greater need than that there be a force of healing in all our public and inner strife: that there be some source of forgiveness and change for the oppressor as well as help for the oppressed; that there be something large enough in love to reach past the wrongs we have done . . . ; that there be hope in the possibility that man can be renewed . . . to a life of greater justice and mercy toward others.” Eugene England, “That They Might Not Suffer: The Gift of the Atonement,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 3 (Autumn 1966): 141–55. Benjamin Keogh also concludes that with Jesus being “the

### *Hold a Personal Quarterly Off-Site*

Holding what I call “personal quarterly off-sites” is a way to see what is happening in our lives, why it matters, and what we need to focus on next. It’s a chance to get away from the reactive, meeting-to-meeting pulse that can lead to intelligent people being tricked by the trivial. Every ninety days, take a day to go somewhere away from the deafening digital noise and usual routine of your busy life and reflect on what really matters. If you can’t take a day, try devoting a few hours on the weekend to think about three big questions:

1. What is essential that I am underinvesting in?
2. What is nonessential that I am overinvesting in?
3. How can I make it more effortless to get my most important things done?

When we don’t take time to ask these more strategic questions, we become a function of other people’s agendas. We are left to react to the latest email and can become rudderless, blown about by every wind of change (see Eph. 4:14).

### *Make Disproportionate Deposits*

In 1978, Thomas F. Fogarty used the bank account metaphor to describe the health of relationships.

The emotional climate in any family [or relationship] . . . reacts like a financial bank account. If one gets an unexpected bill, it can be very small in the context of a positive bank balance. This is not so with no money in the bank or if one is already in debt. Here it could become the straw that breaks the camel’s back. A disruptive emotional climate of jealousy, bitterness, hurt, etc. arising from some incident becomes less prominent if played against a substantial emotional bank account built up over many years. It has less duration and is more easily absorbed into the emotional system. It becomes worthwhile to build such an account of fond memories, warm experiences, and shared feelings.<sup>28</sup>

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fulness of both humanity and divinity,” there are “two significant implications: first, that the righting of human relations truly matters to God; and second, that right relation is not only possible, it is integral to the fulfillment of God’s purposes.” Benjamin Keogh, “Relational Atonement: Groundwork,” in *Latter-day Saints Perspectives on Atonement*, ed. Deidre Nicole Green and Eric D. Huntsman (University of Illinois Press, 2024), 224–25.

28. Thomas F. Fogarty, “Emotional Climate in the Family and Therapy,” 68, The Center for Family Learning, Archives, accessed August 1, 2024, [http://cflarchives.org/images/Emotional\\_Climate.pdf](http://cflarchives.org/images/Emotional_Climate.pdf).

The concept of *disproportionate deposits* stems from the understanding that not all contributions in a relationship have equal weight. Some actions, though seemingly small, might hold immense significance for the other party involved. This principle encourages us to identify and prioritize actions that yield the highest emotional or strategic value in our interactions, ensuring that our efforts are not just noticed but deeply appreciated. In other words, not all deposits are made equal. Have you ever invested one thousand dollars of effort into a relationship and found it only made a one-dollar deposit in the relationship bank account? I have.

Since I was ten years old, when I did my first job cleaning cars, I have liked to have clean cars. I often felt that cleaning our family cars was a win-win because it would show my family and, especially my wife, Anna, that I cared about them. Surely, I thought, it would make a deposit of trust into our emotional bank account. However, sometimes Anna would thank me for doing it; sometimes she didn't even notice. We talked about this recently, and she told me that sometimes it can actually make a withdrawal from our relationship, especially if I get a bit obsessed with it. So what I thought would make a deposit could actually be a withdrawal. That's the fool's bargain: You put in the effort but instead of the result you want, it actually makes the relationship worse.

What if you could invest one dollar of effort into a relationship and make a one-thousand-dollar deposit in the relationship bank account? The key to making a valuable deposit is understanding the people involved. If there is a superpower in this world, it is the ability to feel empathy and compassion for another person (see D&C 50:17–24). This leads us to understand what is essential in any situation. It's also a relationship superpower: perceiving what is essential to others.

The most essential things in life are our relationships. At the end of our lives, it will not be our awards and accolades that matter. Titles will fade into insignificance. Our accumulated goods will offer little solace. But our relationships will endure. So, today, ask yourself these three essentialism questions:

1. Who is the most important person to you?
2. What is the most important thing to them?
3. What is the first, tiniest thing you can do to prioritize that?

Investing in your essential relationships will do more for the quality of your life than anything else. It's by far the best deposit you can make.

### *Discover the Graceful No*

The word *decision* is borrowed from the Latin word *decisio*, which means “the action of cutting off,” “division,” and “separation.”<sup>29</sup> To decide, therefore, is to cut off or eliminate other options. We haven’t truly made a decision until we’ve said no to something. For instance, choosing to focus on a single project means cutting off other potential projects that could distract from the main goal. Similarly, deciding to spend time with family might mean saying no to additional work, or even Church, commitments. In essence, every decision involves a commitment to one path and the rejection of others.

#### *Cynthia*

Cynthia once told me about the time her father had made plans to take her on a night out in San Francisco. Twelve-year-old Cynthia and her father had been planning the “date” for months. They had a whole itinerary: take a trolley car to Chinatown, see Alcatraz, “catch a flick,” grab food from the street vendors, go back to the hotel where they’d be staying, eat an ice cream sundae, and maybe watch another movie.

The plan was for her father to attend a conference during the day. Then in the evening, she would meet him and they would commence their date. This was all going according to plan until, as her father was leaving the convention center, he ran into an old college friend and business associate. It had been years since they had seen each other, and Cynthia watched as they embraced enthusiastically. His friend said, in effect, “I am so glad you are doing some work with our company now. When Lois and I heard about it, we thought it would be perfect. We want to invite you, and of course Cynthia, to get a spectacular seafood dinner down at the Wharf!” Thinking it would be rude to turn down his friend’s generous offer, Cynthia’s father replied, “Dinner sounds just terrific!”

What would this mean for Cynthia’s daydreams of trolley rides and ice cream? She hated seafood and she could just imagine how bored she would be listening to the adults talk all night. But her father added, “But not tonight. Cynthia and I have a special date planned, don’t we?” He winked at Cynthia and grabbed her hand. They ran out of the door and continued with what was an unforgettable night in San Francisco.

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29. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “decision,” Etymology, accessed August 1, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1162739464>.

As it happens, Cynthia's father was the management thinker Stephen R. Covey (author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*)<sup>30</sup> who had passed away only weeks before Cynthia told me this story. So it was with deep emotion she recalled that evening in San Francisco. His decision "bonded him to me forever because I knew what mattered most to him was me! Just meant everything to me!"<sup>31</sup>

Stephen Covey, one of the most respected and widely read business thinkers of his generation, was a true essentialist. Not only did he routinely teach essentialist principles like "the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing"<sup>32</sup> to important leaders and heads of state around the world, he lived them. And in this moment of living them with his daughter, he made a memory that outlasted his lifetime.

### *Give Yourself Permission to Be More Selective*

Everything changes when we give ourselves permission to be more selective in what we choose to do. At once, we hold the key to unlock the next level of achievement in our lives. There is tremendous freedom in learning that we can eliminate the nonessentials. We are no longer controlled by other people's agendas. We choose. With that invincible power, we can discover the best path toward creating and prioritizing eternal relationships.

What if we stopped celebrating being busy as a measurement of importance? What if instead we celebrated how much time we spent listening to the Spirit, ministering to our relationships, and serving our eternal family in the temple? The word "essential" appears only once in the standard works, and it is reserved for eternal relationships: "And now, my dearly beloved brethren and sisters, let me assure you that these are principles in relation to the dead and the living that cannot be lightly passed over, as pertaining to our salvation. For their salvation is necessary and essential to our salvation, as Paul says concerning the fathers—that they without us cannot be made perfect—neither can we without our dead be made perfect" (D&C 128:15).

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30. Steven R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* (Free Press, 1989).

31. Greg McKeown, "How to Live Life in Crescendo with Cynthia Covey Haller," The Greg McKeown Podcast, episode 135, 14:07–17:16, <https://gregmckeown.com/podcast/episode/how-to-live-life-in-crescendo-with-cynthia-covey-haller/>.

32. Rodger Dean Duncan, "Stephen Covey: A Legacy of Humanity and Wisdom," *Forbes*, July 7, 2014, updated June 6, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rodgerdeanduncan/2014/07/07/stephen-covey-a-legacy-of-humanity-and-wisdom/>.



What if we traded off our worldly ambitions and instead became the finest husbands and fathers, mothers and wives, sons and daughters, and friends the Lord can make of us? What if we valued deep connection over social media followers? It takes courage to live a life true to an eternal goal instead of the life others expect of us.

I invite you to ask the Lord to help you become more of a celestial essentialist. It's not about eschewing all email or disconnecting from the web or living like a hermit. That would be backwards movement. It is about giving our lives anew to Christ and putting our relationship with him first. Just imagine what would happen to our world if every person eliminated one nonessential activity and replaced it with an essential relationship.

This brings us back to Bishop Thomas S. Monson. After that tearful moment in the hospital, he made a solemn vow to never again let social awkwardness get in the way of following the guidance of the Holy Ghost. Relationships became the hallmark of his whole life and ministry. We can also choose to let go of what is not essential and instead, choose the way of the essentialist.

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# All One People

*Susan Elizabeth Howe*

In his *BYU Studies* article “Building an Innovative ‘Latter-day Saints without Borders’ Organization,”<sup>1</sup> Warner Woodworth recounts both his own and his students’ extensive work to better the lives of the poor, but he gives credit to many other Latter-day Saint groups who are carrying out similar efforts. All One People, an organization located in Manti, Utah, is one of these groups. Woodworth says that these groups “[act] as ‘social entrepreneurial’ Christians who draw on their faith, rely on scriptural values, harness their educations, and call forth their business skills in designing and launching effective humanitarian services.”<sup>2</sup> These are exactly the values that have motivated the leaders of All One People over the years of its existence.

The current directors, Joan and Fred Johnson and Fred’s sister Vickie Anderson, did not found the organization but became involved a few years after it came into being.<sup>3</sup> Fred, having served a mission for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in South Africa as a young man, was very interested in returning to help Africans, especially after the 1978 revelation giving the priesthood to all worthy men.<sup>4</sup> He decided

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1. Warner Woodworth, “Building an Innovative ‘Latter-day Saints without Borders’ Organization,” *BYU Studies* 62, no. 3 (2023): 111–20.

2. Woodworth, 117–18.

3. The information from this article was provided by interviews of two of the directors, Fred Johnson and Vickie Anderson, on January 10 and January 24, 2024, and with Fred Johnson alone on February 11, 2024.

4. See “Official Declaration 2,” Scriptures, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed June 21, 2024, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/dc-testament/od/2?lang=eng>. See also Edward L. Kimball, “Spencer W. Kimball and the Revelation on Priesthood,” *BYU Studies* 47, no. 2 (2008): 4–78.

with his family to go to Mozambique. They even began studying Portuguese so they would be able to speak the language. But Fred received a clear impression that he should go to Kenya, so he went home, told his family, and spread maps of Kenya all over their dining table.

The very next day, Richard Armstrong, the director of All One People at the time, called Fred and asked him to go to Kenya with a group of BYU students, confirming Fred's inspiration. He didn't think he could leave work so abruptly, but his wife, Joan, was able to go. She met with the students, and they left for Kenya in April 2004 and stayed for two months. Joan established contacts with local government, education, and Church leaders that would prove to be invaluable in future years.

Joan and the BYU students began building a school and got about halfway through its construction. Another group, including Beverly Armstrong, a significant contributor to the Manti community; Debrah Lindsey, the Sanpete County health nurse; and Ellis and Merlene Peterson, who ran a local girls' home, were able to complete the school in 2005.

The next year Richard Armstrong asked Fred and Joan if they would take over leadership of All One People, and they enthusiastically agreed to do so, although they didn't know exactly what they should focus their work on. Once again Fred felt a clear impression of the Spirit that came in words: "See that those kids get an education."<sup>5</sup>

Fred and Joan flew to Nairobi in 2005, not knowing where to stay or what to do. They traveled west to Matunda, praying that they would be able to learn what their specific mission was. In Matunda, they attended Sunday services in the Kitale Branch and met the branch president, Martin Ndungu, and after Fred explained what they were doing there, President Ndungu directed them to the Lillywhite Education Center for Orphans in an interior village named Ndivisi.

The journey to Ndivisi was rather harrowing. First, they had to ride to the end of the line in twelve-person vans, called *matatus*, and then ride the rest of the way on the back fender of bicycles, called *boda bodas*, finally dropping into a remote river valley (fig. 1). When they arrived, two signs greeted them, one for the orphanage and the other for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Fred and Joan met the directors of the Lillywhite orphanage—Patrice and Margaret Kitembe—and the orphans who lived there (fig. 2). They were surprised by how happy the children were because it was clear that they were near starvation. Again, the Johnsons felt impressed that this was

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5. Johnson, interview, February 11, 2024.



FIGURE 1. Joan Johnson traveling in Ndivisi, Kenya, via *boda boda*, 2005. All photos courtesy Fred Johnson.



FIGURE 2. Part of the group of orphans and other children living at the Lillywhite Education Center for Orphans in 2005.

where they should be. Once the Johnsons returned to the United States, they maintained contact with the Kisembes and immediately raised money to pay for the children's food.

The practice of the Lillywhite Center was to help the children become self-reliant, and Fred and Joan agreed wholeheartedly with that goal. All One People funded the leasing of ten acres for the children to plant and raise maize, the installation of solar panels to provide electricity, and the building of a green house in which to grow tomatoes. All One People also worked with another donor to fund the building of a fish farm. The Kisembes taught the children the gospel, with regular scripture study, family home evening, and weekly attendance at sacrament meetings. The branch was soon moved to Misikhu, five miles away, and the children and the Kisembes walked there and back each week for Sunday services.

The next project All One People undertook at the Lillywhite Center was to construct four classrooms as well as bookshelves that would hold the many books that had been donated by the South Sanpete School District. They also built bunk beds for the children, who before had been sleeping on the hard concrete floor (figs. 3, 4). Fred and Vickie particularly remember the hour-long drive in the rain with the windows open with twenty of the foam-pad mattresses tied to the roof of their car.

Since 2007, the major work of All One People has been to enable the orphans and other children from two wards in Nairobi to attend high school. The high-school system is modeled on the English educational system of boarding schools. To attend, the students have to pay for their travel both to and from the school, tuition, fees, room and board, and standard uniforms. These expenses are far greater than not only the orphans but also many of the children in the Nairobi wards can afford.

In addition to about twenty-five students a year from the orphanage, Fred and Vickie thought that they could afford to send four more students. They drove the eight hours back to Nairobi to meet with two Latter-day Saint bishops and see if there were any youth there who needed help to go to high school. They planned to select two students from each ward. The first bishop they met with, Bishop Charles Gesimba, had Fred and Vickie meet young people at the Buruburu chapel. He brought six youth, whom Vickie and Fred interviewed and then had write letters about their circumstances, their preparation for further study, and their goals. The leaders of All One People were impressed by all of these youth and found it very difficult to choose any two over the others. The next day they went to the Upper Hill Ward, and Bishop Moses Alumanda





**FIGURE 3.** Vickie Anderson with a group of girls (mostly LDS) from the Lillywhite Education Center for Orphans who were in uniform and attending Ndivisi Girls High School with help from All One People, 2009.



**FIGURE 4.** Youth from the Lillywhite Education Center for Orphans, whose beds were on the concrete floor prior to All One People providing bunkbeds and mattresses, 2007.

brought eight young members of the Church. Again, the young people were very impressive and had no hope of attending high school without help. In a leap of faith, Fred, Joan, and Vickie said they would help all fourteen instead of the four they had planned on.

The three All One People directors returned to Sanpete County and were miraculously able to raise enough funds to support all thirty-nine kids. It is difficult to ask people to give money, even for worthy causes, but their hope for these children and the children's great need overcame their diffidence. They went door to door looking for donors, sitting in living rooms to explain the situation of these young people. Vickie held a yard sale with donations provided by residents throughout her Ephraim, Utah, community. The directors also held a dinner and invited potential donors to contribute.

As the wards in Nairobi grew and new units were created, more and more youth needed assistance, and in 2009 and for a few years after, All One People was supporting about sixty school students each year. Now they average between forty-five and fifty (figs. 5, 6).

The goal of the organization has been to help these needy young people finish high school, go on missions, and then continue their studies through the Church's Perpetual Education Fund and BYU–Pathway.<sup>6</sup> Fred is very enthusiastic about these particular programs, calling them “inspired.” The best students have also received university scholarships.

In the twenty years of operation, the directors have seen these young people grow and become leaders in the Church. When Fred and Joan visited Nairobi in March 2023, many of the people they met with, now adults with young families, had been in the program. These young people are now serving in their wards in a variety of callings, including leadership positions. In 2016, Fred and Joan attended a baptism and were very impressed by a young man's talk. Fred thought he looked familiar and

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6. BYU–Pathway Worldwide is a higher education organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It began as PathwayConnect in 2009; the name was changed in 2017. Students can earn certificates and degrees online from BYU–Idaho or Ensign College in addition to benefiting from the online support system that Pathway offers. “As of 2022, BYU–Pathway Worldwide serves more than 61,000 students annually from more than 180 countries.” “Our Story,” BYU–Pathway Worldwide, accessed June 12, 2024, <https://www.byupathway.edu/about-byu-pathway-worldwide>. The Church's Perpetual Education Fund, which was established in 2001 by President Gordon B. Hinckley, has helped around ninety thousand students with educational opportunities. “Learn More,” Self-Reliance Services, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed June 10, 2024, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/self-reliance/pef-perpetual-education-fund/learn-more?lang=eng>.





**FIGURE 5.** A group of LDS students from the Lucky Summer and Zimmerman wards in Nairobi who are part of the All One People program, 2023.



**FIGURE 6.** Mayom and Robert, two students from Nairobi wards who attend Kigumu Bendera High School with assistance from All One People, 2023. Like most of the organization's students, each is committed to serving an LDS mission and furthering his education using either the Perpetual Education Fund or BYU Pathway.



FIGURE 7. Former All One People student Tony Lime, now serving as a member of the South B Ward bishopric, and his family, 2023.

learned that he was Tony Lime (fig. 7), one of their former students and at the time the elders quorum president in his ward. Since then he has become a member of the bishopric. Tony also told Fred that his brother Edgar had become a nurse.

In January 2018, Fred felt impressed that there was work All One People needed to do in Ethiopia. He received this feeling with consternation, because he felt that the resources of All One People were stretched to the limit, and he knew almost nothing about Ethiopia. But it turned out that in 2011, Fred and Joan had met an elder serving in Kenya who came from Ethiopia: Eyob Teffera (fig. 8). Fred's son Stephen had kept in touch with this young man on Facebook and, upon request, sent an inquiry to Teffera. It also happened that that same year, Elder Teffera came to Nairobi to translate general conference into Aramaic. Fred and Vickie met with him there and asked if he knew anyone who could help them. He said he was the district president of the only district in Ethiopia. Fred and Vickie felt blessed that these arrangements all fell

into place. Now All One People is helping four students in Ethiopia attend college (high school in Ethiopia is funded by the government).

There are many other touching individual stories. One is the story of Wilson Odunga. He was placed in the Lilly-white Center because his family couldn't afford to care for him. With the assistance of All One People, he graduated from high school in 2012 and then was able to attend the University of Eldoret on an academic scholarship. When he was near graduation, the university offered him a job. He wanted to go on a mission, so he declined the offer. The university said that they wouldn't hold the job for him and that they wouldn't hire him again after his two-year mission. His father also put pressure on him to accept the job so he could help support his parents, but he resisted his father's pressure too.

When he returned from his mission, Wilson graduated with a BS degree in education and an MS in genetic engineering and now teaches near Bungoma at the Atundo Boys' High School. He married another returned missionary, Esther Masitsa, in the Kinshasa Temple, aided in travel by the General Temple Patron Assistance Fund (fig. 9).<sup>7</sup> Wilson was able to build their first house himself, and the Odungas now have a new baby girl named Norah.



FIGURE 8. Eyob Teffera as an elder in 2011. Left to right: Elder Chgayo, Stephen Johnson, and Elder Teffera.

7. "The General Temple Patron Assistance Fund was created to give financial assistance to Church members who otherwise could not afford to attend the temple." Chhom Koemly, "Getting to the Temple," *Liahona* 34, no. 7 (July 2010): 38, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2010/07/latter-day-saint-voices/getting-to-the-temple?lang=eng>.





**FIGURE 9.** Wilson Odunga and his newly wedded wife, Esther, at the Kinshasa temple in 2022.



**FIGURE 10.** Three sisters from a Nairobi ward who were part of the All One People education program: Stacy sitting, Pauline and Alma Natasha standing, 2023.

Another inspiring story is of three sisters aided by All One People: Stacey, Pauline, and Alma Natasha (fig. 10).<sup>8</sup> Stacey began high school with the organization's assistance in 2015. She graduated from high school, went on to college through the Church's Perpetual Education Fund, and is now a schoolteacher. Her sister Pauline is in her second year of university education, and the youngest sister, Alma Natasha, has just graduated from high school. She will begin university study in the fall and hopes to become a surgeon.

The students are incredibly grateful. Jairus Okwakau Kalamu, who graduated from university with a degree in nutrition, sent the directors his "sincere and utmost thanks" for the support All One People gave him, adding, "Your generosity . . . transformed my life."<sup>9</sup> Certainly, many lives have been transformed, which has benefited not only the individuals involved but also those around them. These young people are becoming leaders who will strengthen the Church, and as their children grow up in the gospel, that strength will increase through the generations.

8. The naming customs of Kenya make it necessary to not use the girls' last names.

9. Jairus Okwakau Kalamu, email to Fred Johnson, December 18, 2023.

All One People is a modest organization, with a budget of about thirty-five thousand dollars a year. Virtually all the money raised goes to helping the children, all those who work with All One People are volunteers, and the directors pay their own airfare. The return on their investment is enormous. A donation of merely one hundred dollars a month will keep two students in school for a year, and the growth in these young lives provided by that modest donation is amazing. All One People is one of many independent Latter-day Saint proactive groups that are serving those in need throughout the world. They follow the Savior in doing good and bringing about better lives for so many throughout the world who would be severely limited without the generous assistance these groups provide.

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Susan Elizabeth Howe was a BYU English professor for twenty-eight years. She is a poet with three collections, the most recent of which, *Infinite Disguises*, was published in 2023 by By Common Consent Press. She has recently retired as the associate editor of BYU Studies after serving for five years. She lives in Ephraim, Utah, and learned about All One People from Vickie Anderson, who is in her ward. She is a happy contributor to All One People. Readers who are interested in learning more about All One People (and other worthy projects) can contact Fred Johnson at [fredjohnson@mail.manti.com](mailto:fredjohnson@mail.manti.com).

# On the Day My Missionary Son Departs

*... seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me*  
—Genesis 22:12

Spoken by a father  
who would have to watch his son, his only son,  
be taunted and crucified  
to a father who had to take his son and, despite all  
he'd been promised,  
lift his own hand up with a knife—  
these words have nothing to do with me.

I've done this before. I know  
the hard things coming to him, and to me,  
are good things.  
I know that if he were to choose to stay  
out of fear (his or mine), neither of us  
would be happier with our lives together here.  
I know he will return  
in some ways and not in others,  
or he will not.  
There are many kinds of violence, and chances of harm  
are not greater there than here.

It's nothing like Abraham.

Only in this: covenants have been made.  
Only in this: a mother waits at home  
while big things happen  
somewhere else.

—Darlene Young

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This poem was a finalist in the 2024 BYU Studies Poetry Contest.

# Mother Figures

Miranda H. Lotz

We must have been in a hurry the day that my mom and I shared a stall to try on our swimsuits. We both squeezed into the dressing room and peeled off our layers, with her grumbling about her body. I was fourteen or fifteen and mom was in her mid-fifties. She always wore a one-piece and was particularly modest. When she lifted her shirt, I saw for the first time her doughy, pink stomach with jagged branches of shiny purplish white going across it haphazardly, like lightning strikes.

“What happened to you?” I asked in shock.

She pulled her shirt down, yanked her remaining leg out from her jeans and tossed them onto the bench. Then she looked straight at me and answered, not unkindly, “You did.”

I had heard of stretch marks, of course. I had four older sisters, some of whom were mothers themselves. I had been an aunt since I was seven years old. I knew. I just didn’t *know*.

There’s no way to know. Not until you do.



When I was pregnant with my first child, I was a student at BYU and worked at a local Mexican restaurant as a server. Although I was just twenty-one, I had been married for two years, so there was no scandal attached to my burgeoning belly. My husband also worked at the restaurant, and we shared a warm relationship with the other employees there. One day, a friend came up to me and placed her hand on my abdomen. Her eyes glowed with excitement.

“Does it feel so magical? Is it amazing?” she asked, tapping my tummy softly. Her voice hummed with the thrill of expectation.



Although I was the one expecting, I wasn't thrilled. I was sick of the smell of wet tortilla chips. And at such a young age, I was mostly overwhelmed with exhaustion. Having this baby had been somewhat of a surprise. Two of my sisters had a hard time having biological children, and after their struggles, I was on alert. I thought we had better start trying early so we would be one step ahead of the game when the time actually came for us to have kids. Little did I realize that I would get pregnant almost immediately—in the middle of my junior year of college.

I turned to her wearily, "Actually, it just kind of feels like I have a parasite."

I didn't mean to be callous, or to pop her bubble of joy, but I had anyway. She quickly walked away in stunned silence. I hadn't meant to offend, but in my typical way, I had said exactly what I felt: I was being held hostage by a foreign entity, my body no longer my own. I had such a sense of body dysphoria from pregnancy that I hardly felt like myself.

It was similar to how I felt going through puberty—like my body was changing into a new organism that I was unfamiliar with and slightly scared of. I think most people probably feel this way to some degree as they change from child to adult. All of a sudden you're bumping your head on cabinet doors you used to walk under. Toes are getting jammed at the front of feet that have grown three shoe sizes in a summer. You don't know how to hug your mom anymore, because you used to fit in the nook under her chin, and now she fits in the nook under yours.

Puberty, pregnancy, nursing, perimenopause, menopause. There are so many changes for women's bodies with hardly enough time to acclimate before a new season comes.

On top of that, there is so much social pressure for a woman's body to appear a certain way that even when we're not experiencing one of these watershed phases of physical metamorphosis, we're bombarded with enticements to cause other physical changes to our bodies. Some of these are mild like dying your hair to cover the gray, or using creams and elixirs at night as if they were magic potions that could turn you young by morning. But some of the suggestions are more invasive like having a plastic surgery "mommy makeover," where parts of your body that have been altered by becoming a mother are changed back into their prematernal state.

If a good woman is a skinny woman, then is a good mom a skinny mom?



It started with a cough. Just a little *ahem-hem*-type cough that didn't go away after my mom had a cold. She went to her primary doctor, who

referred her to a pulmonologist where she was diagnosed. I remember hearing her voice from two thousand miles away on the phone. “The doctor has found that I have some scarring in my lungs. It’s called idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis.” Her voice caught, but she pressed on. “It’s terminal, but I should have five years.”

She said that there was a new medicine that doctors were hoping to try on her. I asked how she was feeling about all of this. I don’t remember her answer. My insides were melting, dissolving, leaving a shell of me standing there, holding the banister of my stairs with one hand and my phone with the other. I couldn’t tell her how devastated I was since she was the one who needed comfort. She was the one whose body was struggling. No, sick. No. Dying. A hard truth to accept.

Five years left of having a mother: 1,825 days of listening to her wisdom, soaking up her faith, and basking in the warmth of her approval.

I moved back home to be closer to her, but then Covid came. It was scary for everyone, but for a person with lung disease, it was terrifying. Time was short; she had only a few years left of her time on earth—shorter if she caught the dreaded disease. And yet it passed slowly, as if being pulled like cooling honey-candy. It got stiffer and stiffer, my interactions with her more rigid, controlled by outside forces and fear. I went grocery shopping for her and dad, carefully sanitizing my hands as I placed their groceries on the counter. “Wipe down what you can with Clorox before you put it away.” She nodded, her eyes half visible behind fogged-up glasses and a mask. We were almost afraid to breathe in the same room.

There were no hugs. No long chats sitting on the sofa side-by-side. There was a lot of appreciation and love, but also a hollowness where the physical affection and time together should have been.

She was vaccinated in December of 2020. I was vaccinated in March of 2021. We both wept when we could finally embrace. My heart quivered as I held her. She was tiny. The medicine made her queasy, and she was eating less and less. Her shirt hung from her shoulders, and she was constantly adjusting it to try to keep it on her diminutive four-foot, eleven-inch frame.

She woke up every morning and weighed herself. One hundred two pounds. “Need to eat more today,” she muttered. She would try a few bites of this or that, but many things upset her stomach too much to eat in quantity—mostly the soft foods that she could easily chew.

Ninety-eight pounds. She subsisted mostly on full-sugar Pepsi. When her oxygen test at the pulmonologist showed that her saturation levels had dropped off considerably, the pulmonologist told her that there was

no need to come into the office anymore. Mom began hospice care in the spring of 2022.



As summer drew to a close, Mom grew exasperated. “Why is this taking so long?” She grilled the physician’s assistant who came to check on her.

The kind woman answered, “Because you’re stubborn.” She patted Mom’s knee, the knee that had been injured as a teenager. The knee that had kept her from exercising more and losing the weight she always complained about. Yet here it was, outlasting her lungs.

She continued. “Your desire to stay is keeping you here.” She paused and then asked gently, “Are you afraid of moving on?”

The oxygen compressor ticked the time away, as it pushed air in and out, in and out.

Mom replied as quickly as she could, gulping air between words, “I’m not afraid. . . . I know where I’m going. . . . I don’t want . . . Heavenly Father to think . . . I gave up. . . . I don’t want to be . . . a quitter.”

She who was slowly suffocating; she who force-fed herself every day to lengthen her life; she who had read the Book of Mormon in German, French, and English; she who had served as an ordinance worker in the temple, a senior proselytizing missionary, and a docent at the Church History Museum—she wanted to be valiant to the end, and that meant, to her, to battle her body’s death.

“Mom, you have fought so hard and so long. You’re not a quitter,” my sister Liz reassured her.

“But it’s okay to not fight it anymore. You’re not quitting. You’re accepting Heavenly Father’s will.” I added. “You don’t need to eat unless it’s something you want to eat. You can rest.”

She sat up, perturbed by the idea of resting. “Heavenly Father has work for me to do on the other side of the veil! I know it! I am ready to die.” She looked around at us with the look that all mothers have. It means business. “I am ready.”

The next few days were filled with goodbyes as she steadily offered her words of advice and encouragement to her children and grandchildren. The siblings who could come gathered around her bed and sang to the woman who had taught them the melody of faith. “Isn’t this fun?!” she said, almost unsure again about leaving.

Our roles inverted as I helped care for her bodily needs and offered reassurance that she was being brave and good. She ate a green Melona popsicle, her eyes closed in bliss.

That night, she awoke as I sat next to her bedside. “Who’s coming?” she asked. Her voice was garbled and anxious, concerned that she would miss giving a last hug to one of her loved ones.

“No one’s coming, Mom. You’re done. You did it.”

She died the next day.



When it was time to dress her body in the ceremonial clothing for her burial, my sister Hilary and I went to the mortuary together. I had driven by it several times that week and every time I did, I thought, “Mom’s body is in there, but she’s not.”

It was quiet and we waited momentarily before being ushered into the side room where her body lay. She was dressed in white, and her hair and makeup were done well.

“These might be too big,” I said, holding up the temple clothing and looking at the shrunken version of my mother, her height compressed by time and her bulk long gone.

“She is tiny,” the mortician said gently. “But I’m sure it’ll be just fine.”

Her hands were cold, and my hands were cold from touching where her warmth should have been. Logically, I knew this would be. But there’s no way to know. Not until you do.



I’m so thankful for the extra body weight that kept my mom with us for a year as she sipped on her Pepsi and coughed. She had complained about being overweight almost every week of my young life, but at the end of hers, it was a blessing. It allowed her to mother us for longer, and we needed it. Sometimes the things that we think are our downfalls end up being our strengths.

Without her here, I have felt myself becoming a new person, learning to love myself in new ways. Strange that so much of my growth would occur because of her absence rather than because of her presence. I knew that the challenging parts of my life would be more difficult without her. I didn’t realize that the joyful parts would be just as painful without someone to share them with. We are taught to mourn with those that mourn, but do we adequately celebrate with those who rejoice?

I would take a picture of my child and start to text it to her then realize that she wasn’t there to see it. So many milestones without a second witness to them; it was as if I had lost one of my eyes. And yet, over time, the shell of grief has sloughed off and I have found that my insides, once

gelatinous with pain, have solidified into wings. I celebrate myself when I fly.

When Christ was resurrected, he chose to keep the scars by which he gave us life. His body bears witness of his love for us. We are engraved on the palms of his hands (see Isa. 49:16; 1 Ne. 21:16).

So far as I know, no one has ever seen a resurrected woman in our dispensation. When I see my earthly mother again, or my Heavenly Mother, will her stomach bear the scars of giving me life? Will I be eternally engraved on her bowels of mercy? Will her figure be that of a pregnant woman, a witness of her unique power of creation?

I do not know.

But what I do know is that my mortal body is a tremendous gift. It has changed as I have gone through puberty, born my children, and aged with time. Yet each part of it is irreplaceable, uniquely qualified to serve my mortal existence. And that thrills me.

When Christ looks at his hands, I do not think he recoils in disgust at the changes his body endured to give us life. Still, many of us habitually belittle ourselves and our bodies—the vessels of the Lord—endowed with premortal responsibility to carry the sacred souls of God’s children into mortality, because of the very changes they have undergone to serve God’s purposes.

Motherhood is a unique privilege of knowing someone from their infancy and watching them grow, but it’s also an exercise in spiritual growth and personal development. Willing mothers change, repent, and grow—embracing their emotional stretch marks as evidence of how much they have learned since becoming a steward of souls.

When I see my mom again, I hope that she will take me in her arms. I will ask her how she became a glorified, perfected being, with limitless creative energy, health, and wisdom. And when I ask her what happened to help her become who she is, I hope she will look straight at me and say kindly, “You did.”

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This essay by Miranda H. Lotz was a finalist in the 2024 BYU Studies personal essay contest.

*A Word in Season: Isaiah's Reception in the Book of Mormon*  
by Joseph M. Spencer

University of Illinois Press, 2023

*Reviewed by Joshua M. Sears*

This groundbreaking study by Joseph Spencer, who teaches in Religious Education at Brigham Young University, invites both Latter-day Saints and those outside our faith to consider what the Book of Mormon has to say about the relevancy of prophecy and scripture in our modern world.

*A Word in Season* makes this invitation through two primary tasks. The first is to analyze how Isaiah is used in the Book of Mormon and make the case that Isaiah's prophecies are not incidental but one of the Book of Mormon's major organizing forces. Readers today first encounter Isaiah in the record of Nephi, who "likens" Isaiah's prophecies to his own vision of the latter days, using one revelatory source to interpret the other (see 1 Ne. 19:23–24). Isaiah reappears hundreds of years later when a corrupt Nephite colony spars with the prophet Abinadi over the meaning of Isaiah 52:7–10, with the colony's leadership having apparently twisted Nephi's interpretive strategy to justify their own self-serving ends. In response, Abinadi undercuts their use of scripture by abandoning the program of likening completely, offering instead a Christological reading of Isaiah that focuses on the atoning sacrifice of Jesus (see Mosiah 12–15). Spencer makes the case that this new approach, while effective, had the consequence of dampening subsequent Nephite interest in Isaiah—after all, if Isaiah is simply describing the coming of Christ, why should anyone bother wrestling with his complexity when Benjamin and other Nephite prophets predict Christ's coming much more clearly?

However, the Book of Mormon's midbook disinterest in Isaiah is definitively reversed when the resurrected Christ appears to the Nephites and recentralizes Nephi's focus on the latter-day fulfillment of God's covenant with Israel. Marking the shift, Christ selects as his first

Isaianic quotation the very passage Abinadi had interpreted and assigns it a different meaning. Whereas Abinadi centered salvation history on the Messiah's suffering and death, Christ focuses on the covenants that were granted anciently to Israel and await fulfillment in the last days, incorporating Abinadi's picture into a broader historical view of how the Messiah will redeem his people.

Spencer treats Nephi's use of Isaiah last (following the order in which Joseph Smith first dictated the Book of Mormon), which enables him to bring out how much Nephi shares his approach to Isaiah with 3 Nephi's Christ, although Nephi takes a lot more space to develop his approach. Through all of this, Spencer makes the case that the Book of Mormon programmatically uses Isaiah in creative and sometimes conflicting ways as a means of reflecting on the nature of prophecy and scripture.

Spencer's second primary task is to situate the Book of Mormon's "remarkably inventive" (xv) use of Isaiah among the interpretations offered throughout Christian and (to a lesser extent) Jewish history. While we have existing studies that explore Isaiah's place in the Book of Mormon,<sup>1</sup> none have attempted to systematically fit the Book of Mormon into Isaiah's larger reception history, let alone make the case that the Book of Mormon is a significant contribution to it.<sup>2</sup> Imagine Nephi's take on a passage set alongside Augustine's, or Christ's approach to Old Testament prophecy compared with the Millerites'.<sup>3</sup> To help us see where the Book of Mormon is familiar or disruptive, Spencer imagines an "ideal reader/listener," a theoretical person who, when engaging with the Book of Mormon for the first time in 1830, is so thoroughly versed in Isaiah's existing reception history that they appreciate just how the Book of Mormon fits in (22–24). It turns out, according to Spencer's constructed "ideal reader," that the Book of Mormon is often outside the mainstream, operating on the fringes of standard biblical interpretation if not out of bounds altogether. However, the creativity emerging on the margins is part of how the Book of Mormon makes some of its most significant claims.

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1. For example, the classic collection of essays in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998).

2. Certainly, many Latter-day Saints have *claimed* that the Book of Mormon is history's best interpreter of Isaiah, but this is typically assumed without actually engaging with any other interpreters to demonstrate that their claim holds up.

3. Millerism was a nineteenth-century Christian movement whose descendants include the Seventh-day Adventist Church.



Bringing his two primary tasks together, Spencer argues that the Book of Mormon's own internal debates about the meaning of Isaiah's prophecies collectively outline an approach to scripture that can secure the relevancy of Isaiah—and scripture itself—in our modern world, a world “rapidly falling under the sway of widespread secularism” (xvii). Spencer sees the climax of this argument coming early in the Book of Mormon (at least in publication order, though it appears near the end of dictation order), when Nephi creatively draws upon Isaiah 29 to explore how the world will react to the coming forth of new revelation in the form of the Book of Mormon (see 2 Ne. 26:12–27:35). The “learned” reject “the words of the book” (the translation published by Joseph Smith) because they insist first on having access to “the book” itself (the gold plates). In response to their privileging of evidentiary proofs, God enacts a “turning of things upside down” by affirming that “I am a God of miracles” and that he will only respond to people “according to their faith” (see 2 Ne. 27:6–27).<sup>4</sup> By critiquing latter-day skepticism, Spencer says, the Book of Mormon “studies what it might mean to restore to Christianity its original radical nature” (218). Is it possible to accept the witness of twelve men who saw the risen Christ if we automatically preclude the witness of twelve men who saw the gold plates (213)?

*A Word in Season* offers much to reflect on. First, while most readers recognize that Isaiah is something of a big deal in the Book of Mormon, we sometimes exhibit a communal tendency to downplay just how embedded these Isaiah texts are. When our manuals include Isaiah quotes in a reading block, they tend to focus as much as possible on the Isaiah-adjacent parts. Teachers are often much more comfortable declaring that “great are the words of Isaiah” than they are diving into the actual words of Isaiah. Some of us are conditioned to see the “Isaiah chapters” as extraneous and even distracting from more important Book of Mormon chapters.<sup>5</sup> But while believers in the Book of Mormon rightly bristle at the suggestion of critics that Joseph Smith simply dumped in

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4. For a standalone treatment of these passages from 2 Nephi 27, see Joseph M. Spencer, “The Book, the Words of the Book: What the Book of Mormon Says about Its Own Coming Forth,” *Religious Educator* 17, no. 1 (2016): 64–81.

5. I see this in the Book of Mormon classes I teach at Brigham Young University, where students sometimes puzzle over why our class is covering Isaianic blocks like 1 Nephi 20–21 or 2 Nephi 12–24 at the same speed as “regular” chapters. Their previous experience apparently led them to view these blocks as hard to understand but easy to summarize and, therefore, best treated quickly. In written reviews of the class, some students have complained about being tested on figures like Ahaz (2 Ne. 17) or events like the Assyrian invasion of Judah (scattered throughout 2 Ne. 12–20), since these “Old Testament” things

Isaiah as filler whenever “his literary reservoir . . . ran dry,”<sup>6</sup> we’re not taking the book much more seriously if we assume Nephi himself was just filling space. *A Word in Season* is one of the most compelling cases I have read for treating the prophecies of Isaiah as a fundamental part of the message—something we cannot divorce from the rest of the Book of Mormon. Given our collective anxiety about Isaiah, Spencer’s work should provoke serious discussions about how we can better understand and utilize the Book of Mormon’s favorite Hebrew prophet.

Second, through its engagement with Isaiah’s reception history, *A Word in Season* can help us see Book of Mormon doctrinal contributions that are less visible in isolation. For example, Christians will perceive Abinadi as being eminently traditional in using Isaiah 53 to describe the rejection, vicarious suffering, and death of Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup> Christians have read Isaiah 53 this way at least since the texts of the New Testament (see Matt. 8:17; Mark 15:28; Luke 22:37; John 12:38; Acts 8:32–33; Rom. 4:25; 10:16; Heb. 9:28; and 1 Pet. 2:22–25). But while Abinadi’s approach to Isaiah 53 seems generally inoffensive and mainstream (53–54), it gets less so when Spencer dives into the details. Abinadi shares with early and medieval Christian interpreters an understanding that Isaiah 53:8 (“who shall declare his generation?”) describes Christ’s incarnation, but that interpretation had fallen out of favor centuries before the Book of Mormon’s appearance, making Abinadi look “quaint” in a nineteenth-century context (55–60). Where Abinadi fully departs from Christian interpretation is his insistence that Christ’s “seed” (Isa. 53:10) and the messengers who publish peace (Isa. 52:7) describe *pre-Christian* prophets and disciples. In contrast, traditional Christianity has routinely insisted that the “seed” applies exclusively to those who have accepted Jesus as the Savior *since* the time of his Crucifixion and Resurrection (62–65). The fact that Abinadi’s approach to Isaiah 53 otherwise aligns

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don’t “fit” within a Book of Mormon class. In other words, these students don’t seem to think of the Isaiah quotations as being Book of Mormon texts in their own right.

6. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd ed. (Knopf, 1971), 58.

7. Among the Nephites, the case has been made that even before Abinadi they had a history of using Isaiah 53 Christologically. See John W. Welch, “Isaiah 53, Mosiah 14, and the Book of Mormon,” in Parry and Welch, *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, 305–8. However, it is very possible that Abinadi’s approach was novel. The textual evidence for earlier Nephites using Isaiah 53 to describe Christ is scarce to nonexistent, so the argument in favor of a long tradition depends on thematic overlap with Nephi and Jacob’s teachings rather than explicit quotation.

so well with traditional Christian interpretations actually highlights, Spencer argues, this major point where Abinadi subversively breaks with them. This in turn contributes to the Book of Mormon's broader insistence that the Christian gospel was available to God's children well before Christ appeared in the flesh (65–68).

This example of Spencer putting the Book of Mormon into conversation with Isaiah's reception history is one of many that helped me better appreciate how the Book of Mormon was designed to help latter-day readers understand "the very points of [the Savior's] doctrine" (1 Ne. 15:14). If we lack a meaningful grasp of the history of Christian theology, we may not appreciate all the ways the Book of Mormon corrects and expands on points of controversy and misunderstanding. *A Word in Season* helpfully brings out those contributions.

Third, *A Word in Season* challenges its readers—both Latter-day Saints and others—to think more carefully about what questions we're trying to answer when we seriously consider the Book of Mormon. Since the 1830s, most Book of Mormon scholarship has centered on the book's historicity, with arguments trying to prove or disprove its claim to be a translation of an ancient text. Spencer's reading, however, suggests that this development is highly "ironic" because "Nephi himself argues against the validity of all such debate" (219). Nephi never claims, Spencer says, that these questions don't matter, and Spencer himself acknowledges how important they are. But in Nephi's use of Isaiah, Spencer sees a call to avoid *prioritizing* questions of the Book of Mormon's historicity. Such questions, though important, should "come only after a genuinely *faithful* reading of the book, one that does not decide on its meaning or its value or its truth without having first demonstrated a kind of fidelity to its call" (220, emphasis original). This provocative analysis invites reflection about whether we have been so focused on questions of historicity that we, at times, unintentionally neglect to mine the Book of Mormon for answers to other questions of great spiritual and social importance.<sup>8</sup>

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8. See also the section "Apologetics as an Enterprise" in Nicholas J. Frederick and Joseph M. Spencer, "The Book of Mormon and the Academy," *Religious Educator* 21, no. 2 (2020): 184–87. They argue that our apologetic efforts should be about much more than defending ancient authorship and should show people why the Book of Mormon is so crucially relevant to their deepest questions and practical challenges. They write, "A number of students come into our classes fully convinced that the Book of Mormon is ancient but seem unconvinced that they have more to learn from it" (185).

Finally, it is worth noting what *A Word in Season* signifies about the field of Book of Mormon studies.<sup>9</sup> This isn't the first study of the Book of Mormon to be published by an academic press, but it does show how far things have come. By way of comparison, when Grant Hardy's seminal narrative analysis, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, was published in 2010, it was not a given that the Book of Mormon would be of serious interest to scholars who lacked faith commitments to the Church, so Hardy had to persuade them that "the Book of Mormon is a much more interesting text . . . than has generally been acknowledged."<sup>10</sup> Despite how compellingly he made this argument, the book was regularly punctuated by what Kimberly Matheson has called "performances of shame"—acknowledgments of the Book of Mormon's more inelegant features, which rhetorically served to ease in critical readers who may not have been open to learning of the Book of Mormon's strengths had they not also felt validated in their assumptions about its weaknesses.<sup>11</sup> If such posturing was the academic price of admission a decade and a half ago, *A Word in Season* is remarkable for its consistently positive tone and its unqualified assumption that *of course* the Book of Mormon deserves to be taken seriously. We should be encouraged that more scholars outside our faith are willing to engage with our signature scripture and take up Spencer's invitation to consider more than just the book's historical provenance.

I imagine that serious readers of the Book of Mormon will find, as I did, points of disagreement with Spencer. I occasionally felt that he attributed intentionality to Book of Mormon characters in places that went beyond what we can know from the text,<sup>12</sup> and there are places where his exegetical take on a passage is a bit different than mine.<sup>13</sup> However,

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9. For a broader analysis of the state of the field, see *Book of Mormon Studies: An Introduction and Guide*, ed. Daniel Becerra, Amy Easton-Flake, Nicholas J. Frederick, and Joseph M. Spencer (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2022).

10. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford University Press, 2010), xvii.

11. See Kimberly Matheson, "Emboldened and Embarrassed: The Tenor of Contemporary Book of Mormon Studies and the Role of Grant Hardy," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 31 (2022): 75–99.

12. For example, Spencer suggests several times that Abinadi may have deliberately sought to undermine Nephi's hermeneutical approach to Isaiah and to lead the Nephites away from Isaian interpretation altogether (73–76). I find these suggestions highly speculative.

13. For example, Spencer makes much of the semantic overlap between "generation" (Isa. 53:8) and "seed" (Isa. 53:10), both of which can concern progeny (see 42–44). However, while "generation" in the sense of "what is generated" can refer to generated

I always felt I was being challenged in a good way, and I learned (and unlearned) a great deal. This is one of those books where the insights come so plentifully that some of the most interesting gems are tucked away in the endnotes. Those who have read overlapping material in Spencer's previous works will also find that various arguments have been refined.<sup>14</sup> I recommend *A Word in Season* and hope it will provoke new conversations about the Book of Mormon as "a marvelous work and a wonder" (2 Ne. 27:26).

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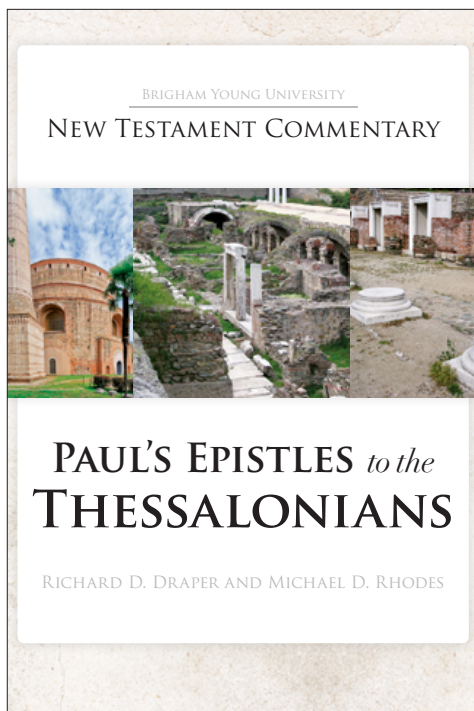
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children in English (as well as with its etymological ancestor, the Latin *generatio*, which early Christians did in fact identify in Isaiah 53:8 as a reference to Christ's incarnation), this does not work so well in Hebrew, where the word's usual sense refers to the period of time when a man lives.

14. For example, Spencer has previously received criticism that his argument for a major break between 2 Nephi chapters 5 and 6 overlooked the most obvious literary division Nephi himself had created: the boundary between the books of First Nephi and Second Nephi. *A Word in Season* maintains that 2 Nephi 6–30 is signposted by Nephi as the heart of his project, but it does more to address why Nephi structured his writings into two books (158–66).

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First and Second Thessalonians are likely the earliest surviving records from the primitive Christian era. Both appear to have been written a mere twenty years after the Lord's ministry closed. These Epistles show how certain aspects of the Christian religion were understood, taught, and promulgated. They also show that the earliest Christians wrestled with aspects of their religion and were trying to more fully understand them. Some Christians misunderstood certain teachings and, as a result, opened the door to forces that could destroy the nascent Church.

Paul offers context and answers to various issues that both the Thessalonians Saints and those of today face. His answers bolster faith, provide understanding, and offer counterpoints to views opposed to the restored gospel. This commentary, though focused on the text of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, clearly elucidates and examines these same issues.

This work is the first comprehensive study of Thessalonians ever produced by Latter-day Saint scholars. In addition to providing commentary on every verse in these two important letters, it also provides a rendering of the preserved Greek text into modern English. The result is that many passages become clearer and more understandable. This rendition is set side by side with the King James Version for easy comparison.

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