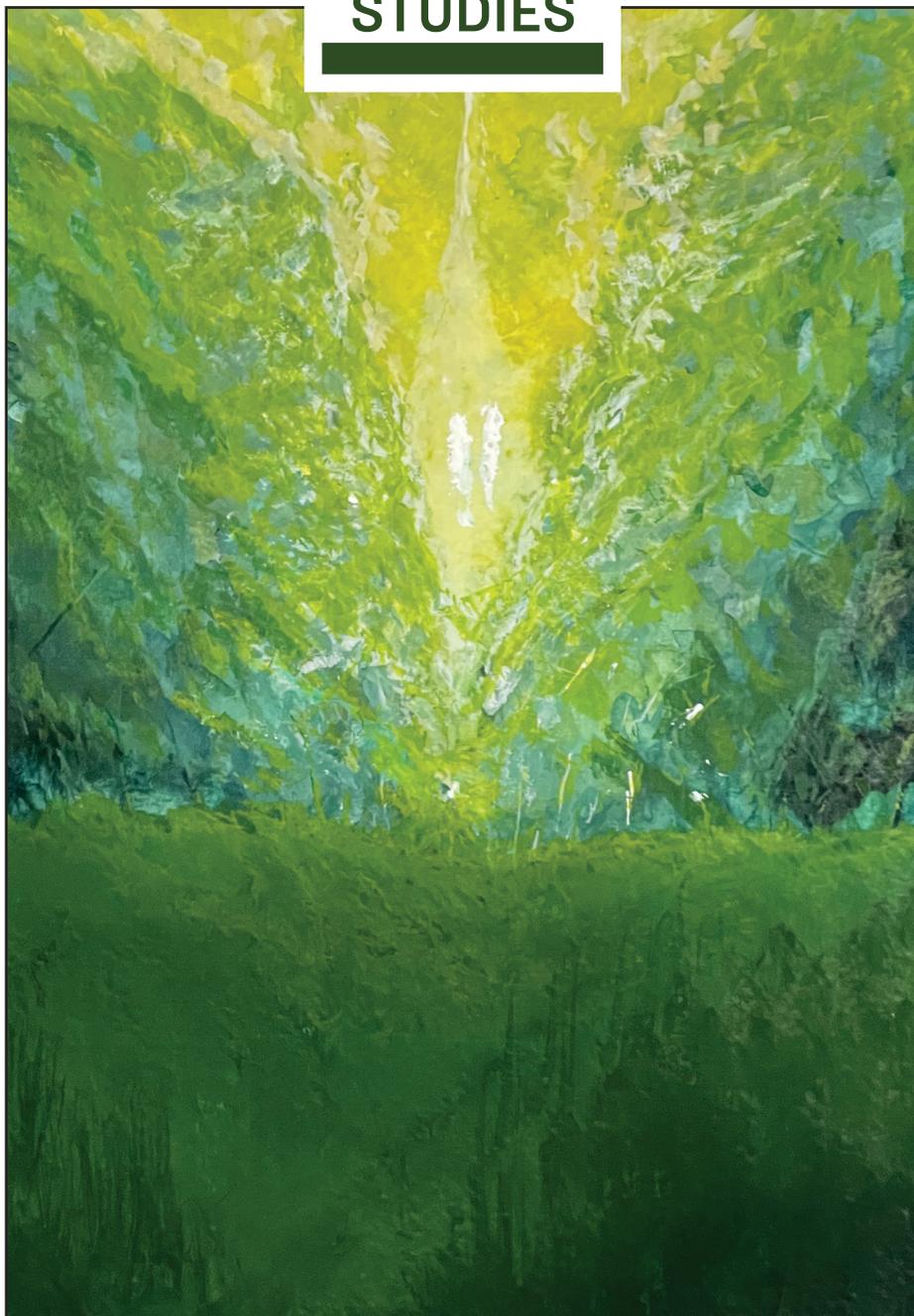


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SCHOLARSHIP ALIGNED WITH THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST

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# BYU STUDIES

Volume 64 • Number 1 • 2025

## Articles

- 4** Brigham Young Unfiltered:  
His Life, Conversion, and Faith in His Own Words  
LaJean Purcell Carruth
- 21** “Not Only Men but Women Also”:  
An Argument for Alma’s Intentional Inclusion of Women  
Cassidy Nichole Pyper
- 45** This Branch of the Church:  
The Early Development of Local Administration  
in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,  
Part 1, The Emergent Church, 1830–1845  
Brandon Plewe
- 81** The Wonder *Is* Scripture  
Jared Halverson
- 95** The Seven Seals, the Age of the Earth, and Ongoing Revelation  
Nicholas J. Frederick
- 97** What Are We to Make of the Gold Plates?  
Richard Lyman Bushman
- 115** “Struck with Wonder and Amazement”:  
On Reading the Book of Mosiah  
Joseph M. Spencer
- 145** Royal Skousen’s Book of Mormon Critical Text Project  
Roger Terry

## **Essay**

- 138** Seam Allowance  
Sarah Hafen d'Evegnée

## **Cover Art**

- 20** Artist's Note on *This Is . . .*  
Eli Peterson

## **Poetry**

- 114** James Walks Home from Nain  
Robbie Taggart

## **Book Review**

- 160** *Focusing the Lens of Exploration: Elizabeth Dennistoun Wood Kane, a Photographic Journey Through the Life of a 19th Century Polymath* by the Kane Historic Preservation Society and Brigham Young University  
Reviewed by Jeffrey Paul Thompson



Photograph of Brigham Young, 1865, from Susa Young Gates family memorabilia, 1865–circa 1928. Courtesy Church History Library.

# Brigham Young Unfiltered

## His Life, Conversion, and Faith in His Own Words

*LaJean Purcell Carruth*

On October 6, 1867, the Saints met in the new Salt Lake Tabernacle for the first time. Brigham Young rose, made some remarks about the still unfinished state of the organ, and then dedicated the tabernacle to the Lord. This dedicatory prayer was completely unknown until I found the original shorthand record of it several years ago and transcribed it; prior to that time, the earliest known dedication of the tabernacle was 1875. He prayed, “O God our Heavenly Father who dwells in the heavens, in the name of thy Son Jesus Christ we come before thee at this time to worship thee. On this occasion we ask for the aid of thy Holy Spirit to teach us how to pray, what we should ask for, [and] how to ask that we may receive.”<sup>1</sup> This and other prayers by Brigham Young tell us a lot about the man: in prayer, the “Lion of the Lord” was a humble, pleading servant.

I am a professional transcriber of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century documents written in both Pitman and Taylor shorthand at the Church History Library, Salt Lake City. I have spent much of my career—twenty-five years—transcribing the words of Brigham Young.

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1. For the entire dedicatory prayer, see “Brigham Young, October 6, 1867, Dedication of Salt Lake Tabernacle” 2, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, typescript in Church History Department Pitman Shorthand Transcriptions, 2013–2024, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/9d78a5af-a73d-43cc-a641-015b46e70560/0/0>. Punctuation and capitalization for this and all other quotes in this paper have been silently added for readability. Struck words have also been removed. Bracketed words have been inserted where appropriate. The transcripts of the complete sermons can be accessed by the links to the Church History Library catalog.

Many of the sermons spoken by Brigham Young and others were reported in Pitman shorthand but never transcribed until I transcribed them, many over 150 years after they were spoken. These previously untranscribed sermons by Brigham Young include many statements that he made about himself, his life, his conversion, and his faith. All quotes in this paper are from my transcriptions of Brigham Young's sermons from the original shorthand records, from previously untranscribed sermons, or in a very few cases, from sermons that were transcribed incorrectly.<sup>2</sup> This article is about what Brigham Young said about Brigham Young—in his own words.

## Early Years

Brigham Young grew up in a very strict, very poor home. “After I was 23 years old [I had] 11 days of education. [I was] brought up in the woods. My father wanted to be wealthy, and [was] plowing the new countries to make himself wealthy. My father never bought me but one hat from the world and it cost him a dollar. I do not think my father ever furnished me more than two or three pair of shoes in his life. I do not consider I am the worst and lowest.”<sup>3</sup>

At that time, children, or the labor of children, belonged to their parents until they were twenty-one years old; Brigham Young's father told him when he was sixteen that he could have his time, that is, he could leave and support himself, which he did from that age on, learning many

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2. For more information on how the *Journal of Discourses* differs from the original shorthand records, see Gerrit J. Dirkmaat and LaJean Purcell Carruth, “The Prophets Have Spoken, but What Did They Say? Examining the Differences between George D. Watt's Original Shorthand Notes and the Sermons Published in the *Journal of Discourses*,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (2016): 24–118; and “Preached vs. Published,” three blogs published by the Church History Department: LaJean Purcell Carruth, “Preached vs. Published: Shorthand Record Discrepancies (Part 1 of 3),” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, August 4, 2020, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/blog/preached-versus-published-part-1-of-3>; LaJean Purcell Carruth, “Preached vs. Published: Shorthand Record Discrepancies (Part 2 of 3),” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, August 11, 2020, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/blog/preached-versus-published-part-2-of-3>; and LaJean Purcell Carruth, “Preached vs. Published: Shorthand Record Discrepancies (Part 3 of 3),” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, August 18, 2020, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/blog/preached-vs-published-part-3-of-3>. See also note 11 herein.

3. “Brigham Young, 19 February 1865, Centerville,” 7, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/e0bb6c85-d950-40b7-a542-0157dc9c190d/0/0>.

things in the process. “I went to school 11 days, [the] most school I ever had, but from [the] time I was 16 years old I clothed and fed myself. . . . I have been in [the] school of economy since [I was] 16.”<sup>4</sup> He worked hard and took pride in the very high quality of his work.

## Conversion

Brigham Young searched many years from his youth up to find a “Bible church, a church whose teachings and practices agreed with the Bible” but was unable to find one. He was finally convinced that there was not a Bible church or a Bible Christian on the earth.

I lived long enough to learn that the whole sectarian world was ignorant, was in darkness <if> they were not in unbelief but supposed they were. They were in ignorance. They didn’t know God and Jesus Christ. They had not the words of eternal life. They didn’t possess the holy priesthood, they hadn’t the keys of the priesthood, [and] they had not power to say to this man, that man, this woman, that woman, do as I tell you and I will promise you eternal life. But [they would say] come to the anxious seat [and] give all to Christ.<sup>5</sup>

He learned about the gold plates from a newspaper article shortly after Moroni’s first visit to Joseph Smith. “4 years before [Joseph Smith obtained the plates], I picked up a newspaper and there [read that] . . . there is a young man living in town of Manchester, Ontario County, that has found plates in the earth. He says it is a history of aborigines of our country, giving details of [the] forefathers of the Indians now living here, and who knows but what our Indians will have a Bible as well as the Jews? And that was all that was said.”<sup>6</sup>

Brigham had been disappointed so many times in his search for a Bible church that he was very skeptical at first, but he was interested enough to follow the travels and activities of Joseph Smith through the years.

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4. “Brigham Young, 3 October 1852,” [6], transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/1767f6d1-2627-4ec2-b2ce-2155e1676b16/0/0>.

5. “Brigham Young, 4 April 1868, Afternoon,” 7, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/9e8514fd-14a8-4250-81d0-8dd651b49f9c/0/0>.

6. “Brigham Young, 24 February 1868; School of the Prophets,” 9, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/d82805b1-dc0c-4ce8-ae9c-47a974093e94/0/0>.

Although I was not a member of the church until [it was] 2 years old, yet I knew very well about Joseph Smith before he organized the church. Brother [Heber C.] Kimball and I only lived 14 miles [from] where the plates [were] taken from the ground. We could hear of the doing of this, about travels to Pennsylvania, over to New York State to place called<sup>7</sup> and back to Palmyra and so forth, and we had the history of the young man all the time. And in [18]30, immediately after the organization of the church, the brethren commenced to preach. I recollect my father and myself early took it into our hearts [that] we [would] go to hear Elder [Oliver] Cowdery preach. I turned to look for my horse to get up a little wagon Sunday morning, [but] I found my horse [was] lame [and] that we could not go, some circumstances transpired that we didn't go. If only [we had] seen Oliver Cowdery [or] Joseph Smith, as soon as the church [was] organized, and known or seen any person [who had] explained to us and given us the reason to hope then, though I expect we should have embraced the faith as we did, when we did.<sup>8</sup>

I can feel the longing in his words, “If only . . .”

He heard others talk about their efforts to get the gold plates from the hill before Joseph Smith obtained them.

I knew one astrologer. I heard him say when Joseph was looking for the Book of Mormon, they was in the hill, and a number of men knew there was a treasure there. Old Father [in longhand: Beman], [a] Baptist minister and several others sent down to town of [illegible] close where I lived. He went up there 3 times to see if they could not get that treasure. This was before Father Beaman was acquainted with Joseph, but [he] knew Joseph had said there was a treasure there and expected to get it. They sent for this astrologer, he was [the] smartest one ever. I saw Job Sanderson walk and put them together, more wisdom in his little finger than all the astrologers here. I saw that man. He went up the last time there, the last he goes on first of September, a few days before Joseph got the plates. [He] came into David Smith's store. I was there [when] he came in. He was the greatest swearer I ever heard, a man of great learning. [He had] been educated in America and sent to France and Italy and had received his education, a man could become a priest and turned out to be a devil. He commenced swearing about this loot and damned him and said, “I believe he will get the treasure I cannot get. They flee

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7. The transcription here states, “Blank space is in shorthand; Watt did not record the place name.”

8. “Brigham Young, 9 October 1865 (two sermons),” 5–6, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/7ed2c0e8-1e2c-45ab-86e4-57750058ba61/0/0>.

away from me. This is the third time I [have] been there, and I cannot go to the spot and I cannot get it.”<sup>9</sup>

In a sermon admonishing departing missionaries to be patient with those they would teach and give them time to study things out, Brigham Young said that although he had a copy of the Book of Mormon in his hands shortly after its publication in March 1830, he studied it and the doctrine and revelations for two years before he joined the Church.

When the Book of Mormon was first printed I had it [in my] hands two [or] three weeks after. Did I believe, though the man [who] brought [it] told me the same things? Says he, “This is the gospel of salvation, revelation [the] Lord has brought forth for [the] redemption of Israel, [the] gospel according to Jesus Christ and [his] apostles. You must be baptized for [the] remission of sins [or] you [will] be damned.” Hold on! says I. The mantle of traditions was over me to that degree and my pre-possessed feelings I had woven. I had beheld all the days of life that the traditions of people all religion they had; I had got a mantle over myself. Says I, Wait a little while. What is the doctrine of [the] book and of [the] revelations the Lord has given? Let me apply my heart to them. And after [I have] done this, [it is] my right to know for myself as much as any man upon the earth. Do not be in hurry now. It took me two years before I made up my mind to receive that book. I knew it was true as well as I believe [the] sight of my eyes, [the] touch of [my] finger, and all my senses [or] I never would have embraced it to this day. It would have all been without form [or] comeliness to me now. [I said,] Wait a little while; I have not time to prove all things from the Bible.<sup>10</sup>

He was introduced to the gospel by men who were not learned, but who brought the power of God.

I praised Christ but disbelieved the religions of the day and [thought] that their practice [was] all folly and nonsense, [which] I believe pretty much to day. When I heard the gospel, men came to our neighborhood, they could not quote half dozen passage[s] of scriptures. They could not talk longer than every brother here today, some 3 minutes some 11, 13 and 9, but if they got up and talked 3 minutes they did pretty well. But

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9. “Brigham Young, 3 February 1868, School of the Prophets,” [2], transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/c60399d6-18d3-42fa-aeba-a9dcbae4a3a8/0/0>.

10. “Brigham Young, 8 August 1852,” 20–21, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/9874d297-4315-416d-a499-7d5899f342b2/0/0>.

they brought the power of God with them, and the Holy Ghost spoke through them, and spoke to my heart.<sup>11</sup>

He used his experience with the Book of Mormon to encourage the Saints to ask God to know if things were true.

I have no doubt but what the spirit will bear witness to every such person that desires the truth and wishes to receive it. Upon this ground and upon this very principle I embraced Mormonism. When the Book of Mormon came to me, when the revelations came to me, when witnesses came and declared that Joseph Smith [was a] prophet, seer, and revelator, [and] bore their testimony, the revelations neither the Book of Mormon was testimony to me until I got the revelations for myself [that] it was true and of God. [I] never admitted the fact in my own feelings or judgment that any of this was true pertaining to the gospel of salvation as brought forth through the Prophet Joseph Smith until the Lord revealed that to me by his Holy Spirit.

I admitted the facts as far as it went, but man's testimony did me no good, for [a] man to say he was prophet himself or to have witness to declare it that heaven [was] open, [the] Lord had spoken to him was no witness to me to benefit me or prepare me to enjoy the blessings until I could . . . receive testimony for myself. Upon this grand principle men [and] women [are] capable of judging the things of God and those that are not of him.<sup>12</sup>

Like many new converts, Brigham Young had very high expectations for other members of the Church, and, like many new converts and longtime members, he was deeply disappointed in the behavior of other Church members.

When I received the spirit of this religion that we have embraced, that so far enveloped me in love, purity, good thought, and good feelings, I could not but believe that every man and woman that came into this kingdom was as pure as an angel. Here in I was mortally deceived. . . . [When] I received the gospel, I put up my book[s], I laid them aside, I did not expect to charge another particle of labor [f]or anything I should do. I calculated to live with the church and had not the least idea that book

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11. "Brigham Young, 2 September 1866," 2, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/cb5fc7f5-ebd0-4c03-8005-bb191e643788/0/0>.

12. "Brigham Young, 7 October 1853," [2-3], transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/b840245a-d8ef-4aba-8664-f3b8bee8da94/0/0>.

account[s] [were] needed in this church. I calculated that every man would do every thing necessary to do for themselves and something more, and hand it to send the gospel, gather up the poor saints, learn them how to get their living, and how to do for themselves, and no one should say aught they had, they possessed. I found myself mistaken.<sup>13</sup>

## On Joseph Smith

Brigham Young was baptized in April 1832. That fall, he went to Kirtland, Ohio, to meet the Prophet Joseph Smith for the first time. On his way, he visited with a minister, who was greatly opposed to Joseph Smith.

I recollect when I was going to see [the] brethren for the first time, one of my Methodist friends, I don't know whether Methodist or not but he was a preacher. I recollect calling on him; he began to tell what old Joe Smith [had] done, [that Joseph] himself [had] done this, that, and [the] other thing. What [power did he do it] by? By the power of the devil! [He said that Joseph Smith was] one of wickedest men [to] ever live. Says I, "Hold on a little! Let me talk. Joseph Smith I have never seen, to my knowledge, though I have always lived close by him. And the revelations that the Lord has revealed through him is the same as he revealed through his ancient prophets and apostles, and by his Son Jesus Christ. I have taken the rule laid down there, and in the late revelations, to know whether they are true or not. [I thought], if they are true, the Lord will tell [me], he will answer [me], he will reveal [it to me]. Go to the Father in [the] name of Jesus Christ, and all these things shall be made known. Now," says I, "I don't know anything about Joseph. But the doctrine [that has] been revealed through him, I do know to be the plan of salvation according to the New and Old Testament[s], and the signs God has given me. He may act like the devil, for aught I care—I didn't call him to be a prophet, deliver the plates of [the] Book of Mormon, [or] send Moroni to administer to him. And I had nothing to do with him, and don't care to the latest day he lived what he do. It is not my business to call in question an act of his life. He was in the hands of him that called him, and the doctrine, and the author could do as he pleased with his servant."<sup>14</sup>

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13. "Brigham Young, 26 March 1865," 4, 11, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/2c83dae6-dd2f-4e87-afd5-2c13c0f4e4fa/0/0>.

14. "Brigham Young, 7 April 1859," 16, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/093e861b-f5af-4d04-aa21-c4bdcd2bc4c6/0/0>.

The Lord “could do as he pleased with his servant.” It was the Lord’s job to call his servants, and only the Lord could judge those whom he called.

Brigham Young described his first meeting with Joseph Smith:

After I was baptized and built quite a number of branches, I had to see the prophet in the fall. I wanted the hand of prophet in my hand, his eye to look in mine. I wanted to look in his eye, and I wanted to read that man’s heart, and I wanted to know for myself and not for another. I saw him and heard him speak; he was chopping in the woods. [He] stopped and shook hands with us. All right. He put down his ax. I said, “I can chop this,” so we chopped and loaded a little while, and then [he] said, “Come, let’s go to the house.” I knew then for myself and not for another. I wanted to see this man that dictated and led and guided and the Mormons where they lived together and then for the world. I defy it to produce any community like this that is governed and controlled by words and words alone.<sup>15</sup>

Brigham gained a firm testimony of Joseph Smith, and he never wavered, ever. He earnestly sought to learn all he could from him.

I know how I received the knowledge that I have got. I have seen the time when I first saw Joseph, I had but just one prayer and that was all the time I could hear Joseph and hear his doctrine. . . . I would watch him; I was with him several years before I ever opened my mouth. I was with him when [he] received revelation and so was Brother Kimball and others. . . . An angel never watched him closer than I did, and that is what has given me the knowledge I have to day.<sup>16</sup>

Brigham Young traveled on many missions, including preaching in Canada, before he was baptized.<sup>17</sup> He described how he obtained food and lodging while traveling and preaching the gospel.

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15. “Brigham Young, 20 November 1864,” 11, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/bf80c07f-14af-4c9c-a792-870dfe360018/0/0>.

16. “Brigham Young, 8 October 1866,” 6, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/6f60b02a-236e-4135-92b1-bc22e54ab3d1/0/0>.

17. “Brigham Young, 9 April 1853,” transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/61a07e7e-336e-4a65-8901-5243fc4488ec/0/0>; “Brigham Young, 6 April 1860, afternoon,” transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/4dcb a2a2-f8f6-4bf7-afa5-adf3f80dade8/0/0>.

[George A. Smith] commenced his preaching [when he was] 17 years old, traveling [with] blood in his shoes. [He] traveled [and] asked if [he] might stay over night. “No sir; go to [the] next house.” “Will you keep Mormon elders here?” “No!” Next house, “Will you feed a Mormon elder?” “No! Mormon? What is Mormon?” But I recollect [hearing] yes yes! “You are a follower of Joe Smith? Away with you, we don’t want you here!” Elders have been turned out of doors scores and hundreds of times. I [can’t] say that is the case myself, and though I have traveled without purse or scrip about as much as any other man in the church, but I rather lean upon the office and doings of the Apostle Paul. He said it was no harm to take them by guile. If I was hungry and stopped in a house, I asked them for something to eat. I don’t know I ever told them I was a Mormon elder until I got what I wanted. I thought I was justified in this. If I [was hungry and] went into a house, I [would] make known my wants, and by time I got through eating they were willing to talk about Mormon[ism] [or] anything else. If I wanted to stay over night, I made known my want. I don’t recollect of one circumstance but what I was made welcome and could call again and was welcome to every table lodging and friendship.<sup>18</sup>

Brother Brigham must have been an engaging, very pleasant guest.

## Missouri Persecutions

The Saints were driven from their homes in Jackson County, Missouri, in the fall of 1833. In 1834, a group of Latter-day Saints called Zion’s Camp traveled from Kirtland and other places to Missouri with Joseph Smith. They tried to help the Saints who had been driven away and restore them to their lands. When they returned home without fighting and without restoring the Missouri Saints to their lands, many considered the venture a failure. Brigham Young later related a conversation he had with one such person.

I recollect in the year [18]34 [that] 205 [of us] was going up to Jackson County. We did not go [into Jackson County]. We did not reinstate the brethren. We returned and the Lord gave Joseph a revelation concerning this matter. I understood it. I recollect when I returned home the question was asked me by some of the elders: “Brother Brigham, what have you gained by your going up to Missouri?” “Knowledge.” “What is the advantage of Joseph calling a company together to lead them to

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18. “Brigham Young, 20 August 1865,” 4, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/6514365e-8bbd-4eda-afce-e81e4fea4c52/0/0>.

Missouri? They have accomplished nothing!” Says I to the individual that was talking with me, “For the knowledge I have gained, this is the [use?] in leading the companies, gathering saints, dealing with myself, overcoming myself, governing and controlling the spirits of others. For this knowledge I have gained, I would not give it for this town, and then I will add the county of Geauga, and I will add the state of Ohio, too, and every person there is in it to be our slaves, and every particle of property in it to be my own individual property. You did not go, did you?” “No.” “No, and there is something we have gained [that] you will never learn.”<sup>19</sup>

During Zion’s Camp, Brigham Young gained the experience of watching Joseph Smith and learning from him how to lead a group of people. This became invaluable four years later when Joseph Smith was imprisoned in Liberty Jail, and Brigham Young and the Twelve had to direct the Saint’s removal from Missouri to Illinois, and then again, years after that when he had to direct the migration to the Salt Lake Valley.

Brigham Young described how his father, John Young (baptized into the Church on April 5, 1832), felt when the Saints were expelled from the state of Missouri in 1838: “My father was a Revolutionary [War] soldier. ‘Now,’ says he, ‘I want to live no longer. I have fought for the liberty of my country. <If there is> there is no liberty left, no freedom left for the inhabitants of the country I have fought for, I want to live no longer.’”<sup>20</sup> John Young died in Quincy, Illinois, in October 1839.

Joseph Smith received a revelation on July 8, 1838, in Far West, Missouri, directing the Twelve to leave on their mission to England the next spring: “Let them take leave of my saints in the city of Far West, on the twenty-sixth day of April next, on the building-spot of my house, saith the Lord” (D&C 118:5). While the thought of a mission to England must have sounded daunting in and of itself, none of the Saints would have predicted the mobbing and violence they would experience that fall, their expulsion from the state of Missouri, or that Joseph Smith and other Church leaders would be arrested and held in Liberty Jail. It was life-threatening for a Latter-day Saint to return to Far West, Missouri, in 1839, and many said they should not go to Far West as commanded, but as Brigham Young later related, he was determined to follow the Lord’s directions and keep his commandments at all costs.

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19. “Brigham Young, 24 September 1864, Parowan,” 4, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/f7424d8a-3245-47ee-a90a-2f25e1d33fe7/0/0>.

20. “Brigham Young, 20 May 1866,” 6–7, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/9f722472-c4e0-43ff-8b39-f5f87df24f4c/0/0>.

It is pretty hard in the eyes of many for us to go to Far West [at the] time we left. There was nine of us there after ordaining George A [Smith] and another.<sup>21</sup> Some of our brethren said we should not live to go there. I said we should and come back, and one thing [was] certain, if we did not live to go, we should die trying, we should fulfill all the Lord had spoken. They had said far and near that there was one revelation [that] could not be fulfilled. The revelation was given on 8th of July and was published in [the] *Elder's Journal* and went forth among the people, and they cried that that revelation never could be fulfilled, but it was, and we went our way rejoicing.<sup>22</sup>

They arrived in Far West shortly after midnight on the appointed day, sang, prayed, ordained George A. Smith and Wilford Woodruff as Apostles, symbolically started their mission (though they were not able to leave for months), and went on their way rejoicing. They fulfilled the commandment of the Lord. Seeking and obeying the will of the Lord, no matter the cost, was central to Brigham Young's life.

## On Himself

Brigham Young's comments on himself help us see him as he saw himself. He said he didn't care what others thought of him: "I am that independent [that] I never lose a moment's sleep reflect[ing] whether people love me or not. [It] never takes away my appetite. I never hate anybody so as [to] take away my appetite, or love anybody so as [to] do it, but I delight in doing good, keeping the commandments of [the] Lord, and building up this kingdom, and it is my chief and only joy."<sup>23</sup>

## Brigham Young on Himself as a Prophet and His Ministry

After Joseph Smith's death, Brigham Young and the Twelve took their proper place as the leadership of the Church. Brigham later said, "When I heard of the death of Joseph [my question was], What will become of the people? What will the saints do? The prophet has gone! It was my whole desire to preserve the sheep, the flock of God. This was my desire and my whole desire and it is so today: what can we do to preserve the flock of God."<sup>24</sup>

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21. George A. Smith and Wilford Woodruff, the "another" in the quotation, were ordained Apostles at the Far West temple site on April 26, 1839.

22. "Brigham Young, 20 May 1866," 7.

23. "Brigham Young, 8 April 1865 (two sermons)," 22, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/eee49d5a-8a2e-46f1-9551-722e1ab35a08/0/0>.

24. "Brigham Young, 31 August 1875," transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from David W. Evans's shorthand papers in L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee

But there were others who also laid claim to the leadership of the Church. When Joseph and Hyrum Smith were killed, most of the Twelve were away on missions. Sidney Rigdon arrived in Nauvoo, Illinois, on August 3, 1844, before most of the Twelve, and immediately pressed his claim to the leadership of the Church. Brigham Young and four other members of the Twelve arrived the evening of August 6. Sidney Rigdon had called a meeting of the Saints for August 8, 1844, now 180 years ago, at which he spoke about the future of the Church.<sup>25</sup> Brigham Young later recalled his response to Sidney Rigdon's words.

I do think I am a good hand to keep dogs out of the flock. When Sidney Rigdon was saying he [should become the] church guardian, I called at Brother Woodruff's, Dr. Richards, but he was gone and I went there alone, and pretty soon Kimball came and Brother Woodruff, this and that and the other, and filled up the stand, and Sidney took his place on the wagon. I thought, My good fellow, if I do not hunt you until you are out of this flock of sheep, I am mistaken! That is the way I feel to this day. I am angry when anybody does anything to destroy the truth.<sup>26</sup>

Brigham Young knew he was called of God: "The Lord in his providence called me where I am; [it is] not my own doing, and it is and through the providence of God, and I know how to build up the kingdom."<sup>27</sup> He applied the same standard, that the Lord calls his prophets, to himself that he did to Joseph Smith.

I am [filled?] naturally as much tempted as any other man. As to the complaint many make, want of education, there is not a man in this

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Library, Brigham Young University, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/7ec33299-8227-443a-95e4-6d863f21da62/0/0>.

25. For information about succession after the death of Joseph Smith, see D. Michael Quinn, "The Mormon Succession Crisis of 1844," *BYU Studies* 16, no. 2 (1976): 187–233; Ronald K. Esplin, "Joseph, Brigham and the Twelve: A Succession of Continuity," *BYU Studies* 21, no. 3 (1981): 301–41; Lynne W. Jorgensen, "The Mantle of the Prophet Joseph Passes to Brother Brigham: A Collective Spiritual Witness," *BYU Studies* 36, no. 4 (1996–97): 125–204. For Sidney Rigdon's August 8, 1844 speech, see LaJean Purcell Carruth and Robin Scott Jensen, "Sidney Rigdon's Plea to the Saints: Transcription of Thomas Bullcock's Shorthand Notes from the August 8, 1844, Morning Meeting," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (2014): 121–39.

26. "Brigham Young, 23 September 1865, Beaver," 7, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/ba471b58-9522-41d0-91f5-7bbf2270313a/0/0>.

27. "Brigham Young, 8 September 1867, Logan," 10, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/b1b31972-deac-4a5d-b7d3-cd4f580fa44d/0/0>.

stand that can tell hardly story with regard to [woods?], back woods, hard fare. The most schooling I ever had after [I was] 22 years old [was] 11 days. I know how to cut down hemlock trees and beech, maple, basswood. I know how to clear off farms. I knew it in my youth, learned it as [a] trade, hard fare. What I aim to say [is], God calls me to [this] duty. [It is] none of my business whether [I am] capable or not; if he doesn't give me anything to say to people, I sit down and hold [my] tongue.<sup>28</sup>

Many Church members questioned then and later why Brigham Young did not write revelations like Joseph Smith did. Brigham Young brought this up on occasion: “Many whine [that] Brother Brigham does not have revelation. Why bless your souls, hearts or gizzards! I could not exist one day without living in the light of revelation. [People ask me], ‘Why do not you write your revelations?’ Because it would damn the people, and when a revelation is given, if [they do] not abide it, [it would] cut people from the church. I speak the words of the Lord to the people without writing a revelation and saying thus saith the Lord; it is to spare the weak and the feeble and the ignorant.”<sup>29</sup>

He said that if he wrote a revelation and it was accepted by the people, those who did not obey would be under condemnation. Therefore, he did not write his revelations. Section 136 is the only revelation given through Brigham Young that is in the Doctrine and Covenants. Though he did not write revelations as Joseph Smith did, Brigham Young said that revelation was essential to him to live and lead: “I do not know how a saint can get along without the revelations of the Spirit of the Lord day by day. I do not. I cannot accomplish any business transactions and know how to conduct myself before my family, before my neighbors, and do my work, to be prepared to accomplish the work here upon the earth that is assigned me to do manfully, nobly, and acceptably to God. I do not know <see> how a person can get [a]long without the revelations of the Lord Jesus.”<sup>30</sup>

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28. “Brigham Young, 25 September 1853,” 3, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/d98222ad-b616-42f9-a5ee-d44ee99f8d76/0/0>.

29. “Brigham Young, 7 September 1864, Fillmore,” 7, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/edf36b22-aa39-4e10-b744-66bb310ffd4b/0/0>.

30. “Brigham Young, 25 August 1865,” 1, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/d8a96e24-c157-4c5f-93ac-f76e785a91e8/0/0>.

Brigham Young sought to learn and then follow the mind and will of the Lord. He told the Salt Lake City School of the Prophets in May 1868 the following:

I have an experience in these things, and it is this: in the first place to learn the mind and the will of God, then bring my will and mind and love and affection directly to that line, to do the things the Lord wants done and requires of me. That is what I wish to do. I wish to do nothing else but the will of God. . . . I know just as well how to direct this people how to sustain themselves, to become wealthy and wise, as I know the road home. God has given this to me and filled me with every thing. [I] know [the] place and time, and it is plain to me how to dictate the people. There is no goodness in me more than others, only I am here. I am here, and I only desire to do the best I can, and lead this people to victory and glory, the Lord being my helper, and he does help me all the time.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

When we have Brigham Young's own words, what he really said according to the shorthand record, we hear a very different man from the one that is so often criticized. Brigham bashing has become a sport for some people—criticizing him for his words or parts of his teachings, often without correct information or considering the times in which he lived. Yes, he said things that I and many others wish he had not said. But I have said many things that I wish I had not said, and I suppose every person has. We need to reexamine what we believe and say about Brigham Young, with a more broad understanding and based on correct sources. He was a complex person and lived in complex times. He thought deeply and shared his thoughts. He led the Church through many perilous times. He organized the first migration to Salt Lake City and tried every means, including handcarts, to bring the Saints to Utah, even though he knew many, if not the majority, would not stay faithful.<sup>32</sup> He was a brilliant organizer. He sought the Lord and his gospel long before he found The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. When he found the truth, he studied it intensely, then believed and never

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31. "Brigham Young, 7 May 1868, School of the Prophets," 7, 12, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman shorthand manuscript in Papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/58bccd9c-071c-4145-a3da-5e7bc67f561c/0/0>.

32. "Brigham Young, 24 August 1867, Evening; Provo," 3, transcribed by LaJean Purcell Carruth from Pitman Shorthand manuscript in papers of George D. Watt, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/72dc6187-91c8-4ab4-8b8f-7c17287f1a96/0/0>.

wavered. He learned for himself of the divinity of Joseph Smith's call, as he said: "I knew then for myself and not for another."<sup>33</sup>

He lived according to what he knew. When hard times and difficult teachings came, he studied and prayed and pondered until he could understand, and he always remained faithful to Joseph Smith, to his teachings and revelations, to the gospel, to the Church, and to the Lord.

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33. "Brigham Young, 20 November 1864," 11.

## Artist's Note on *This Is . . .*

*Eli Peterson*

The First Vision has always been an inspiration to me—the opening of heaven, the burst of such a powerful presence that our Father in Heaven and Savior brought to the earth after nearly two thousand years. Even though spring is viewed as bright and beautiful, the earth was in darkness; the darker colors of spring are to reflect the absence of truth and light in the world. The trees move away from the brilliance of the light and truth that is once again found on earth. God the Father and Jesus Christ are two distinct individuals with physical bodies. It was further evidence that there is another realm that we cannot see, where God is working to fulfill his covenants. He is not absent. He is worthy of our trust, and he is the same forever.

# “Not Only Men but Women Also”

## An Argument for Alma’s Intentional Inclusion of Women

*Cassidy Nichole Pyper*

In an interestingly specific inclusion of women, Alma taught the Zoramites that “[God] imparteth his word by angels unto men, yea, not only men but women also” (Alma 32:23). This phrase suggests that Alma had an awareness of women and their ability to receive revelation despite how little the Book of Mormon explicitly includes women in its narrative.<sup>1</sup> The Book of Mormon mentions women at drastically lower rates than even the Bible.<sup>2</sup> Some students of the Book of Mormon are concerned not only that women are rarely spoken of in the text but also that women may have been ignored or disregarded as part of the intended audience.<sup>3</sup> The loudest of the concerns stem from two

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1. Alma’s awareness of women’s ability to receive revelation is peculiar when we note that there aren’t any examples in the Book of Mormon of specifically women being ministered to by angels in the same way that Alma himself was. Reasons why this may be the case are discussed later in this article under the section “Examples of Alma Being Inclusive of Women.”

2. Camille S. Williams explains it this way: “In addition to the problems presented by biblical texts, latter-day scripture contains far fewer stories of individual women than those in either the Old or the New Testament.” Camille S. Williams, “Women in the Book of Mormon: Inclusion, Exclusion, and Interpretation,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 11, no. 1 (2002): 68, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol11/iss1/12/>.

3. Melodie Moench Charles describes the male preachers in the Book of Mormon as being oblivious to women or, worse, ignoring them completely. Melodie Moench Charles, “Precedents for Mormon Women from Scriptures,” in *Sisters in Spirit: Mormon Women in Historical and Cultural Perspective*, ed. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher and Lavina Fielding Anderson (University of Illinois Press, 1987), 51. Carol Lynn Pearson calls herself an “unwelcome visitor, . . . a stranger in a strange land,” and “an outsider overhearing something important that is going on in another room.” She states that the book does

preeminent issues: (1) the lack of female representation in the text and (2) the book's frequent use of gender-exclusive (masculine) language.

Many Latter-day Saint scholars have attempted to understand and answer a myriad of questions and concerns about gender and the Book of Mormon.<sup>4</sup> On one end of the conversation, scholars point out the androcentrism of the text. For example, Lynn Matthews Anderson argues that “without exception, every word intended for readers in modern times who ‘shall receive these things’ (Moro. 10:3–5) is directed only to men: the writers, redactors, and even the translator of the Book of Mormon assumed a solely male audience for its salvific message.”<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, Francine R. Bennion acknowledges that Book of Mormon women appear as “accessories to men,” but she asserts that “the wonder is not that there is so little about women in the Book of Mormon but

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not “invite women,” and she feels she needs to put away her femaleness in order to read it. Carol Lynn Pearson, “Could Feminism Have Saved the Nephites?,” *Sunstone*, March 1996, 34, <https://sunstone.org/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/101-32-40.pdf>.

4. Heather Farrell's is the most extensive work written entirely on women in the Book of Mormon. See Heather Farrell, *Walking with the Women of the Book of Mormon* (Cedar Fort, 2019). Heather B. Moore also covers the prominent women in the Book of Mormon, explaining cultural context while attempting to relate modern women to the Book of Mormon heroines and female antagonists. See Heather B. Moore, *Women of the Book of Mormon* (Covenant Communications, 2015). Camille S. Williams wrote an apologetic, with the hopes of answering many of the “big questions” regarding gender and the Book of Mormon. See Williams, “Women in the Book of Mormon,” 66–79. Other important works to note include Camille Fronk, “Desert Epiphany: Sariah and the Women in 1 Nephi,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 5–15, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol9/iss2/3/>; Jane Allis-Pike, “‘How Oft Would I Have Gathered You as a Hen Gathereth Her Chickens’: The Power of the Hen Metaphor in 3 Nephi 10:4–7,” in *Third Nephi: An Incomparable Scripture*, ed. Andrew C. Skinner and Gaye Strathearn (Neal A. Maxwell Institute; Deseret Book, 2012), 57–74; Daniel C. Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 16–25, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol9/iss2/4/>; Kimberly M. Berkey and Joseph M. Spencer, “‘Great Cause to Mourn’: The Complexity of *The Book of Mormon's* Presentation of Gender and Race,” in *Americanist Approaches to “The Book of Mormon,”* ed. Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman (Oxford University Press, 2019), 298–320; and Robert A. Rees, “The Midrashic Imagination and the Book of Mormon,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 3 (2011): 53–54, <https://www.dialoguejournal.com/articles/the-midrashic-imagination-and-the-book-of-mormon/>. For a review of all the significant literature on gender in the Book of Mormon, see Joseph M. Spencer, “The Presentation of Gender in the Book of Mormon: A Review of Literature,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 29 (2020): 231–63, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/7215/>.

5. Lynn Matthews Anderson, “Toward a Feminist Interpretation of Latter-day Scripture,” *Dialogue* 27, no. 2 (1994): 188, <https://www.dialoguejournal.com/articles/toward-a-feminist-interpretation-of-latter-day-scripture/>.

that there is so much, given the times and traditions." She adds, "Many of us fail to notice what mention there is of women in the book, either because it is what we expect or because it is not."<sup>6</sup> In a shorter but still expansive article, Jerrie W. Hurd tells the story of all the named women of the Book of Mormon, emphasizing their "power and influence." She adds that the women "are repeatedly acknowledged by Book of Mormon writers in a way few other ancient records can match."<sup>7</sup>

Other scholars such as Wendy Hamilton Christian strive to identify "less conspicuous ways that Book of Mormon women are included in the text."<sup>8</sup> Christian's conclusion is derived from clear textual evidence that women were present during relevant narrated events in the volume—for example, the delivery of sermons. Herein lies the unacknowledged problem, however. Just because the women present on such occasions *could* have been intentionally included among the speaker's addressees doesn't mean they *were*. Indeed, Melodie Moench Charles uses one of the same examples that Christian uses—King Benjamin speaking to an audience that definitively included women—to draw a conclusion in direct opposition to Christian's. The female presence at the meeting is all the more aggravating to Charles because, as she says, "throughout the speech, [Benjamin] totally ignores the adult female portion of his audience, while specifically addressing all other groups, even children."<sup>9</sup>

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6. Francine R. Bennion, "Women and the Book of Mormon: Tradition and Revelation," in *Women of Wisdom and Knowledge: Talks Selected from the BYU Women Conferences*, ed. Marie Cornwall and Susan Howe (Deseret Book, 1990), 171, 177.

7. Jerrie W. Hurd, *Our Sisters in the Latter-day Scriptures* (Deseret Book, 1987), 1.

8. 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), 47, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/4597/>. Christian's unique contribution is her exhaustive list of "words, phrases and figurative language inclusive of women" (49). She calculates over 230 words and phrases that mean, imply, or include women, with 5,201 total occurrences of female-inclusive language (165). She bases her argument on the context in which gender-exclusive (masculine) terms are used. Her calculations "indicate over 300 instances of brethren in the Book of Mormon that reference women as well as men" (49).

9. Charles, "Precedents for Mormon Women from Scriptures," 51. Her conclusion contributes to the perception of gender inequality in the record. Both Charles and Christian interpret the intended audience of King Benjamin's speech based on their definition of the word "brethren." Neither scholar, however, dissects the use of "brethren" in its context, nor do they analyze the audience based on anything but their assumed definition of the term.

These very polarizing interpretations of the Book of Mormon demonstrate how crucial it is that we carefully read and study the text. It has been too easy for scholars to make sweeping claims based on a few citations<sup>10</sup> when what's needed is a detailed examination of relevant passages. To provide a very deliberate and nuanced understanding of the gendered language in the Book of Mormon, I will examine the story and sermons of one Book of Mormon character, Alma the Younger,<sup>11</sup> leaving for further research whether the patterns discernable there can be found throughout the Book of Mormon. Looking at one character whose presence in the text includes an extensive narrative and multiple sermons will allow for more concrete textual evidence to determine whether Alma was or was not aware and inclusive of women. First, I will examine the word "brethren," explaining how the word is demonstrably inclusive of women in the relevant texts (whatever the term's overtones may

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10. For example, Pearson makes a sweeping claim about the feelings of the Nephite women without examining the text for evidence of her claim: "Nowhere in the book do we find the phrase, 'My brethren and my sisters,' or anything comparable to it. . . . 'Arise, my sons, and be men! . . . Awake, my sons!' Did Nephite women feel similarly ignored? Certainly, if only on a subconscious level." Pearson, "Could Feminism Have Saved the Nephites?" 34.

11. In her work on masculinity and the Book of Mormon, Amy Easton-Flake makes an important observation about Alma's conversion narrative and its connection to the published conversion experiences of nineteenth-century women. She discovered that although the nouns of address are masculine, the actual descriptions of Alma's conversion are more feminine, making Alma the Younger an important individual to dissect in regard to his sermons and gender. For example, Alma's extreme feelings of "guilt, sin, and estrangement from God," Alma's "overwhelming feelings of relief and joy" after turning to Christ, being so overcome by the spirit that he falls to the ground, and then Alma's willingness to give up political leadership so he could preach "the word of God in much tribulation" (Mosiah 27:32) are all examples that nineteenth-century readers would have associated with women's conversion experiences at that time. Easton-Flake states, "Alma's experience parallels most closely a woman's rather than a man's conversion experience in nineteenth-century America. That this fact was likely not lost on the book's initial readers carries interesting implications, as once again the ideal male figure—even the prophet—models supposed nineteenth-century female attributes and behaviors. . . . What is much more nebulous is the text's message to (and about) women. For while women lack an overt presence in the text, their implicit presence may be felt throughout as the book continuously privileges the traits, actions, and spheres commonly associated with nineteenth-century women in conduct books and other popular literature." Amy Easton-Flake, "'Arise from the Dust, My Sons, and Be Men': Masculinity in *The Book of Mormon*," in Fenton and Hickman, *Americanist Approaches to "The Book of Mormon"*, 381; see also Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740–1845* (University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

be today). Second, I will explain the relationship between "people" and "brethren" and describe how they are used interchangeably in specific contexts. Third, I will demonstrate how Alma used "brethren" to intentionally speak to women as well as men and will share other evidence of him addressing the female presence in his audiences. And fourth, I will examine an account of Alma seemingly excluding women and explain how it nonetheless supports my thesis.

### **"Brethren" as a Gender-Inclusive Term?**

Charles and other similarly focused scholars arguably make their claims about the Book of Mormon being addressed to only men because that is how it reads to a more modern audience. Three of Alma's four main sermons begin with him addressing the congregation as his brethren. The only sermon that doesn't is in Alma 9, wherein Alma addresses the people of Ammonihah as a "wicked and perverse generation" (v. 8) before changing his tone and calling them his brethren (v. 30). When Alma addresses his audiences, he never addresses them as "my people" or "my brothers and sisters"—phrases that would certainly be seen as inclusive of female listeners. He consistently uses masculine terminology ("brethren," "man," and "men"), with only five specific acknowledgements of women in his sermons and the associated narratives. In an age of gender-inclusive language, it is easy to conclude that Alma and other prophets in the Book of Mormon completely ignored the women, even if it is apparent that they were present. However, an appropriate understanding of the term "brethren" and how it was used two hundred years ago brings clarity to the conversation.

Noah Webster's 1828 Dictionary of American English represents the lexicology during the time Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon. The word "brethren" in that dictionary is defined first as the "noun plural of brother," which is how readers today often interpret the term.<sup>12</sup> Looking at the word "brother" in the same dictionary provides additional definitions. The second definition for "brother" is "any one closely united; an associate." The third definition offers another connotation: "one that resembles another in manners." The dictionary further explains that "kings [who] give to each other the title of *brother* address their

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12. American Dictionary of the English Language, Websters Dictionary 1828, under "brethren," accessed November 18, 2024, <https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Diction ary/brethren>.

congregations by the title of brethren. In a more general sense, *brother* or *brethren* is used for man in general; all men being children of the same primitive ancestors, and forming one race of beings.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, based on the latter two definitions of “brother” from Joseph Smith’s day, “brethren” wasn’t necessarily a male indicator and could have included women.<sup>14</sup>

According to the Google Books Ngram Viewer, in 1830 (the year the Book of Mormon was first published), “brethren” was used 9 times more than the phrase “(my) people,” 33 times more than “brothers and sisters,” and 112 times more than “brethren and sisters.”<sup>15</sup> In conjunction with the inclusive interpretations of “brethren” in the early nineteenth century, these findings could indicate that “brethren” was used more commonly because, in addition to its traditional use as a male indicator, it may have also been used as the all-encompassing and endearing term for humankind.<sup>16</sup>

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13. American Dictionary of the English Language, Websters Dictionary 1828, under “brother,” accessed November 18, 2024, <https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/Brother>, emphasis original.

14. Websters Dictionary 1828’s first definition of “man” is defined much the same way: “mankind; the human race; the whole species of human beings.” American Dictionary of the English Language, Websters Dictionary 1828, accessed November 18, 2024, under “man,” <https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/man>.

15. Data for “brethren, my people, brothers and sisters, brethren and sisters,” 1800–1835, Google Books Ngram Viewer, [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=brethren%2Cmy+people%2Cbrothers+and+sisters%2Cbrethren+and+sisters&year\\_start=1820&year\\_end=1835&corpus=en&smoothing=3&case\\_insensitive=false](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=brethren%2Cmy+people%2Cbrothers+and+sisters%2Cbrethren+and+sisters&year_start=1820&year_end=1835&corpus=en&smoothing=3&case_insensitive=false).

16. It is important to note that even if “brethren” did mean “men,” this may have been less offensive or noticeable to nineteenth-century women because they were accustomed to reading themselves into male stories. In her previously referenced article, Easton-Flake explains, “Nineteenth-century women well versed in the Bible and patriarchal church structures were accustomed to religious texts highlighting male rather than female actions; they were adept at finding meaning—and also themselves—in the stories of men. For instance, many female preachers in early America compared themselves to and drew strength from Jonah and Jeremiah, seeing these prophets as their personal models and predecessors. Consequently, for nineteenth-century women, the absence of female characters in *The Book of Mormon* may not have suggested a diminished role for women in actuality. While the text and the religion it founded certainly placed men at the head of the home and its religious institution, as Susanna Morrill points out in her article on women and *The Book of Mormon*, nineteenth-century women too found themselves within the text and made it ‘meaningful for their own lives and priorities.’” Easton-Flake, “Arise from the Dust,” 372. This could explain why no change to gender-inclusive terms would have seemed necessary in the translation of the Book of Mormon as women were adept at finding themselves in male-centered texts already. See also Susanna Morrill, “Women and the Book of Mormon: The Creation and Negotiation of

Two decades ago, controversy arose when various versions of the Bible began to be published with gender-inclusive translations. Some individuals felt this was unnecessary, stating that if masculine terms were used historically, then those terms should not be altered. Others claimed that the New Testament authors intended for "man" to mean "humankind," and "brethren" to include sisters, and therefore the Bible needed to be altered to reflect this inclusive interpretation to modern readers. Arguing in favor of making textually inclusive changes, biblical scholar Mark Strauss wrote,

The Greek masculine noun ἀδελφός can carry the sense of a physical brother but is more often used in the NT figuratively of the kinship between believers. Traditional English translations have rendered the Greek singular as "brother" and the plural (ἀδελφοί) as "brothers" (NIV) or "brethren" (NASB, RSV, KJV, NKJV). In many contexts, however, the author is clearly addressing both men and women. An example of this is Phil 4:1–2 where Paul, after addressing the Philippian congregation as ἀδελφοί (v. 1), encourages two women to live in harmony with each other (v. 2). When ἀδελφοί carries this inclusive sense, it seems that the most accurate translation would be "brothers and sisters." This is not a concession to a feminist agenda. Rather, it is exactly what the term meant in its first century context.<sup>17</sup>

Although the Book of Mormon was not written in Greek like the New Testament, its English translation of reformed Egyptian shares a lexicon with the language found in the King James Version.<sup>18</sup> Knowing other definitions for the word "brethren" were available at the time of translation allows for the possibility that Joseph Smith may have occasionally meant "brothers and sisters" when translating the word. In addition, just as Strauss argues for Paul in the New Testament, it's also possible that Alma meant "brethren" to mean "brothers and sisters."

We see this in languages still used today. For example, in Cakchiquel, a modern Mayan language, "they use itz'iin, which is basically 'brother.' But in Ch'orti' Maya [another Mayan language], the same term can be

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a Latter-day Saint Tradition," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 26, no. 1 (2017): 82–105, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol26/iss1/4/>.

17. Mark Strauss, "Linguistic and Hermeneutical Fallacies in the Guidelines Established at the 'Conference on Gender-Related Language in Scripture,'" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41, no. 2 (June 1998): 253.

18. See Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 5, 11–42.

used for brother or sister depending on the context (ijtʒ'in)."<sup>19</sup> We can find similar patterns in the English language. Although “brothers” and “brethren” do not currently connote the inclusion of women, English speakers have other words that do. For example, the term “guys,” though technically a male indicator, can be and has been used gender-inclusively—however, not without critique.<sup>20</sup>

Understanding and explaining how male terms can be inclusive of women does not mean that we shouldn't be sensitive to how these terms sound or read today. A greater effort to convey an inclusive message to all of God's children by using non-gender-specific terms or both a male and a female pronoun is crucial in today's world. Some leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have begun to assume gender-inclusiveness in the Book of Mormon by clearly identifying sisters as a part of the intended audience. In the April 2024 general conference, Elder Shayne M. Bowen quoted the Book of Mormon (Moro. 7:27, 29) and adjusted the verse to read, “Wherefore, my beloved brethren [and sisters], have miracles ceased because Christ hath ascended into heaven? . . . Nay; neither have angels ceased to minister unto the children of men.”<sup>21</sup> There is wisdom in following this example in our own reading and quoting of scriptural text.

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19. Dr. Kerry Hull, email correspondence with author, August 21, 2022. Dr. Kerry Hull is a professor of religion at Brigham Young University with academic interests in Maya linguistics and anthropology and is fluent in Ch'orti' Mayan.

20. *Oxford English Dictionary*, under “guy (noun<sup>2</sup>),” additional sense, accessed November 20, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6723058808>. Even if male terms are meant to be inclusive, and the individuals being addressed are aware of the inclusivity, the fact that some universal terms are masculine in nature can be frustrating in and of itself. For example, some could argue that “the term [guys] is sexist because, while claiming to be gender-neutral, it actually positions men as the ‘default’ . . . For women in male-dominated industries particularly, ‘guys’ can reinforce their sense of being in the minority.” Grace Jennings-Edquist, “Is It Time to Stop Saying ‘Guys’ at Work?” ABC Everyday, October 16, 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/everyday/is-it-time-to-stop-saying-you-guys-at-work/10240970>.

21. Shayne M. Bowen, “Miracles, Angels, and Priesthood Power,” *Liahona*, May 2024, 54, brackets original. Additionally, when quoting the prophet Nephi (2 Ne. 31:19), Elder Jeffrey R. Holland adjusted the verse to read, “My beloved brethren [and sisters], after ye have [received these first fruits of the Restoration], I would ask if all is done? Behold, I say unto you, Nay.” Jeffrey R. Holland, “A Perfect Brightness of Hope,” *Liahona*, May 2020, 83, brackets original.

## The Relationship Between the Uses of "People" and "Brethren"

Early on in Alma's story, he becomes chief judge over the people thanks to the encouragement of King Mosiah. After his sons reject their rights to the throne, Mosiah issues a proclamation concerning the status of government. It begins with these words: "Behold, O ye my people, or my brethren, for I esteem you as such" (Mosiah 29:5). Mosiah begins with a term that is inclusive of all genders, the word "people," but then he changes this to "brethren." It is important that he consciously did so because, as he says, he "esteems them" or values them as such. He is still, however, talking to all "his people." There is no reason to think that he suddenly meant to speak only to the men. Rather, he adjusted his language to demonstrate his endearment toward his readers. Mosiah apparently wanted them to feel more like family than subjects. Here, in short, it appears that "brethren" is used as a familial term. This pattern repeats throughout Mosiah 29 and continues through Alma 34.

Note that in these chapters (Mosiah 29 to Alma 34), possessive pronouns are used before "people" only when the pronoun refers to a person who led a group of people: kings, would-be kings (such as Amlici), and, most importantly, God. However, Alma never addresses his audiences as "my people." This is perhaps because, having given up his office as chief judge to fully dedicate himself to the work as high priest, he didn't want his audiences to feel like they were his subjects. He addresses them as "my brethren," which makes them his equals. As mentioned earlier, using "brethren" this way falls under the third definition of "brother" from the 1828 Webster's Dictionary.<sup>22</sup>

Almost exclusively, when there is no possessive pronoun before the term "people,"<sup>23</sup> Alma and Mormon refer to a group of individuals being talked *about*. When Alma uses the word "brethren," he refers to individuals being talked *to*. We see this illustrated helpfully in Alma 5, where Mormon begins the chapter by saying "that Alma began to deliver the word of God unto the people. . . . And these are the words which he spake to the people in the church" (vv. 1–2). Mormon uses the word "people" twice when talking *about* whom Alma will be preaching to, but as soon

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22. American Dictionary of the English Language, Websters Dictionary 1828, under "brother."

23. One exception is in Alma 30:32, where Alma calls the people "my people" when debating with Korihor.

as Alma begins to speak *to* the people, he says, “And now behold, I say unto you, my brethren” (v. 6). Throughout the chapter 5 sermon, Alma uses the word “brethren” thirteen times. Once he uses “brethren” to refer to the people his father had baptized.<sup>24</sup> Another ten times he uses “brethren” to refer to the people he is speaking to, often using the possessive and endearing term “my” before “brethren” (see vv. 6, 8, 14, 22, 24, 26, 43, 50, 53, 58). By contrast, “people” is used eight times during this sermon. Five of those times, Alma refers to a group of people not present—they were either in the past or the future. Two other times, Mormon describes the people Alma would preach to as a narrator speaking in third person (vv. 1, 2). Alma uses the term “people” to address the group he is preaching to only once (v. 44).<sup>25</sup>

This language pattern continues when Alma preaches in Ammonihah, a city in which “Satan had gotten great hold” (Alma 8:9). Mormon seems to copy Alma’s own account, as evident in Alma 9:1: “And again, I, Alma, having been commanded of God that I should take Amulek and go forth and preach again unto this people, or the people who were in the city of Ammonihah.” Note here that Alma, when talking *about* those he would preach to, refers to them as “the people,” following the pattern from before. This time, when he actually begins to address this group, he does not call them his “brethren” but instead a “wicked and perverse generation” (Alma 9:8). However, he eventually changes his tone in verse 30: “Ye are my brethren, and ye ought to be beloved.” Again, we see Alma’s use of the word “brethren” is meant to convey a loving, kindred relationship. The people of Ammonihah do not respond in a way that reflects the sibling-like relationship Alma experienced before, yet he calls them “brethren” in the hopes that they will live up to that endearing title. This demonstrates that when Alma uses “brethren,” he is

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24. Alma explains that his father baptized “his brethren in the waters of Mormon” (Alma 5:3). Mosiah 18 records Alma’s father doing so: “As many as believed him went thither to hear his words. . . . And after this manner he did baptize every one that went forth to the place of Mormon; . . . and they were baptized in the waters of Mormon” (vv. 6, 16). The emphasis is on *everyone*, not every *man*. The first three individuals baptized are male, but that is the only time gender is specified. There is no reference to men or even the word “brethren” in this chapter, while “people” is used eleven times. Later, in Mosiah 24:22, women are mentioned as a part of the group who left the land of Helam with Alma. Therefore, in Alma 5, Alma’s use of the word “brethren” included his father’s people, both women and men.

25. For example, in Alma 5:4, Alma refers to “the people of king Noah,” and in verses 21 and 27, he speaks of Christ’s people. Alma does say in verse 44 that he is commanded to stand in front of “this people,” but even there, he is referring in the third person to the people he is talking to.

not being exclusive of gender. Rather, his word choice is about affiliation and camaraderie.

Continuing on to Alma 32 and Alma's sermon to the outcast Zoramites, we see Alma's frequent use of the term "brethren" and its connection to Mormon's use of the term "people." Alma consistently addresses the Zoramites as "my brethren" (Alma 32:24, 43; 33:14, 17, 21, 23),<sup>26</sup> but when Mormon prefaces Alma's sermon, he refers to Alma's Zoramite audience as "the people," "the poor class of people," and "the people upon the hill Onidah" (Alma 32:1–4). Because Mormon uses the term "people" when referring to Alma's audience in third person, we cannot necessarily infer that it was a male-only audience, nor can we assume that Alma meant to address only the men. With Mormon's third-person sermon introduction, it is equally possible that Alma spoke to men and women.

Taken together, these examples present a consistent distinction in the narrative of Alma the Younger that makes "brethren" a translation of the gender-inclusive word "people" in the form of direct address. This is encouraging for readers of the Book of Mormon, as it sets forth the possibility that the prophets and writers were not always using the word "brethren" to be gender-exclusive, but rather often used it to express a relationship and an equality between themselves and their congregations.

### Examples of Alma Being Inclusive of Women

There is much evidence to support that "brethren" *can* be an inclusive term, but what evidence is there that Alma spoke intentionally to women? Alma's inclusion of women within masculine terms begins with his first spoken words after his intense repentance scene in Mosiah 27.<sup>27</sup> Arising from his coma, Alma acknowledges his redemption through Christ and then quotes what the Lord said to him: "Marvel not that all mankind, yea, men and women, all nations, kindreds, tongues and people, must be born again; yea, born of God" (v. 25). Here, Alma immediately uses

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26. Alma uses "people" only when talking about a separate group of people during the time of the prophet Zenock (see Alma 33:16, 17) or when speaking of the Son of God who "will come to redeem his people" (Alma 33:22), using a possessive pronoun before "people" because Christ is their leader.

27. Not only is Alma explicitly inclusive of women when he preaches after his coma, but as noted earlier, Alma's conversion experience is laced with feminine characteristics. "For while the vast majority of conversion narratives in *The Book of Mormon* focus on men, the description mirrors most closely the conversions of women. . . . Alma's experience parallels most closely a woman's rather than a man's conversion experience in nineteenth-century America." Easton-Flake, "Arise from the Dust," 379–81.

Christ's words to teach his audience what he wants them to understand. When he says "all mankind," he clearly means women and men. The doctrine he has been called to teach applies to all of them.<sup>28</sup> This inclusive ideology may have been new to Alma, as the Lord's first words to him were "marvel not" (v. 25).<sup>29</sup> But it is also possible that Alma marveled over the method of being saved rather than who can be saved.<sup>30</sup>

Whether Alma was originally egalitarian or whether God's redemption for all humankind inspired him to become so is not entirely clear. Regardless, there is textual evidence of Alma's efforts to be inclusive throughout his ministry. In Mosiah 27:30, Alma says because the people can "foresee that he will come, and that he remembereth every creature of his creating, he will make himself manifest unto all." From the time Alma was "born of the Spirit" (Mosiah 27:24), he made it clear that Christ redeems all genders, races, and people, and Alma continued to support these claims throughout his mission.

At the conclusion of his repentance story, Mormon summarizes Alma's efforts: "Alma began from this time forward to teach the people, and those who were with Alma at the time the angel appeared unto them, traveling round about through all the land, publishing to *all the people* the things which they had heard and seen" (Mosiah 27:32, italics added). In Alma 5:44, Alma declares to the people in Zarahemla that he is "commanded to stand and testify unto this people." In Alma 29, he acknowledges that his greatest wish is to "declare unto *every soul* . . . repentance and the plan of redemption" (v. 2, italics added). To his son Helaman, he declares that he has labored to "bring souls unto repentance" and that "because of the word . . . many have been born of God" (Alma 36:24, 26). The use of words like "all," "people," and "souls" illustrates that Alma knew he was called to invite everyone to come unto Christ. If one carries

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28. In their recently published work, Fatima Salleh and Margaret Olsen Hemming make a similar observation on the inclusivity of Alma's word choice. They also note the gendered language in the metaphor of a second birth: "Birth requires a womb. Therefore, to be born of the spirit would require the spirit to have a womb. Until we repent and follow God, we are waiting in a womb, waiting for spiritual birth. This is particularly gendered language, tied closely to God and the Spirit." Fatima Salleh and Margaret Olsen Hemming, *The Book of Mormon for the Least of These*, vol. 2, *Mosiah–Alma* (Common Consent Press, 2022), 117.

29. Kylie Turley, conversation with author, September 16, 2023.

30. When retelling the experience to his son Helaman, Alma reiterates that he has been "born of God" and that others need to be as well. He focuses on this aspect of the original revelation more than the "all mankind" portion of the revelation (see Alma 36:23–26 compared to Mosiah 27:25).

this understanding into the remainder of Alma's sermons and stories, it clarifies the likelihood that Alma preached to both women and men throughout his work.

### Male-Exclusive Terms That Could Include Women

We see in Alma 1 how the word "man" could be inclusive of women. Here Mormon explains what happened when Alma and the priests went to preach: "And when the priests left their labor to impart the word of God unto the people, the people also left their labors to hear the word of God. And when the priest had imparted unto them the word of God they all returned again diligently unto their labors; and the priest, not esteeming himself above his hearers, for the preacher was no better than the hearer, neither was the teacher any better than the learner; and thus they were all equal, and they did all labor, every man according to his strength" (Alma 1:26). Before Mormon wrote that "every man" labored "according to his strength," he wrote that when the priests spoke, "the people" (a term that could be inclusive of women) "left their labors." If women were included in the people who left their labors, it naturally follows that they were also included in those who labored "according to his strength."<sup>31</sup>

When we proceed to the next chapter in the book of Alma, we see that in certain contexts, "brethren" was used to identify only men. I will explain this more in the following section, but in the story of the Amlicites, the word "brethren" is used to describe both a "plural of brother"<sup>32</sup> and those "closely united."<sup>33</sup> The leaders who were sent to watch the camp of the Amlicities returned to Alma with the grave news that the Amlicities were "upon our brethren in that land; and they are fleeing before them with their flocks, and their wives, and their children, towards our

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31. A further hint that "men" included the female laborers is found in the prosperity that occurred because of the consecration of the people. The people began to be unified, which led to prosperity, specifically in "silk and fine-twined linen, and all manner of good homely cloth" (Alma 1:29). Anciently, these materials were associated with women. "One of the best documented female roles in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica was in relation to textile production, and archaeological spindle whorls provide an abundant data set for interpreting female economic contributions." Geoffrey G. McCafferty and Sharisse D. McCafferty, "Canadian Contributions to Mesoamerican Gender Studies," in *Canadian Journal of Archaeology/Journal Canadien d'Archéologie* 36, no. 1 (2012): 69.

32. American Dictionary of the English Language, Websters Dictionary 1828, under "brethren."

33. American Dictionary of the English Language, Websters Dictionary 1828, under "brother."

city” (Alma 2:25). We know that women are not included this time in “brethren” because they are mentioned separately.

But Mormon uses similar phrasing inclusively in the next chapter. In Alma 3, Nephite warriors had died in battle, and “many women and children had been slain with the sword, and also many of their flocks and their herds; and also many of their fields of grain were destroyed” (Alma 3:2). Then chapter 4 refers back to this same verse when discussing the survivors’ remorse and potentially uses “brethren” gender-inclusively in doing so. Alma 4:2 explains, “But the people were afflicted, yea, greatly afflicted for the loss of their brethren, and also for the loss of their flocks and herds.” Rather than repeating the mention of Nephite male soldiers who were slain in battle plus “women and children,” Mormon combines them all into “brethren.”<sup>34</sup> When Mormon does not acknowledge women individually, as in Alma 3:2, he may acknowledge women collectively by the gender-neutral use of the term “brethren,” as seen in Alma 4:2.

In Alma 5, Alma defines what he means by the term “brethren.” He begins his sermon by addressing the people thus: “And now behold, I say unto you, my brethren.” He then explains what he means by “brethren” in the next phrase: “you that belong to this church” (v. 6). Later, in verse 49, he states that he was called to “preach unto my beloved brethren,” and then adds: “Yea, and every one that dwelleth in the land; yea, to preach unto all, both old and young, both bond and free; yea, I say unto you the aged, and also the middle aged, and the rising generation.” In this list, Alma does not specify that he is speaking to both genders, as he does with age and class. This could be because he has already established that “brethren” means “church members” earlier in the chapter. Whether or not Alma intended to define what he meant,<sup>35</sup> he makes it clear he preached to all people.

In their recently published second volume of *The Book of Mormon for the Least of These*, Fatimah Salleh and Margaret Olsen Hemming note that “this verse is distinct in its focus on age rather than sex or race. Alma nods toward generational divides multiple times only to underline their lack of importance before God. This may hint at the conflicts

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34. Mormon does a similar thing with “flocks and herds.” In Alma 2:25, Mormon only uses “flocks,” but in Alma 3:2 and Alma 4:2, he specifies “flocks and their herds” or “flocks and herds.”

35. During Alma’s conversion experience, Alma said that the Lord defined “mankind” as “men and women, all nations, kindreds, tongues and people” (Mosiah 27:25).

within Zarahemla's society; Alma's community may need a prophetic call to generational healing."<sup>36</sup> This is an important observation because it gives insight into why at certain times Alma would be more specific about age and other demographics. He speaks to the needs of the population he is talking to, seeing their cultural struggles and not ignoring them. We will see him do this with gender in Alma 32. When Alma does not address his audience by gender, it could be because that particular audience did not need it clarified.

As Alma continues his preaching, Mormon makes a point of acknowledging the universality of Alma's mission: "The word of God was liberal unto all, that none were deprived of the privilege of assembling themselves together to hear the word of God" (Alma 6:5). This emphasis on "all" and "none" leaves little doubt that women were invited to these meetings. There may have been specific meetings that were for men alone, as we will demonstrate later, but here Mormon reiterates that Alma's preaching in Zarahemla (in Alma 5) was to *all*.

### Sermon in Alma 13 and Women

Many read the Alma 13 sermon as addressed only to men because of Alma's references to ordination. In verse 2, Alma mentions the priests who "were ordained after the order of [God's] Son," and in verse 6, they are called "to teach his commandments unto the children of men, that they also might enter into his rest." Here, Alma refers to those ordained in the third person, as if they were not in attendance. As Alma's sermon continues, Alma never invites this audience to enter into this order of the high priesthood. Instead, in verse 10, Alma explains that "there were many who were ordained and became high priests of God . . . on account of their exceeding faith and repentance." Then addressing his audience in verse 13, Alma invites them to "humble yourselves before God, and bring forth fruit meet for repentance, that ye may also enter into that rest." It could be that entering into the rest of the Lord may have included ordination in the days of Melchizedek, but according to Alma and this audience, "rest" could also result from faith and repentance. Because Alma never explicitly invites them to enter into the order, it leaves the possibility open that women were included in the audience—women who were invited to repent and enter into the rest of the Lord.

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36. Salleh and Hemming, *Book of Mormon for the Least of These*, 2:154.

In addition, in verses 21–22 Alma declares that “now is the time to repent, for the day of salvation draweth nigh; Yea, and the voice of the Lord, by the mouth of angels, doth declare it unto all nations; . . . and he doth sound these glad tidings among all his people.” We know that by the time Alma gives his sermon in Alma 32, Alma believes God’s word is given by angels to men, women, and children. Possibly, Alma did not believe this until after seeing the brave testimony of the women and children in Alma 14. Regardless, based on the idea that all are invited to enter into the Lord’s rest and that Alma believed that “glad tidings” are made known to all genders, it seems possible that this chapter was also addressed to women.

### **Martyred Women in Alma 14**

We see further indication of the probability of women’s attendance in the very next chapter, which relates one of the most heartbreaking stories in the Book of Mormon. Alma ends his preaching to the people of Ammonihah with words that must have been comforting to those who would soon be martyrs: “Having faith on the Lord; having a hope that ye shall receive eternal life; having the love of God always in your hearts, that ye may be lifted up at the last day and enter into his rest” (Alma 13:29). According to the text, many in Ammonihah believed him and began to repent. But many would not repent, and instead, they were angry with Alma and Amulek to the point of retaliation. They bound Alma and Amulek and took them to the chief judge. Many testified against Alma and Amulek before the chief judge, but Zeezrom, formerly their antagonist, tried to defend them (see Alma 14:1–5).

Zeezrom was cast out along with “all those who believed in the words which had been spoken by Alma and Amulek” (v. 7). The words “all those” initially appear inclusive, but then the next verse says that the angry mob “brought [the believers’] wives and children together, and . . . caused that they should be cast into the fire” (v. 8). This passage could lead the reader to deduce that only men, or mostly men, were among those cast out during the scene with the chief judge. This understanding, supported by the statement that “all those who believed” were cast out (v. 7), suggests that only men had been taught by Alma and Amulek as they preached in Ammonihah. Nonetheless, a more careful reading of the text challenges this assumption.

First, it is not known how much time passed between the ending of the sermon and the trial. Enough time had to have passed, however, for

those who believed to search the scriptures (see Alma 14:1). Everything from the sermon to the burnings could have taken place in one day or multiple days; the text is not explicit.<sup>37</sup> Either way, Alma and Amulek were removed from the area in which they preached their sermons and taken to the chief judge. Multiple believers followed them to the chief judge, most likely with the intent to save their preachers (as Zeezrom's presence at the trial suggests). Women and children who may have been in attendance for Alma and Amulek's preaching, however, might not have been present for the trial. One can imagine that mothers especially would have taken their children elsewhere, not wanting to take them into a situation that was bound to be hostile. Even if this was not their reasoning, the text reports that people "brought [the believers'] wives and children together" to kill them, possibly suggesting that they weren't present at the end of the trial (v. 8). Based on verse 7, which says that "all those who believed in the words" were cast out, "all" may refer to all *who were in attendance in the court* who believed in Alma and Amulek—not all those who had been in attendance at the sermon. But if they were in attendance at court and believed in Alma and Amulek's teachings, they must have heard Alma's sermon in person or heard about Alma's sermon in order to believe.

Further indication that women were present at and intended receivers of the sermon, even and especially if they were not at the trial, is found in verse 8, which reads, "Whosoever believed or had been taught to believe in the word of God [was] cast into the fire." When would these women and children have heard the word of God or been taught the word of God, such that they could be believers at that point? They don't seem

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37. The text is explicit, however, on dates of certain events at Ammonihah. The angel visited Amulek on "the fourth day of this seventh month, which is in the tenth year" (Alma 10:6), the same day in which Amulek encountered Alma. They were together for "many days" before they began their public preaching (Alma 8:27). Three months and a week later, "on the twelfth day, in the tenth month, in the tenth year" (Alma 14:23), after having been imprisoned for "many days" following the martyrdoms of the women and the children, the prison walls crumbled, and Alma and Amulek were miraculously set free (see Alma 14:23–28). As all the events concerning Ammonihah mentioned in this paper occurred between the visit of the angel to Amulek and the prison crumbling, we know that the Ammonihah sermon and the subsequent martyrdom took place within approximately a three-month period, giving the possibility for more time between the sermon and the martyrdom. These details were presented to me in conversation with Dr. Joseph M. Spencer, professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University, in 2023.

to have been believers from an earlier point in time. At the beginning of Alma's preaching in Ammonihah, he was rejected and cast out without anyone making a defense for him (see Alma 8:13). It seems evident that few or none believed in the word of God when Alma began his mission there, and none were converted until he and Amulek began preaching together. Even Amulek, who became Alma's companion, acknowledged that he had hardened his heart and "would not hear" until his angelic visitation (Alma 10:6).

Moreover, in Alma 14:1, "after he had made an end of speaking unto the people [note the gender-inclusive language here] many of them did believe on [Alma's] words, and began to repent, and to search the scriptures." If the sermons, trial, and martyrdom all happened on the same day, who would have had time to search the word of God *except* the women who had returned home (that is, if only the believing men trailed Alma and Amulek to the courtroom)? If the sermons, trial, and martyrdom happened over several days, the women and children may have attended the court scene, been cast out for believing, and then been forced into the fire another day. Possibly, they willingly entered the fire, refusing to deny their testimony of Christ.

The martyred women and children's lives may be another suggestive element of their presence at Alma's sermons. Although this point is not conclusive, it is worth exploring. The women were not just deemed guilty by association because of their husbands', brothers', or fathers' belief. According to the text, "whosoever believed" was cast in the fire (Alma 14:8). It thus appears that these woman had a chance to deny the faith and escape their fate. It is not difficult to imagine that the women who were burned saw themselves in the words Alma had taught: "Death comes upon mankind," but there is "a plan of redemption laid, which shall bring to pass the resurrection of the dead" (Alma 12:24–25). These brave women were possibly willing to suffer physical death, believing it was a better fate than the "second death" Alma spoke of (Alma 13:30), having been taught that they would soon "enter into the rest of God" (Alma 12:37). If one assumes that women were ignored in sermons, one would assume also that their experiences would be ignored too, but these and other examples highlight that they were not.

### **Alma's Inclusion of Women in Alma 32**

Alma's next sermon comes some chapters later. In Alma 32, while preaching among the Zoramites, he offers "one of the most inclusive

verses in the Book of Mormon.”<sup>38</sup> This time he includes women explicitly, making sure that they understand that what he is teaching is for them. “And now,” he says, “[God] imparteth his word by angels unto men, yea, not only men but women also” (v. 23). Kylie Turley interprets this passage as signaling how Alma had changed after watching the burning of the women and the children; only now, after witnessing that awful event, does he choose to acknowledge women explicitly.<sup>39</sup> Joseph Spencer in turn uses this verse to explain how Alma may have wanted to address women more directly after Korihor’s success among them (see Alma 30:18).<sup>40</sup> Although I agree with Turley that Alma must have been changed by the scenes he witnessed in Ammonihah, and I agree with Spencer that Alma would have been increasingly concerned about women in Korihor’s aftermath, Turley’s and Spencer’s arguments fail to note evidence (reviewed previously) that Alma may have been acknowledging women before he spoke to the Zoramites, before Korihor, and even before Ammonihah. Alma 32:23 may not be an exception to male-exclusive content; it could be another clear indication of female inclusion and of Alma’s awareness of women.

However, it is worth analyzing why Alma was more direct and explicit about his inclusion of women in Alma 32 than in previous sermons. Both Turley and Spencer note the rareness of Alma addressing women independent of men. Using the evidence they introduce in their articles, and pairing it with what has been mentioned thus far, perhaps the experience at Ammonihah and the interaction with Korihor made Alma aware of the fact that although he knew he was speaking to women as well as men, his use of language was not effectively portraying his inclusive intent to his audience (as it doesn’t clearly do so in modern language). Alma may have felt the need to point out that angels can come to women (and children, as also stated further along in the verse) to debunk a cultural myth that angels only come to men.<sup>41</sup> Both Alma and

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38. Salleh and Hemming, *Book of Mormon for the Least of These*, 2:267.

39. Kylie Turley, “Alma’s Hell: Repentance, Consequence, and the Lake of Fire and Brimstone,” in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 28, no. 1 (2019): 33–34, <https://scholars.archive.byu.edu/jbms/vol28/iss1/2/>.

40. Joseph M. Spencer, “Women and Nephite Men: Lessons from the Book of Alma,” in *Give Ear to My Words: Text and Contexts Alma 36–42*, ed. Kerry M. Hull, Nicholas J. Frederick, and Hank R. Smith (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2019): 235–53.

41. Dr. Joseph M. Spencer, conversation with author during winter 2023.

Amulek had been visited by angels (see Mosiah 27 and Alma 10:7), and because they were both male, Alma may have wanted to make it clear that it was not their genders that invited the heavenly visitations. As seen before, Alma addressed certain demographics explicitly (like gender or age) when cultural circumstances called for it. But when gender wasn't specified, it may have been because Alma felt that women were naturally included in his audience.

### **Alma 7: A Potential Exception to Alma's Gender-Inclusive Language**

In the preceding sections, I have made the case that Alma's sermons are generally intended to be read as addressed to women as well as men.<sup>42</sup> Are there any clear exceptions to this rule? As it turns out, there is one sermon for which there is suggestive evidence that Alma explicitly addresses only men. In Alma 7:1, Alma addresses the crowd as "my beloved brethren" and continues to refer to them as such three other times, in verses 17, 22, and 26. Given the evidence prior to this section, one might assume that an accurate twenty-first-century translation would be "brothers and sisters" in the place of every "brethren"—but the concluding verse of the sermon complicates things. There, Alma leaves a blessing on the congregation: "And now, may the peace of God rest upon you, and upon your houses and lands, and upon your flocks and herds, and all that you possess, *your women* and your children, according to your faith and good works, from this time forth and forever" (Alma 7:27, emphasis added).<sup>43</sup> To Pearson, this verse makes it appear as if women are property.<sup>44</sup> Based on Kevin and Shauna Christensen's rebuttal to that reading, if we remove the list of possessions as part of a nonessential phrase, the verse could also read, "May the peace of God rest upon you,

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42. There are times when "brethren" is used to talk about a group of men exclusively. We see this in Alma 27, when Alma runs into his former comrades. "Now the joy of Alma in meeting his brethren was truly great. . . . And now it came to pass that Alma conducted his brethren back to the land of Zarahemla" (Alma 27:19–20). We again see this use of "brethren" when the text references Alma and his missionary companions, who are listed as all men (see Alma 31:6, 11–12, 19).

43. Brant Gardner, in his Book of Mormon commentary, points out that it is significant here that Alma "does not bless a city. He blesses families. . . . He blesses the lands and flocks required to support that family." Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, vol. 4, *Alma* (Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 137.

44. Pearson, "Could Feminism Have Saved the Nephites?" 35.

your women, and your children, according to your faith and good works, from this time forth and forever."<sup>45</sup> Even with the second interpretation, women are still "not the subjects of the sermon."<sup>46</sup> If there were women in the crowd, then Alma appears to ignore them in this verse and potentially ignores them for the entire sermon.<sup>47</sup>

As explained earlier, what makes "brethren" confusing is that it can mean "brothers and sisters," but it can also mean just "brothers." In Alma 7, then, it is possible that Alma is addressing only men in verse 27 because he was talking to a solely male audience throughout the sermon. Other textual evidence is in fact suggestive here. For example, in the previous chapter, Mormon introduces the story of Alma going to the Gideonites as follows: "And Alma went and began to declare the word of God unto the church which was established in the valley of Gideon" (Alma 6:8). In other accounts of Alma going to visit a people, Mormon introduces those interactions with the following: "[Alma] began to teach the people in the land of Melek" (8:4), and "Alma began to deliver the word of God unto the people, first in the land of Zarahemla" (5:1). However, in the land of Gideon, Mormon indicates that Alma specifically goes to "the church." It is possible that Alma taught church members in different groups and that his sermon to the church in Gideon, recorded in Alma 7, was taught just to men. In fact, Mormon acknowledges that there was more taught to the people of Gideon than is recorded in Alma 7: "And now it came to pass that Alma returned from the land of Gideon, after having taught the people of Gideon many things which cannot be written" (Alma 8:1). If Alma gave more instruction in Gideon than what was recorded, this leaves space for the possibility that multiple gatherings occurred with other groups that did include women.

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45. "Pearson claims that women in Nephite culture are marginalized and viewed as property. The longer we have worked on this response, the less inclined we are to accept this charge. Pearson reads a blessing that the peace of God may 'rest upon you, and upon your houses and lands, and upon your flocks and herds, and all that you possess, your women and your children' (p. 35, quoting Alma 7:27). The reference to women and children comes after the summary statement 'all that you possess,' not before. Even so, there are instances when women speak of 'my husband; . . . my sons' (1 Nephi 5:8; compare Mosiah 21:9; Alma 19:4–5)." Kevin Christensen and Shauna Christensen, "Nephite Feminism Revisited: Thoughts on Carol Lynn Pearson's View of Women in the Book of Mormon," in *FARMS Review of Books* 10, no. 2 (1998): 42.

46. Salleh and Hemming, *Book of Mormon for the Least of These*, 2:159.

47. It is possible that it was not appropriate for Alma to bless the women directly due to cultural customs. However, there is neither historical nor scriptural evidence that such a tradition existed.

However, Mormon's introduction to Alma's chapter 7 sermon in Alma 6:8 deserves closer attention in this regard. It is probable that the "holy order" portion of Alma 6:8 should be read adjoined to the rest of the verse: "And Alma went and began to declare the word of God unto the church which was established in the valley of Gideon, according to the revelation of the truth of the word . . . , and according to the spirit of prophecy . . . , according to the testimony of Jesus Christ, . . . and the holy order by which he was called." With this reading, Alma went to speak to the church in Gideon because he was called to preach the redemption of Christ. The "holy order" could refer to his covenant to preach the word, not the group of people he addressed.

Depending on how one punctuates the text, other readings are also possible. If the verse's middle three sentences are placed between em dashes or parentheses, such that the first and the last sentences are continuous, the text reads, "And Alma went and began to declare the word of God unto the church which was established in the valley of Gideon, . . . and the holy order by which he was called." Such a rendering could suggest that Alma went to declare the word to the church (the general population of the membership) and to the "holy order." We could assume "holy order" means those who were ordained to the priesthood, but it could also mean those who were in covenant relationship with Christ through their baptism. Both meanings coincide with Alma's explanation for why he preached to the church in Gideon in Alma 7:22: "that I might awaken you to a sense of your duty to God, that ye may walk blameless before him, that ye may walk after the holy order of God, after which ye have been received."

Alma 5:54 is another instance where we read "the holy order of God." Alma mentions those who have humbled "themselves and do walk after the holy order of God, wherewith they have been brought into this church, having been sanctified by the Holy Spirit, and they do bring forth works which are meet for repentance." Thus, with repentance being the qualification to "walk after the holy order of God," those mentioned in Alma 5 could have been male or female. As Alma 7:22 also uses the phrase "walk after the holy order of God," we could assume the same. However, 7:22 includes the phrase "after which ye have been received." When Alma uses the word "received" in 7:22, it echoes the use in Alma 13:18, where "Alma speaks of the high priest Melchizedek who 'received the office of the high priesthood according to the holy order of God.' We see here that *received* is the term Alma used to denote those who were ordained to an office of the priesthood. In Alma 7:22, then, it seems that

Alma directly speaks to priesthood bearers, increasing the probability of his audience in Alma 7 being exclusively male."<sup>48</sup>

But even if Alma spoke of Christ's ministry to a male-only audience in Gideon, he still uses inclusive language: "And [Christ] shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of *his people*. And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind *his people*; and he will take upon him their infirmities, . . . that he may know according to the flesh how to succor *his people* according to their infirmities. . . . The Son of God suffereth according to the flesh that he might take upon him the sins of *his people*" (Alma 7:11–13, emphasis added). Moreover, Alma admits in verse 9 that the Spirit admonished him to "cry unto this people." The message Alma wanted to make clear throughout all his sermons, it seems, no matter the demographic of the actual audience, is that Christ is the Savior of everyone and that Alma was sent to teach Christ's redemption to all people, including women.

## Conclusion

Although the stories and sermons of Alma are apparently written entirely by men, male authorship does not automatically equate to the text being exclusive of women. Alma's conversion speech, the sermons he gives, the narrative of the converts in Ammonihah, and even the possible intentional exclusion of women in Alma 7 all point to Alma's overall intended audience including women. Alma's teaching that "[God] imparteth his word by angels unto men, yea, not only men but women also" (Alma 32:23) helps us recognize that women weren't just meant to hear what was being taught—they were meant to experience it. We can also see that Alma believed that they did hear and experience and would continue to do so. Not only *could* Alma have been intentionally inclusive of women, but the text offers support that he was.

While the general lack of female representation in the text remains a question for readers and scholars to wrestle with, careful analysis suggests that a slow and deliberate reading of the Book of Mormon may reveal a much less androcentric text than many readers have perceived it

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48. Cassidy Nichole Pyper, "I Say unto You, My Brethren': Helping Female Students See Themselves in the Book of Mormon," *Religious Educator* 24, no. 3 (2023): 104, <https://rsc.byu.edu/vol-24-no-3-2023/i-say-unto-you-my-brethren>.

to be. That itself is good news for those who embrace the book as scripture in the twenty-first century. Joseph Spencer agrees that “the Book of Mormon, despite initial appearances, has much of interest and relevance to say about gender.” He continues, “It seems to me that we will not get far on difficult topics like this without slowing down and investigating the details we are too likely to miss when we zoom out and try to take in the big picture.”<sup>49</sup> To discover more insight into gender and the Book of Mormon, readers must do as Spencer prescribes and carefully and meticulously study the Book of Mormon’s words to understand the author’s intent, especially regarding gender.<sup>50</sup> I hope this paper is one of many others still to come where the experiences and sermons of other Book of Mormon authors, editors, and speakers are carefully explored on whether and how they, like Alma, intentionally included women.

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49. Joseph M. Spencer, “Mothers, Daughters, Wives, and Women: Notes on Gender in First Nephi,” in *The Anatomy of Book of Mormon Theology*, vol. 1 (Greg Kofford Books, 2021), 235.

50. The following questions about the Book of Mormon have aided me in my research: Were women seen as lesser by prophetic voices in the Book of Mormon? Did those prophets aim for women to hear or read them, or did they see males as their primary and desired audience? In an explicitly devotional sense, did God intend the Book of Mormon to be for women?

# This Branch of the Church

## The Early Development of Local Administration in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Part 1, The Emergent Church, 1830–1845

*Brandon Plewe*

It is easy for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to read the Doctrine and Covenants, or most basic histories of the Church, and assume that the Church has always operated like it operates today, if a bit simpler. By the mid-1830s, most significant local and general offices and titles of Church leadership that we recognize today were in place, and it is possible to interpret historical texts through a modern understanding. Occasional inconsistencies can be easily dismissed as the vagaries of frontier language.

On closer inspection, it becomes clear that Church administration has changed in almost every way, at both the general and local levels. For example, additional leadership offices, roles, and responsibilities were added as the Church grew larger and more complex. Even the core office of bishop changed in fundamental ways.<sup>1</sup> During the presidencies of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, there were very few established policies for local administration beyond the basic principles in the Doctrine and Covenants (especially in sections 20 and 107). These scriptures were interpreted and implemented in a variety of ways in different places at different times.

In 1877, President Brigham Young, in the final major act of his life, standardized the local administration of the Church, which has since been termed the Priesthood Reorganization of 1877.<sup>2</sup> First envisioned by

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1. Dale Beecher, “The Office of Bishop,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 15, no. 4 (Winter 1982): 103–15.

2. William G. Hartley, “The Priesthood Reorganization of 1877: Brigham Young’s Last Achievement,” *BYU Studies* 20, no. 1 (1979): 3–36.

Brigham during the St. George Temple dedication that April, he and the Twelve Apostles traveled across Utah territory, reorganizing wards, stakes, and quorums. In July, the First Presidency issued a circular to Church leaders that explained the new standard policy for how the local Church should be organized and operated.<sup>3</sup> This precursor to the modern *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* was the first clear policy statement on Church administration since the mid-1830s and set forth a structure that is very similar to the way the Church is organized today:

- Stakes are regional groupings of congregations led by a presidency and high council, which should hold regular stake conferences.
- Wards are the primary type of congregation, presided over by a bishop. They hold weekly Sunday meetings and should have their own auxiliary organizations (Relief Society, Sunday School, Primary, Young Ladies' and Young Men's Mutual Improvement Associations).
- Branches are smaller congregations led by a presiding priesthood holder (preferably an elder) and structured more simply.
- Melchizedek and Atonic Priesthood quorums are only organized at the ward and stake level.
- All of these organizations are expected to keep accurate records of membership, meetings, and finances.
- Congregations must be geographically bounded so that every member is assigned to a congregation.

At the beginning of 1877, many places were already operating in this fashion, but at least half of the towns in Utah Territory were organized in a variety of ways that changed significantly over time.

This variation led me to ask the question at the center of this project: "What was local Church administration like prior to the 1877 Reorganization?" How were the organizational structures, leadership roles, and guiding philosophy similar to the modern Church, and how were they different? How and why did they vary over time and space?

Past historians were generally aware of the lack of standards in pre-1877 local administration but typically brushed over it by saying

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3. Brigham Young, John W. Young, and Daniel W. Wells, *Circular of the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Salt Lake City, Utah Territory, July 11, 1877), <https://archive.org/details/circularoffirstp00unse>.

something to the effect of “things were odd then.” Exceptions to this trend include landmark works, such as Dale Beecher’s study of the changing role of bishops and William Hartley’s work on the priesthood in Nauvoo and the 1877 Reorganization.<sup>4</sup> The research presented here builds on their foundation. Employing sources not earlier available, a more detailed historical-geographic analysis, and a fresh perspective, some of their findings are strengthened, some are clarified, and some are refuted. A significant challenge was to conscientiously set aside our modern assumptions and concepts of local church organization, such as those listed above, to analyze doctrines, policies, and practices as they were understood at the time.

Specifically, we studied the administrative history of every stake, ward, and branch that existed prior to 1877, focusing on the core areas of Church settlement (just over three hundred local units) rather than the outlying missions with their thousands of branches.<sup>5</sup> The result is not a collection of general histories but an attempt to answer the following questions about each unit:

- How did the function and structure of each congregation change?
- How did the titles and roles of congregational leaders change?
- What terms were used to refer to the congregation and what did they mean?

As I compared these histories, several patterns emerged. In summary, the types of local units and leaders with which we are familiar today—wards, branches, stakes, bishops, and presidencies—emerged and gradually gained acceptance during this period. Indeed, the 1877 Reorganization was not an invention of a new system as much as it was a standardization of current best practices. Along the way, though, several very different types of units and leadership structures came and went, including some that were still present in 1877 and a few that survived into the twentieth century.

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4. Beecher, “Office of Bishop”; Hartley, “Priesthood Reorganization of 1877”; William G. Hartley, “Nauvoo Stake, Priesthood Quorums, and the Church’s First Wards,” *BYU Studies* 32, nos. 1–2 (1992): 57–80; William G. Hartley, “Brigham Young and Priesthood Work at the General and Local Levels,” in *Lion of the Lord: Essays on the Life and Service of Brigham Young*, ed. Susan E. Black and Larry C. Porter (Deseret Book, 1995), 338–70.

5. To learn more about the specific research that helped generate this article, visit <https://mormonplaces.byu.edu>, which attempts to document the organization history of every unit of the Church that existed prior to 1930, almost eight thousand in total.

This work will appear in a series of four articles. This article covers the lifetime of Joseph Smith, including the remaining time in Nauvoo (1830–45). The second article will cover the early pioneer period in the Council Bluffs area and Deseret (1846–52). The third article will include a wide variety of practices that emerged during the 1850s. The fourth and final article will cover the maturing (but not standardized) practices of the 1860s and 1870s, culminating in the 1877 Reorganization.

### Early Developments: 1830–1838

From the very beginning of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in April 1830, a major concern was how to organize local groups of members into congregations to ensure that each member was cared for, an imperative found both in the Book of Mormon (Moro. 6:4–5) and the founding “constitution” of the Church, the Articles and Covenants (now D&C 20:47, 83).<sup>6</sup>

#### The Branch or Church

The original form of congregation was called the *branch*. After the Church was organized, the members in New York met in three separate places: Manchester/Palmyra, Fayette, and Colesville. These were originally called *churches*, as set forth in the April 1830 Articles and Covenants of the Church (D&C 20:81): “the several churches, composing the Church of Christ.”<sup>7</sup> Within a few months, missionaries organized several more in Ohio.

They were also called *branches* by October 1831,<sup>8</sup> the term first appearing in scripture in December 1831 (D&C 72:23), although it was probably already common by then. The use of the synonym *church* continued for

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6. Original text in “Revelation Book 1,” 55, Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian’s Press, accessed December 12, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-book-1/39>; later published in *The Evening and Morning Star* 1, no. 1 (June 1832): 1.

7. “Revelation Book 1,” 58–60 (Articles and Covenants [D&C 20]). The term “branch” also appears in that section (D&C 20:65–66), but these verses were added in 1834. Compare the text published in the June 1832 issue of *The Evening and Morning Star*, which matches the Book of Commandments and does not contain these verses, with the January 1835 Kirtland reprint, which is the current text in the *Doctrine and Covenants*. *Evening and Morning Star* 1, no. 1 (June 1832, reprint January 1835): 4.

8. Minutes of a conference held in Hiram Portage County, Ohio, October 11, 1831, in “Minute Book 2,” 8, Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian’s Press, accessed December 12, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minute-book-2/10>.

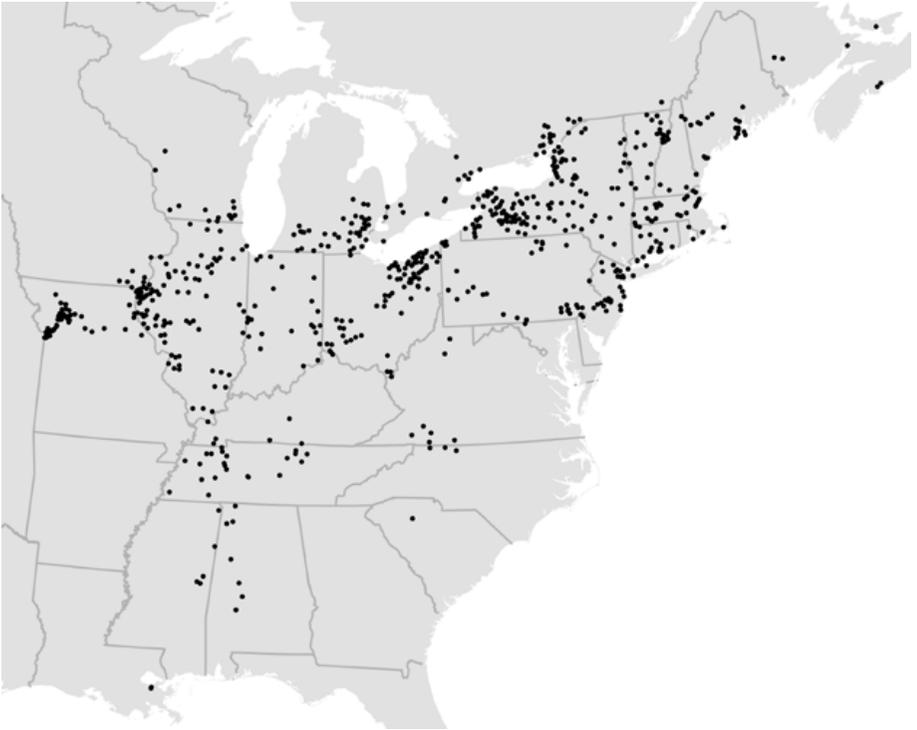


FIGURE 1. Branches in the United States and Canada, 1830–44. From *Mapping Mormonism: An Atlas of Latter-day Saint History* (Brigham Young University Press, 2014), 41.

several years after this but largely faded out by 1834.<sup>9</sup> This may have been due to confusion between the general “Church” and the local “church.”

During the 1830s, missionaries established hundreds of branches across the United States, Canada, and England (fig. 1), although most were short-lived as converts eventually gathered to Kirtland or Missouri.<sup>10</sup> The average mission branch had ten to fifty members, a few priesthood holders, and a presiding elder (the title *president* was rare and typically appeared only in larger branches where he had counselors).

9. A fairly late example is the “Church” in Springfield, Pennsylvania, mentioned on February 20, 1834. “Minute Book 1,” 39, Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian’s Press, accessed December 12, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minute-book-1/43>.

10. “The Church in the Kirtland-Missouri Era,” in *Mapping Mormonism: An Atlas of Latter-day Saint History*, ed. Brandon S. Plewe, S. Kent Brown, Donald Q. Cannon, and Richard H. Jackson, 2nd ed. (BYU Press, 2012), 36–37.

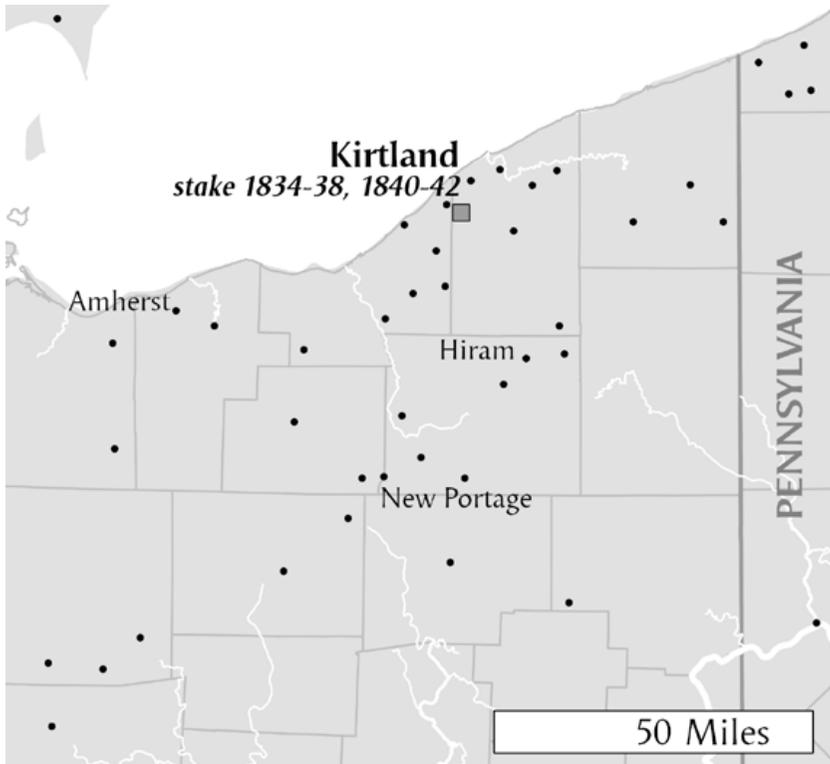


FIGURE 2. Likely branches in the Kirtland, Ohio, region. Based on data from <https://mormonplaces.byu.edu>.

If there were no elders, a priest or teacher could be called to preside, as directed in the Articles and Covenants (D&C 20:44, 49, 56).

Surprisingly, it has been more difficult to determine where branches existed near the headquarters in Kirtland (fig. 2); members lived in dozens of locations, but fewer than ten locations have documentary evidence of a distinct church or branch organization.<sup>11</sup>

### The Local Bishop

A second development in local administration occurred when Newel K. Whitney was called as a bishop in Kirtland in December 1831 (D&C 72:8).

11. For example, in an elders meeting on September 12, 1831, “churches” are mentioned in Shalersville, Orange, and Warrensville, all within thirty miles of Kirtland. Minutes of a Conference held in Kirtland, Geauga County, Ohio, September 12, 1831, in “Minute Book 2,” 6.

Edward Partridge had been called as a bishop in February 1831 with a responsibility for the entire Church (D&C 41:9), but he had resettled in Missouri. Although neither was given a specific regional jurisdiction, Partridge and Whitney were informally operating at a stake level.<sup>12</sup> Stake-level “presiding bishops” would continue to be common until the 1877 Reorganization when they were officially eliminated.

Initially, the bishops were not general ecclesiastical leaders but focused solely on the temporal affairs of the Church, including managing the Law of Consecration (February 1831, D&C 42:31), real estate and caring for the poor and needy (November 1831, D&C 107:68), being a judge in civil disputes and disciplinary actions (August 1831, D&C 58:18, D&C 107:72–74), and presiding over the Aaronic Priesthood (November 1831, D&C 68:17, D&C 107:87–88).<sup>13</sup>

### The Emergent Stake

The word *stake* was first mentioned in April 1832 (D&C 82:13–14) as a designation for the Kirtland area. Initially, *stake* was not clearly defined as a specific administrative organization but rather a place designated for the permanent gathering of the Saints (D&C 101:21). The term was a metaphor for a tent stake that helps hold up the ever-expanding tent for the House of Israel and was based on the imagery of Isaiah 54:1–2. From 1832 into the 1850s (and in some respects for several years thereafter), the notion of a stake was neither exclusively ecclesiastical nor regional. Instead, it was envisioned as a new city, with an inspired but typical grid-street layout centered on a landmark temple, with the Church as the predominant land developer, and governed by both a church organization run by the priesthood and a civilian municipal government. Perhaps we can call this notion the *stake-as-gathering-place*.

The meaning and practices of stakes and their officers emerged gradually over several years. When Joseph Smith was ordained as the “President of the High Priesthood” in January 1832, it is not clear to modern readers whether he became the President of the Church, the president of the Kirtland Stake, or the president of the new quorum of high priests.<sup>14</sup>

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12. The title of *presiding bishop* would not appear until many years later. Modern histories have often referred to them as “general bishops,” but only “bishop” was used prior to 1877.

13. The subsequent evolution of these roles is discussed in depth in Beecher, “Office of Bishop.”

14. D&C 107:91 (November 1831) set forth the office in which Joseph Smith was sustained at the Amherst, Ohio conference on January 25, 1832. “Minutes, 26–27 April

To Joseph and his followers at the time, however, there was no need for a distinction. Even after the First Presidency was organized in March 1832, and was more fully explained by revelation in March 1833 (D&C 90), it still presided over both local and general matters.<sup>15</sup>

At first, Church business (both general and local) was conducted by Joseph Smith gathering an ad hoc collection of trusted priesthood holders.<sup>16</sup> This advisory body was formalized when the high council was organized in February 1834 (D&C 102). As with the First Presidency, their authority initially had theoretical jurisdiction over the entire Church. This was clarified somewhat when the Quorum of Twelve Apostles was called in March 1835 as a “traveling high council” (D&C 107:36) with the same authority as the high council for branches outside of stakes. The Twelve theoretically limited the authority of the high councils in Kirtland and Missouri to their immediate vicinity, although meetings of the presidency and high council in Kirtland continued to conduct general Church business. The Twelve would not gain broader, general authority until late in the Nauvoo era.

### The Church in Zion

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the Saints in Jackson County, Missouri, were never organized as a stake per se.<sup>17</sup> After all, it was the center place of Zion, the tent pole in the Isaiah metaphor, not a stake securing the edges. At the time, it was almost always called “The Church in Zion.” That said, the organization there essentially filled the role of a stake.

At first, Bishop Edward Partridge was the only titular authority, but his roles were limited. Business was conducted there in the same fashion as it was in Kirtland: Meetings were held with an ad hoc group of elders and high priests, and decisions were made by consensus. When

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1832,” 24–25, Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian’s Press, accessed December 12, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/minutes-26-27-april-1832/1>.

15. *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev., 7 vols. (Deseret Book, 1971), 1:334; see also “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” 334, Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian’s Press, accessed January 16, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/340>.

16. “Minute Book 2,” 3–19.

17. The title “the center stake of Zion” was often used in later years when Church leaders contemplated the prophesied millennial regathering to Missouri. For example, *Sermon by Brigham Young, Delivered May 29th, 1847, to the Pioneers While They Were Crossing the Plains*, reported by William Clayton (n.p., n.d.), 12, <https://archive.org/details/sermonbybrigham00young/page/12/mode/2up>.

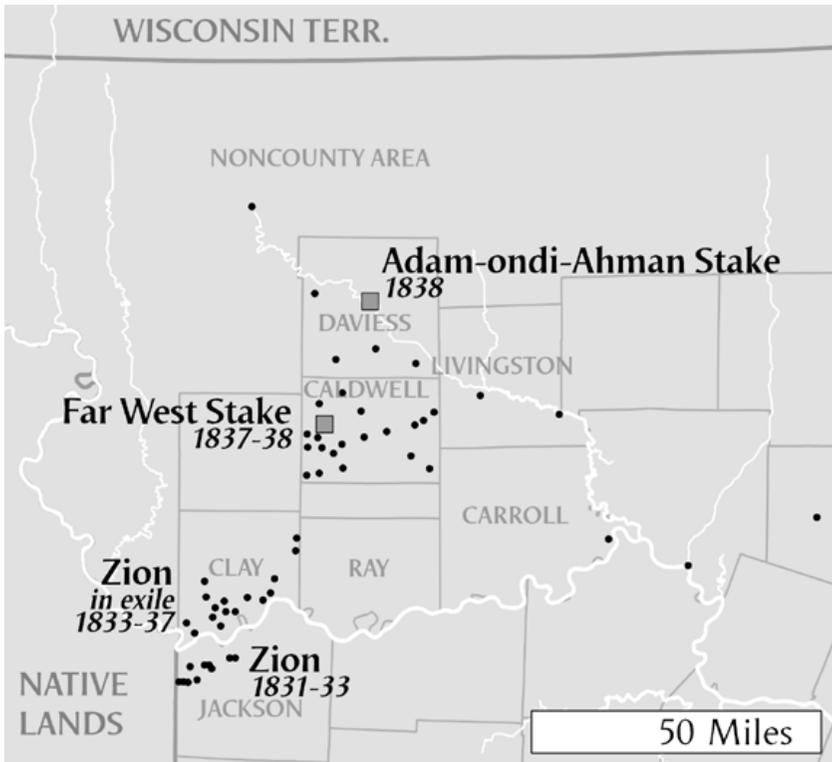


FIGURE 3. The Church in Zion, stakes, and branches in Missouri, 1831–38. Based on data from <https://mormonplaces.byu.edu>.

Oliver Cowdery (the original Second Elder), John Whitmer, and W. W. Phelps arrived in January 1832 to publish the Book of Commandments, they took on a first-among-equals role in these meetings but did not officially preside.<sup>18</sup> In September 1833, after Cowdery returned to Kirtland, Bishop Partridge was officially recognized as “the head of the Church of Zion at present,”<sup>19</sup> the first time a bishop was given broad ecclesiastical authority.

Zion was organized into four branches in July 1832, the first clear indication of separate congregations within a central gathering place (fig. 3).<sup>20</sup> As the population grew, these were subdivided into ten branches in September 1833, each presided over by a high priest. It is unclear if these

18. “Minute Book 2,” 21–37.

19. “Minute Book 2,” 36.

20. “Minute Book 2,” 29.

branches ever functioned before the Saints were driven out of Jackson County within two months of their organization.<sup>21</sup>

The “Church in Zion” went into exile in Clay County and received a stake-like organization. In July 1834, David Whitmer was ordained the “President of the Church in Zion,” with counselors, a bishop, and a high council that mirrored the organization in Kirtland; however, Zion was never called a stake.<sup>22</sup> Individual congregations appear to have been temporary and informal, although there is secondary evidence of a few organized branches.<sup>23</sup>

The stake-like organization of Zion-in-exile continued after the Saints moved from Clay County to Caldwell County, until Whitmer and his counselors were removed from office in February 1838 (with the two senior Apostles, Thomas B. Marsh and David W. Patten, assuming the title of “Presidents pro tempore”).<sup>24</sup> In April 1838, the concept of Zion-in-exile ceased with the organization of the Far West Stake.<sup>25</sup> But even after this, Zion’s appellation as a stake is rare, with “the high council of Zion” still commonly used in their records.<sup>26</sup>

### More Stakes

The first clear callings of stake presidents occurred in 1838: When Joseph Smith left Kirtland in January, he appointed William Marks as president there with John Smith and Reynolds Cahoon as counselors; Marks served at least through July and likely until October 1838.<sup>27</sup> When Joseph Smith arrived in Missouri in April 1838, he authorized the Apostles to

21. “Minute Book 2,” 36.

22. “Minute Book 2,” 43–45.

23. For example, the Hulet Branch: “Minute Book 2,” 58.

24. “Minutes of the Proceedings of the Committee of the Whole Church in Zion,” *Elders’ Journal* 1, no. 3 (July 1838): 44, <https://archive.org/details/EldersJournal18371838/page/n43/mode/2up>.

25. “Conference Minutes,” *Elders’ Journal* 1, no. 3 (July 1838): 47, <https://archive.org/details/EldersJournal18371838/page/n47/mode/2up>.

26. “Minute Book 2,” 132–155.

27. Marcellus Smith to George A. Smith, September 26, 1837, holograph, image 6 of “John Smith Letter, Kirtland, Ohio, 1838 January 1,” George A. Smith Papers 1834–1877, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/4487c499-6a42-4c45-bb37-e92d4de1e93e/0/5>; Hepzibah Richards to Willard Richards, January 18–19, 1838, holograph, image 3, Willard Richards Journals and Papers, 1821–1854, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/106d974b-d7f3-4f0b-99ca-fc4c2cbeec7e/0/0>; Kirtland Camp, Journal, 1838 March–October, holograph, image 16, Kirtland Camp Constitution and Journal, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/ee641835-dea0-4576-83f0-5659845714a5/1/15>.

continue as a presidency pro tempore of the new stake in Far West, a role they would continue to hold until the Church left Missouri and perhaps a first step in the Twelve's emergence as a body with greater authority than their original role. The stake at Adam-ondi-Ahman was organized in June 1838 with John Smith as president (having left Kirtland and its presidency in April), a high council, and an acting bishop.<sup>28</sup> In July 1838, William Marks was called to leave Kirtland and preside over Far West (D&C 117:10), but he did not go West until late in the year, by which time the Saints had been exiled to Quincy, Illinois.

Each early stake of Zion (Kirtland, Far West, and Adam-ondi-Ahman) included not only the central planned city but also nearby rural branches, which were envisioned to eventually grow and become their own stakes.<sup>29</sup> There may have been twenty or more such branches in northern Missouri (fig. 3), but no branch records have survived; there are only oblique references in journals and stake records.<sup>30</sup>

A temple was proposed in Zion and each of the three stakes in Ohio and Missouri. Like Kirtland, temples included a large meetinghouse with offices for leaders, more like the later stake tabernacles (and modern stake centers) than the later temples.

## The Outlying Church

Starting in 1835, the newly ordained Quorum of the Twelve Apostles established two more types of regional organization beyond the stakes. The first was the *conference*, a group of branches that met quarterly (in “conference”), established during the Apostles’ tour through western New York in May 1835.<sup>31</sup> This was based on a reinterpretation of Doctrine and

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28. A. Ripley, “Adam Ondi Ahman is situated . . .,” *Elders’ Journal* 1, no. 4 (August 1838): 60–61, <https://archive.org/details/EldersJournal18371838/page/n51/mode/2up>. Note that we have yet to find a source that gives either of these an official name; at best they are “the stake at X.”

29. For example, an 1838 policy statement says, “Each branch of the church, not yet organized into a stake.” Then a couple sentences later it says, “To the Clerk of the nearest stake, or to such as they [branches] may be attached.” George W. Robinson, “Notice,” in *Elders’ Journal* 1, no. 4 (August 1838): 62, <https://archive.org/details/EldersJournal18371838/page/n61/mode/2up>.

30. For example, “Minute Book 2,” 100–2; see also William Draper, *Autobiography*, 1881, holograph, 8 [image 9], Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/775acd0d-43ec-4697-ae7f-be99af01d340/0/8>.

31. “Record of the Twelve, 14 February–28 August 1835,” 8, Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian’s Press, accessed December 14, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/record-of-the-twelve-14-february-28-august-1835/14>.

Covenants 20:61, which originally referred to the general conference. It could also have been indirectly based on the conferences that were regional organizations in the Methodist Church.<sup>32</sup>

The second regional organization, the *mission*, initially referred to a particular group of proselyting missionaries and their leaders in a specific area such as the British Mission of 1837.<sup>33</sup> The use of the term to refer to the entire church in the region, including the members and their branches, was informal and infrequent during this period, not becoming common until decades later. For example, in the official records of the British Mission, the collection of branches and members was almost always called “The Church in Great Britain and Ireland”; the same was true for “The Church in the Eastern United States” and elsewhere.<sup>34</sup> This phrasing precisely matches “The Church in Zion” in the previous section.

In summary, during the first eight years of the Church, local and general administration gradually evolved and diverged. Many innovations came by direct revelation, but some came by practical necessity or by trial and error. Much of the structure and policy governing local congregations was documented, such as in D&C 20 and 107, but there was plenty of room for interpretation. Even today, members apply scriptures such as these to modern structures and policies that differ significantly from their original intent or interpretation. The flexibility of these documents left room for debate over the details of Church policy and facilitated further evolution as new needs arose in Nauvoo and beyond.

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32. The conference as a group of branches not in a stake was rebranded as a “district” in 1927, the term still in use today. J. E. T., “Districts and Conferences,” *Millennial Star* 89, no. 14 (April 7, 1927): 216, <https://archive.org/details/millennialstar8914eng/page/216/mode/2up>.

33. Willard Richards, Journal (Volume 1), 1836 December–1840 April), holograph, image 18, Willard Richards Journals and Papers, 1821–1854, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/53d252e7-a5a9-4e9e-b22b-ac6e1d12ea3d/0/17>.

34. For example, in an April 1855 conference of the St. Louis Stake, Erastus Snow was sustained as “President of the Church in the Western and Southern States.” “Saint Louis Stake (1854–1858), Historical Record, 1852–1856,” 246–47, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/a627690d-69ef-4686-bc14-e90ac5a36c2b/0/0>. In another example, at the October 1850 British general conference, Franklin D. Richards expressed gratitude for Orson Pratt’s service as “the President of the Church in the British Islands.” “General Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, for Great Britain and Adjacent Countries,” *Millennial Star* 21, no. 12 (November 1, 1850), 323, <https://archive.org/details/MStarVol12/page/n327/mode/2up>.

## The Nauvoo Era: 1839–1845

When thousands of Saints were driven from Missouri in the winter of 1838, Joseph Smith and other leaders were in prison,<sup>35</sup> and administrative organization was not a high priority. Families from Missouri scattered across southwestern Illinois and southeastern Iowa—wherever they could find shelter. In some of these places, branches already existed, such as Springfield,<sup>36</sup> Jacksonville,<sup>37</sup> and Crooked Creek (later Ramus/Macedonia).<sup>38</sup> Elsewhere, branches were organized during the winter of 1838–39 as some refugees purchased land, including Pittsfield<sup>39</sup> and Warsaw,<sup>40</sup> but most Saints spent the year in a scattered, unorganized state. Even the many members in Quincy, Illinois, the largest gathering place for the Missouri refugees, were more concerned with immediate needs, such as trying to free their Prophet, helping refugees, and regaining their lands in Missouri, rather than establishing any permanent organization.<sup>41</sup>

In late April 1839, Joseph and most of his fellow prisoners escaped their captors.<sup>42</sup> Upon their arrival in Quincy, attention immediately shifted to finding a new gathering place. With the authorization of Joseph and the Church, the three existing bishops, acting in their temporal affairs capacity, purchased the failed town of Commerce, Illinois,

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35. See William G. Hartley, “The Saints’ Forced Exodus from Missouri, 1839,” in *Joseph Smith, the Prophet and the Seer*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzzapfel and Kent P. Jackson (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2010), 247–90.

36. Joel Hills Johnson, Autobiographical Sketch and Journal, 1835 August–1859 December, holograph, image 32, Joel Hills Johnson Papers, 1835–1882, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/07dfb8cc-63ac-4253-b97d-9a0d7a0c36d4/0/31>.

37. Leland R. Nelson, comp., *The Journal of Brigham: Brigham Young’s Own Story in His Own Words* (Council Press, 1980), 14.

38. “Extracts of Letters,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 2, no. 5 (February 1836): 263, <https://archive.org/details/LDSMessengerAndAdvocate18341837/page/n262>.

39. Jesse N. Smith, Autobiographical Sketch, holograph, circa 1884, image 6, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/678711f4-22d8-4ee6-b249-6eb69484d98c/0/5>.

40. John Smith, “Journal of John Smith,” June 3, 1839, typescript, image 143, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/4887b2b8-2d2a-4fcf-8a17-72c96710e0f3/0/142>.

41. Hartley, “Saints’ Forced Exodus,” 366–70.

42. Alex Baugh, “‘We Took a Change of Venue for the State of Illinois’: The Gallatin Hearing and the Escape of Joseph Smith and the Mormon Prisoners from Missouri, April 1839,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 2, no. 1 (2001): 66–67, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/3720/>.

on April 30 and thousands of acres directly across the Mississippi River in Iowa during May.<sup>43</sup> Thousands of refugees began gathering to Commerce, which functioned as a branch with William Marks as president and Newel K. Whitney as bishop.<sup>44</sup> In the fall, a new city was surveyed next to Commerce named Nauvoo.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, several settlements were established in Iowa, with the largest being Nashville and Montrose.

## Two Central Stakes

By the general conference on October 5, Nauvoo and southeastern Iowa were each ready to be appointed “a stake and a place of gathering for the Saints,” continuing the earlier meaning of *stake*. Two stake organizations were sustained, then fully organized in the following weeks.<sup>46</sup> The jurisdiction area of these two stakes varied, but generally, they claimed authority over as large an area as members were willing to recognize their authority, just as in Kirtland. The very first item of business for the Nauvoo high council concerned Harlow Redfield, a member in Pittsfield

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43. “Bond, Hugh White to Alanson Ripley, 30 April 1839,” Hancock County Bonds and Mortgages, 1:31–32, entry 28, Joseph Smith Papers, Church History Press, accessed January 28, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/bond-hugh-white-to-alanson-ripley-30-april-1839/1>; “Deed, Isaac and Elizabeth Wilcox Galland to George W. Robinson, 29 June 1839,” Hancock County Deeds, book G, 247–48, entries 3135–36, Joseph Smith Papers, Church History Press, accessed January 28, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/deed-isaac-and-elizabeth-wilcox-galland-to-george-w-robinson-29-june-1839/1>; “Deed, Isaac and Elizabeth Wilcox Galland to Oliver Granger, 29 May 1839–A, as Recorded in Lee County, Iowa, Land Records,” 508–9, Joseph Smith Papers, Church History Press, accessed January 28, 2025, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/deed-isaac-and-elizabeth-wilcox-galland-to-oliver-granger-29-may-1839-a-as-recorded-in-lee-county-iowa-land-records/1>.

44. “Minutes of a General Conference Held by the Church of the Latter Day Saints, at the Presbyterian Camp Ground near Quincy, Adams County, Illinois, on Saturday the 4th of May 1839,” holograph, image 6, Historian’s Office General Church Minutes, 1839–1877, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/3ae7a00d-6f8f-4a31-bba7-a00199f3eb60/0/5>.

45. “A Plat of the Town of Nauvoo . . .,” microfilm of holograph, 37–39 [images 27–29] (recorded September 3, 1839), in Hancock County Plat Book 1, Family History Library, <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CSX8-B9JC-K>.

46. “Proceedings of the General Conference, held at Commerce, Hancock County, Illinois, on Saturday the 5th day of October, 1839,” *Times and Seasons* 1, no. 2 (December 1839): 30, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n45>; *History of the Church*, 4:12; Iowa Stake, Iowa Stake Record, 1839–1841, holograph, image 3, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/27cab0df-5f36-42f9-8f32-0d57f324401e/0/2>. At the conference, the eastern stake is called “Commerce,” but it begins to call itself “Nauvoo” by December.

who lived seventy miles to the south. This stretched the high council's jurisdiction across southwestern Illinois.<sup>47</sup> The high council also issued a letter in December instructing all Saints living west of Kirtland to gather to Nauvoo rather than Kirtland, thus claiming authority over a broad region.<sup>48</sup> In fact, this council simply referred to itself as the "High Council of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter day Saints" until January 1840 when it adds the restriction "of Nauvoo." Contemporary records show that it was very rarely called a stake after the day it was organized. That said, its activity was almost completely focused on the Saints in the city, and its authority elsewhere was tenuous.

The stake in Iowa also had regional jurisdiction by July 1840.<sup>49</sup> Like Nauvoo, it consisted of a central gathering city—initially at the new town of Nashville, then the planned city of Zarahemla near Montrose (D&C 125:3)—surrounded by several satellite branches across Lee County and one or two beyond the county, as itemized in the conference held on August 7, 1841.<sup>50</sup> It is also very rarely called a stake in its own records. Most often, it calls itself "this branch of the Church."<sup>51</sup>

## The General Branch Ideal

The above reference reflects an emerging use of the term *branch* to refer (in a general sense) to any organized portion of the Church, regardless of particular administrative roles or structures. Although this usage would persist through the next twenty years, the Saints at the time never gave it a distinct name, and I have not found evidence of past historians discussing it, so I will call it a *general branch* to distinguish it from

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47. Nauvoo Stake High Council, Minutes, 1839 October 20–1840 May 2, holograph, image 1 (October 20, 1839), Nauvoo Stake High Council Minutes, 1839 October–1845 October, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/51afec20-84fe-4da4-b423-7b8de8fb5422/0/0>.

48. H. G. Sherwood, "To the Saints Scattered Abroad, in the Region Westward from Kirtland Ohio," *Times and Seasons* 1 no. 2 (December 1839): 29, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasonsVoll/page/n43>.

49. Representatives of the high council are sent to visit branches in Nashville, Montrose, Ambrosia, and other areas. Iowa Stake, Iowa Stake Record, 1839–1841, July 18, 1840, holograph, 91 [image 29], Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/27cab0df-5f36-42f9-8f32-0d57f324401e/0/28>.

50. Iowa Stake, Iowa Stake Record, 1839–1841, holograph, 101 [image 34], listing branches at Zarahemla (near Montrose), Siloam, Nashville, Ambrosia, Mecham Settlement, Keokuk, Augusta, Van Buren Township in Lee County, and Chequest Creek in Van Buren County.

51. For example, Iowa Stake, Iowa Stake Record, 1839–1841, July 12, 1840, holograph, 90 [image 29].

a *congregational branch*. At the time, the formal phrase “branch of the Church” often implied this general meaning. Thus, a stake was a branch of the Church, a ward was a branch of the Church, a conference was a branch of the Church, and a branch was just a branch of the Church to which no more specific title applied.

The acknowledgement of this meaning of *branch* clears up hundreds of passages in historical documents that can be confusing to modern readers, such as a unit being called a “branch” and a “stake” in the same sentence.<sup>52</sup> Previous scholars have often attributed this to a general vagueness of the terminology of the young church. But interpreted through the general branch concept, the use of *branch* is consistent, reflecting a widely understood meaning that has since fallen into disuse.

Having (congregational) branches of (regional) branches may seem confusing to today’s members, but it was consistent with the scriptural metaphors of the House of Israel as a grapevine or olive tree with branches, from which the word was taken (Jacob 5; Isa. 5) and with scriptures such as D&C 20:65. In use through at least the mid-1850s, the general use of “branch” was synonymous with what the Church now calls an *ecclesiastical unit*, a cumbersome technical term that is not commonly used by members today; unfortunately, we lack one simple term that collectively includes a ward, branch, stake, and mission.

This general branch concept engendered more than just a semantics of category hierarchy; it gave early Church members a sense of continuity between these different kinds of branches. A branch could start very small and simple with just a presiding elder. It could then add leaders as its growing membership needed—presidency counselors, bishopric, high council, patriarch, and priesthood quorums—gradually becoming a stake. If there happened to be smaller branches nearby, these leaders might have had jurisdiction over them. If the central city became very large, it might be subdivided into smaller subsidiary branches (that is, wards) with their own leadership. If the membership of a branch later decreased, such layers of leaders could be removed as needed or, if leaders departed, left vacant. But through any growth, wards and stakes were always branches of the Church. This *branch continuum* concept remained the ideal framework for local administration in the minds of Church leaders until it diminished in the 1850s.<sup>53</sup>

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52. For example, Jedediah M. Grant, in one of his final sermons in 1856, calls the Salt Lake Stake a “stake” twice and a “branch” five times. Jedediah M. Grant, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool, 1855–86), 4:124–5 (October 26, 1856).

53. This change will be covered in the third article in this series.

## The Rise and Fall of Congregational Stakes

The most notable example of fluidity between different types of branches at this time was what will be called herein a *congregational stake*, in which a single congregation was declared a stake and had at least some portion of the full stake leadership as found in Nauvoo and Iowa. These proliferated as it became clear that not all members were able or willing to move to Nauvoo. This was an important promotion for a settlement; status as a stake was not only a reward for a large membership but also a designation as a permanent place of gathering—a commitment by the Church to invest in the community’s success and potentially even the construction of a temple.

As Church leaders were getting ready to settle in Commerce, they learned that Kirtland was seeing an influx of converts from the Eastern states who were unable to move all the way to Illinois (or were uncertain as to the long-term prospects there). On May 6, 1839, Kirtland was authorized to reorganize as a stake under the presidency of Oliver Granger, but Granger was also tasked with resolving the complicated financial affairs of Joseph and the Church there. In keeping with the stake-as-place concept, Kirtland was redesignated as a permanent gathering place, especially for eastern Saints.<sup>54</sup> Granger eventually made it to Kirtland in 1840, but there are no records of him reorganizing the Kirtland stake. Granger performed his financial duties until his death in August 1841.

After the organization of the two stakes at the October 1839 Conference, William Draper (president of a branch at Pleasant Vale, 80 miles south of Nauvoo) asked Joseph what it would take to become a stake, to which the Prophet responded that “when the Branch reached the [number] of 100 he would then come and organize the Branch a stake of Zion.”<sup>55</sup> Within two weeks, Draper had built his branch to 112, and Hyrum Smith came and organized it as a stake.

The next summer, the Crooked Creek Branch east of Nauvoo requested permission for a stake from the First Presidency, and with their approval, one was organized on July 9, 1840, with Joel H. Johnston as president and William Wightman as bishop.<sup>56</sup> In the branch/stake records, it is clear that the stake was not considered complete until a city

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54. “Minutes of a General Conference Held by the Church of the Latter Day Saints, at the Presbyterian Camp Ground near Quincy,” image 2.

55. William Draper, *Autobiography*, 1881, holograph, 22 [image 23], Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/775acd0d-43ec-4697-ae7f-be99af01d340/0/22>.

56. Macedonia Branch, “A Record of the Churh [sic] of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Macedonia (also Called Ramus),” 1839–50, holograph, 8 [image 17], Church

site was selected and surveyed in late August; both the new town and stake adopted the name Ramus.<sup>57</sup> In addition to the central settlement, this stake, like those in Nauvoo and Iowa, had some jurisdiction over neighboring branches, such as LaHarpe.<sup>58</sup>

Over the next year, several branches in southwestern Illinois became similarly large. By the October 1840 general conference, the Prophet felt it was time to significantly expand the gathering vision.

“The president called upon those persons who had any remarks to make respecting the location of Stakes that then was the opportunity of doing so. Bro Miller then rose and made a statement of the desire of a number of the brethren in Adams County in Mt Ephraim Branch to have a Stake appointed there and stated the advantages of the place for agricultural purposes. On motion, resolved that a Stake be appointed in Adams County at Mt Ephraim.”<sup>59</sup>

This was probably Henry W. Miller, who presided over a branch surrounding his homestead near Payson, east of Quincy. Spurred by this request, a committee was appointed to determine other good locations for stakes, led by Hyrum Smith. Kirtland was again declared an intended stake, with Almon Babbitt (one of the committee members) as president and given a renewed authorization as a place for eastern members to gather.

Hyrum Smith was the obvious choice to act as head of the committee; he had recently been ordained associate president (D&C 124:95), and an 1838 revelation had declared that “no stake shall be appointed except by the first presidency.”<sup>60</sup> Two weeks later, Hyrum’s committee began the expansion effort, organizing several stakes southeast of Nauvoo (fig. 4).<sup>61</sup> As far as the records indicate, a high council was not included in any of these organizations.

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History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/a7535ad2-bca8-443d-96ec-46099b50c272/0/16>. The high council was not organized until July 29.

57. “Ramus,” 45 [image 31] (recorded August 26, 1840), in Hancock County Plat Book 1.

58. Macedonia Branch, “Record of the Churh,” 16 [image 25].

59. “Minutes of the General Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, [Nauvoo, Illinois,] October 3, 1840,” holograph, image 3, Historian’s Office General Church Minutes, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/268dddc2-c4de-4804-ae66-aeef05c566e47/0/2>.

60. “Revelation, 12 January 1838-B,” Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian’s Press, accessed December 19, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-12-january-1838-b/1>.

61. *History of the Church*, 4:233–36; Hyrum Smith, Diary 1839 March–April, 1840 October, image 45–46, Church History Library, MS 2945, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/63b84c16-190e-4fa9-ba12-f272684cfe0b/0/44>.

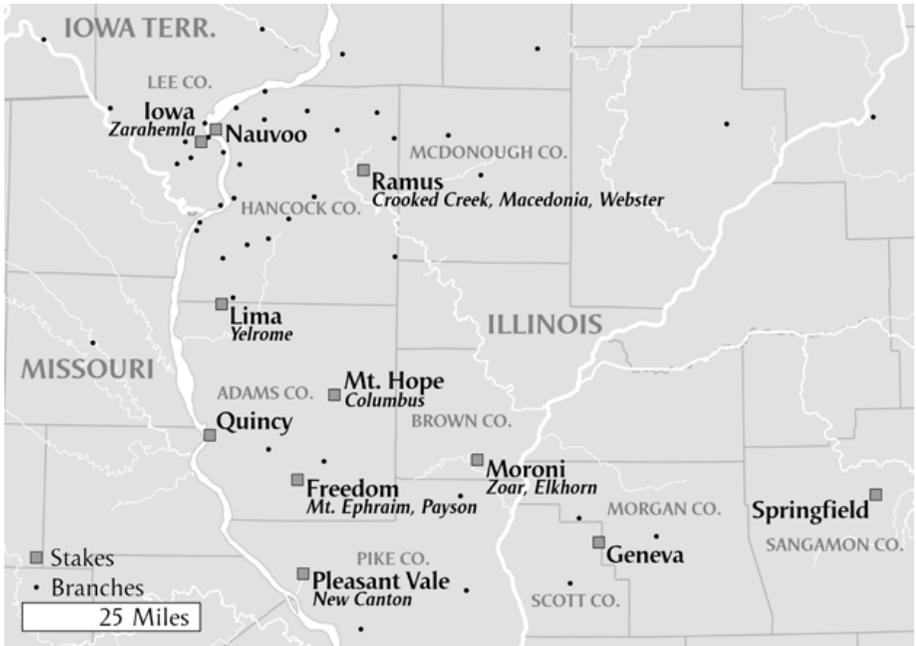


FIGURE 4. Stakes and branches in the Nauvoo area, 1839–46. Based on data from <https://mormonplaces.byu.edu>.

- October 23, 1840: Lima Stake/Branch, President Isaac Morley, Bishop Gardner Snow<sup>62</sup>
- October 25: Quincy Stake, President Daniel Stanton, Bishop George W. Crouse
- October 27: Mt. Hope Stake (at Columbus), President Abel Lamb, Bishop Daniel A. Miller
- October 27: Freedom Stake (formerly Mt. Ephraim Branch near Payson), President Henry W. Miller, Bishop Matthew Leach
- November 1: Geneva Stake, President William Bosley, Bishop Gardner Clark
- November 5: Springfield Stake, President Edwin P. Merriam, Bishop Abraham Palmer<sup>63</sup>

62. “The Church Record of the Lima Branch,” holograph, October 23, 1840, images 5–6, in James C. Snow Record Book, 1840–1851, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/97704266-7e00-464c-b7e4-10425583fbb4/0/0>. This record and Hyrum Smith’s journal both call it the Lima Branch at this time.

63. *History of the Church*, 4:233–36; Hyrum Smith, Diary, images 45–46.

An eleventh stake was organized February 29, 1841, when the Moroni Branch in the area near Perry, Pike County, reorganized itself as the Zoar Stake, with Levi Gifford as president, James Brown as bishop, and 110 members in the congregation.<sup>64</sup> It is not clear whether this last stake was authorized by the First Presidency or Hyrum Smith's committee as others had been, but it suggests that any branch with over one hundred members felt it was justified in becoming a stake.

The expansion even went into the East. Babbitt arrived in Kirtland by January 1841 as instructed, where he apparently found Oliver Granger confused about his standing based on the conference report.<sup>65</sup> Upon clarification from Joseph, Granger continued as the Church financial agent, but Babbitt assumed the ecclesiastical leadership. A stake organization was completed May 22 with Babbitt and a presidency, Thomas Burdick as bishop, but no mention of a high council.<sup>66</sup> On April 6, 1841, Hyrum Smith reorganized the Philadelphia Branch (214 members) with a full presidency and bishopric but no high council.<sup>67</sup> Nine days later, the New York City Branch (153 members) was also "more perfectly organized" with a presidency and bishopric by George W. Harris, "he having been specially appointed and authorized by President Hyrum Smith."<sup>68</sup> Although these two cities are never called stakes, this appears to be an intermediate almost-a-stake stage; for years afterward, New York and Philadelphia had a higher status than the surrounding branches.

Generally, new stakes consisted of a single congregation, although Kirtland may have included more. At the May 1841 Kirtland conference,

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64. "A List of Names in Stake of Zoar, Brown County Illinois Organized Feb. 29, 1841," in Moroni Branch Record, 1841, holograph, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/9fc7b4e4-1f69-4cfc-bc75-39e47e116ea3/0/0>.

65. John and C. Smith to George A. Smith, January 7, 1841, holograph, image 43, in "John Smith letter, Ambrosia, Iowa 1841 January 7," George A. Smith Papers, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/839e8fa2-9d7c-4e36-9f5b-10d17be825ff/0/44>. Granger was insufficiently reporting his business and ecclesiastical activities to Joseph, who had heard a rumor that Granger had quit and was moving to Nauvoo, leading to Babbitt's call. "Letter to Oliver Granger, 26 January 1841," Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian's Press, accessed December 19, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-oliver-granger-26-january-1841/1>.

66. W. W. Phelps, "Conference Minutes," *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 17 (July 1, 1841): 458, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n467>.

67. B. Winchester, "Conference Minutes," *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 14 (May 15, 1841): 412–13, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n421>.

68. L. R. Foster, *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 19 (August 2, 1841): 499, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n508>.

several nearby branches are mentioned in addition to the “Kirtland church,” but it does not state whether Kirtland was one of the branches in a regional stake or if it was the entire stake and the others just happened to attend the conference.<sup>69</sup> Subsequent conferences do not list any other branches.

In those stakes for which records have survived, there was a consistent division of labor among stake leaders. The presidency carried out the Melchizedek Priesthood duties set forth in scripture: conducting worship meetings, managing leaders of constituent branches, and ministering to the spiritual needs of members. The bishopric, denoted in scripture as the presidency of the local Aaronic Priesthood and its temporal ministry, managed tithing and Church property, and tended to the physical needs of the poor, sick, and widows with the help of adult Aaronic Priesthood holders.<sup>70</sup> The high council had a legislative and judicial role, making most policy and practical decisions (often with the presidency) and holding courts. In the stakes without a high council, the court responsibility generally fell to the bishopric. It should be noted that for both the bishop and the high council, these courts were convened to decide civil disputes (like a small claims court) at least as often as to discipline members for transgression—a pattern that lasted for many years until a civil judicial system was established in Utah.

The expansive gathering area established in these twelve stakes by early 1841 did not last long. The main issue was real estate. There were simply not enough Saints gathering with sufficient wealth to buy land and build up all these new settlements. Outlying Church towns such as Ramus and Zarahemla sold a few lots, mostly to members already living in the area. Joseph Smith was especially concerned with the massive debt the Church had incurred to purchase the land for Nauvoo. Lots were not being sold fast enough to make the mortgage payments. Also, the construction of the temple and the Nauvoo House (as commanded in D&C 124:22–23) was moving too slowly, and Joseph did not want a reprimand like the one he had received from the Lord for neglecting the Kirtland Temple (D&C 95), so he needed more laborers in Nauvoo.

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69. W. W. Phelps, “Conference Minutes,” *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 17 (July 1, 1841): 458–59, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n467>.

70. In the earlier days of the Church, most Aaronic Priesthood holders were adult men. To learn more about this, see William G. Hartley, “From Men to Boys: LDS Aaronic Priesthood Offices, 1829–1996,” in *My Fellow Servants: Essays on the History of the Priesthood* (BYU Studies, 2010), 37–86.

Consequently, on May 24, 1841 (coincidentally, just two days after the Kirtland Stake was organized), the Prophet issued the following:

The First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, anxious to promote the prosperity of said church, feel it their duty to call upon the saints who reside out of this county, to make preparations to come in, without delay. This is important, and should be attended to by all who feel an interest in the prosperity of this the corner stone of Zion. Here the Temple must be raised, the University be built, and other edifices erected which are necessary for the great work of the last days; and which can only be done by a concentration of energy, and enterprise. Let it therefore be understood, that all the stakes, excepting those in this county, and in Lee county, Iowa, are discontinued, and the saints instructed to settle in this county as soon as circumstances will permit.<sup>71</sup>

Thus, all the stakes other than Nauvoo, Ramus, Lima, and Iowa were to be disorganized so the Saints could move to Nauvoo. However, this edict was generally implemented in a piecemeal fashion.

- Moroni: On May 22, 1841, its bishop was replaced by Priddy Meeks, but it is never mentioned again with this organization.<sup>72</sup> In 1845, it was mentioned as a branch.<sup>73</sup>
- Mt. Hope: As of June 1841, it still had a presidency and a bishopric, but one of its decisions was appealed to the jurisdiction of the Nauvoo high council, so it must have lost its sovereignty.<sup>74</sup> By the summer of 1843, it was merged with the neighboring New Liberty Branch.
- Springfield: The president and bishop left in the autumn of 1841 without reorganizing. On January 25, 1842, the members reorganized as a regular branch.<sup>75</sup>

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71. G. A. Smith, "To the Saints Abroad," *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 15 (June 1, 1841): 434–35, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n443>.

72. "List of Names in Stake of Zoar, Brown County Illinois."

73. Quorum Record, 1844–1845, February 25, 1845, holograph, image 82, High Priests Quorum Record, 1844–1845, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/3bee6eb3-d491-47ba-873c-f55723c0fe68/0/81>.

74. Nauvoo Stake High Council, Minutes, 1840 March 8–1842 May 20, holograph, 31, Nauvoo Stake High Council Minutes, 1839 October–1845 October, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/75eb5e4f-7d07-4136-807c-e16a3b03c11b/0/30>.

75. "Letter from Abraham C. Hodge and Springfield, Illinois, Branch, 25 January 1842," Church History Library, Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian's Press, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-from-abraham-c-hodge-and-springfield-illinois-branch-25-january-1842/1>.

- Quincy: Though disorganized as a stake on January 29, 1842, Quincy was reorganized as a regular branch with a presiding elder.<sup>76</sup> It survived as a sizable branch at least through October 1844, when a new bishop was assigned to it.<sup>77</sup>
- Freedom: On April 7, 1842, a branch decision was appealed to the Nauvoo high council, so it did not have its earlier sovereign status.<sup>78</sup>
- Geneva: President William Bosley was called to serve a mission on October 7, 1841, and Bishop Gardner Clark moved from Geneva to Nauvoo on April 28, 1842, so the stake probably ceased to function around this time.<sup>79</sup>
- Pleasant Vale: On May 8, 1842, in response to an appeal of a decision in this branch, the Nauvoo High Council declared it disorganized.<sup>80</sup>
- Kirtland: President Almon Babbitt, who had zealously promoted the eastern gathering to Kirtland (in keeping with, if exaggerating, his 1840 instructions, but in opposition to Joseph's recent policy change to gather in Nauvoo), was disfellowshipped at the October 1841 general conference.<sup>81</sup> Upon being notified of this, his counselors and Bishop Thomas Burdick asked for clarification on Kirtland's status.<sup>82</sup> In a response on December 15, 1841, Joseph answered that even though the authorization for gathering as a stake was discontinued in May, Kirtland had permission to continue building.<sup>83</sup> At

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76. Record Book 1840–1844, January 29, 1842, holograph, 23 [image 32], Quincy Branch Records Books, 1840–1848, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/bb7b0edd-3211-47cc-bbda-f2f7d5c3bf53/0/31>.

77. Wm. Clayton, "Conference Minutes," *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 20 (October 8, 1844): 696, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n1685>.

78. Nauvoo Stake High Council, Minutes, 1840 March 8–1842 May 20, image 41.

79. Nauvoo 9th Ward, High Priests Minutes, 1844 November–1845 February, holograph, image 15, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/9be9c56c-addf-4993-9144-5e5b4b1927c7/0/14>.

80. Nauvoo Stake High Council, Minutes, 1840 March 8–1842 May 20, image 44.

81. Elias Smith and Gustavus Bills, "Minutes of a Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Held in Nauvoo, Ill., Commencing Oct. 1st, 1841," *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 24 (October 15, 1841): 577, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n586>.

82. "Letter from Lester Brooks and Others, 16 November 1841," Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian's Press, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-from-lester-brooks-and-others-16november-1841/1>.

83. "Journal, December 1841–December 1842," 31 (December 15, 1841), Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian's Press, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1841-december-1842/4>.

a conference there on October 28, 1842, presided over by Apostle Lyman Wight, Kirtland was reorganized as a branch (specifically not a stake) but retained a full presidency and bishopric.<sup>84</sup> At the next conference in April 1843, also presided over by Elder Wight, those Saints who were still loyal to the Church agreed to leave for Nauvoo.<sup>85</sup>

- Philadelphia: President Benjamin Winchester was replaced in October 1842, and Bishop Jacob Syfritt was excommunicated in October 1843, by which time it had already been reduced to a simple branch.<sup>86</sup>
- New York: At a November 1841 conference, there was still a full presidency and bishopric.<sup>87</sup> Bishop John M. Bernhisel moved to Nauvoo in May 1843, but it is unclear whether he was still serving as bishop.

So after the May 1841 proclamation, the dual presidency-bishopric administration in these congregations continued to function as before, but they were no longer called stakes, and at least those in Illinois became part of the jurisdiction of the Nauvoo Stake. It could be that the Nauvoo High Council was claiming authority as a general appellate authority, as Kirtland had been years earlier, but there were no appeals between October 1840 and May 1841 when the stakes were authorized. Also, the Kirtland case suggests that the Quorum of the Twelve had authority beyond the Nauvoo area. Then, as leaders left, each stake was either reorganized as a regular branch (only a presiding elder without counselors or bishopric) or drifted into unorganized obscurity.

Some of the stakes closer to Nauvoo also had difficulty sustaining their energy. For example, Ramus had issues with internal strife. On December 4, 1841, a conference was held with Hyrum Smith and four

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84. Alexander Badlam, "Kirtland, October 28, 1842," *Times and Seasons* 4, no. 3 (December 15, 1842): 39, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n1018>.

85. Alexander Badlam and Thomas Kerk, "Conference Proceedings," *Times and Seasons* 4, no. 18 (August 1, 1843): 282–84, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n1261>.

86. Philadelphia Branch, Record Book, Community of Christ Library and Archive, typescript in MSS 2182, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University; Maurine Carr Ward, "Philadelphia Pennsylvania Branch Membership: 1840–1854," *Mormon Historical Studies* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 67–98, <https://ensignpeakfoundation.org/mormon-historical-studies-spring-2005-vol-6-no-1/>.

87. L. R. Foster, "Conference Minutes," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 12 (April 15, 1842): 763, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n781>.

of the Twelve, at which Hyrum decided to discontinue the Ramus stake because “some had become so disaffected towards the remainder there seemed no possible chance of a union.”<sup>88</sup> Ramus was thus returned to branch status (and renamed Macedonia) after an existence of just seven-teen months.

Despite its revelatory introduction, Zarahemla was not ultimately successful as a gathering place either. County records indicate that very few lots in the new city were officially sold,<sup>89</sup> and the Iowa Stake was demoted on January 6, 1842: “A conference of the branch of the Church . . . in Lee County Iowa . . . Resolved. That the High Council and Bishop and counsellors in this branch of the church be discontinued. Resolved that President John Smith continue to be the presiding elder of the branch of the church in this place.”<sup>90</sup>

Another potential gathering place or stake in Hancock County was the new town of Warren; it was surveyed in the summer of 1841 on land the Church owned at the best steamboat landing site in the area.<sup>91</sup> It was announced with great fanfare as a destination for British immigrants. Willard Richards was called to lead there, and at least one immigrant company arrived. However, the company had to stay in neighboring Warsaw, the epicenter of the “Anti-Mormon Society.” They were treated poorly, and the plan was abandoned in December.<sup>92</sup>

Conversely, the Lima Stake continued longer than any others outside Nauvoo. In fact, while other outlying stakes and branches were disbanded, the Lima Stake was strengthened. Even though it was subordinated to

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88. Macedonia Branch, Macedonia Branch Record, 1839–1850, holograph, 24 [image 33], Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/a7535ad2-bca8-443d-96ec-46099b50c272/0/32>.

89. David Pettegrew, Journal, 1840–1857, 1926–1930, holograph, 35 [image 43], David Pettegrew Family Collection, 1836–1883, 1926–1930, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/fd3e91a9-f25e-4f70-ae4f-539d1ca618fd/0/42>.

90. “Minutes of a Conference Held in Zarahemla, Jany 6th 1842,” holograph, image 2, Elias Smith Papers, 1834–1846, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/ceb36342-5da8-49d6-b58e-e7328efa4227/0/1>.

91. “History Draft [1 January–31 December 1841],” 14 (August 19, 1841), Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian’s Press, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-draft-1-january-31-december-1841/14>; B. Young, H. C. Kimball, O. Pratt, W. Richards, John Taylor, and G. A. Smith, “An Epistle of the Twelve to the Saints Scattered Abroad Among the Nations,” *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 21 (September 1, 1841): 520–21, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n529>.

92. “Journal, December 1841–December 1842,” 33 (December 13, 1841), Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian’s Press, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1841-december-1842/5>.

the Nauvoo Council in 1841, just like all the other outlying stakes, it eventually gained an even more complete organization than before.<sup>93</sup> At a branch conference on June 11, 1843, not only were the presidency and bishopric sustained, but a new high council was added to the organization.<sup>94</sup> Also at this conference, plans were announced to build up a new Church city, soon surveyed and named Yelrome (essentially President Isaac Morley’s surname in reverse), which also became the name of the branch.<sup>95</sup> In 1844, a high priests quorum of thirty-one members was organized, an organization usually reserved for stakes.<sup>96</sup> The Lima Stake even survived the loss of its president when Isaac Morley moved to Nauvoo in early 1845 and was replaced by Solomon Hancock. However, throughout this period it was almost exclusively called a branch, not a stake, and it is not clear how long a full stake-like organization operated beyond 1843. The branch was not fully abandoned until mobs attacked in the autumn of 1845.

### The Near Comeback of Stakes

The expanded gathering ideal of the fall of 1840, which had been put on hold in 1841, gained new traction in 1844. At the April conference, Joseph Smith stated that “the whole of America is Zion,”<sup>97</sup> and more particularly, “I have rec[eived] inst[ruction] from [the] L[or]d that E[lde]rs shall build churches where ever they raise branches through the States then builds stakes—in the g[rea]t cities Boston &c there shall be stakes.”<sup>98</sup>

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93. Nauvoo Stake High Council, Minutes, 1840 March 8–1842 May 20, image 38 (February 4, 1842).

94. “Conference Minutes and Re-organization,” *Times and Seasons* 4, no. 19 (August 15, 1843): 303, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n1281/mode/2up>; J. C. Snow, “Conference Minutes and Re-organization (Continued),” *Times and Seasons* 4, no. 20 (September 1, 1843): 316, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n1295>.

95. “Town of Yelrome,” 60 [image 39] (recorded April 24, 1844), in Hancock County Plat Book 1.

96. Williard Richard Notation, circa 1845, holograph, image 1, Joseph Smith History Documents 1839–1860, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/351b9741-ff27-494c-819b-7db7cb4f7cdf/0/0>.

97. “Discourse, 8 April 1844, as Reported by Willard Richards,” in *Documents, Volume 14: 1 January–15 May 1844*, ed. Alex D. Smith, Adam H. Petty, Jessica M. Nelson, and Spencer W. McBride, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2023), 356.

98. “Discourse, 8 April 1844, as Reported by William Clayton,” 356.

To put this plan in motion, the Prophet called a series of elders to preside over the Church and the missionaries in each state,<sup>99</sup> essentially functioning like modern mission presidents (but not called such), with the added responsibility of promoting Joseph’s campaign for president of the United States around the country. Many were serving in their new capacity when Joseph and Hyrum were murdered in June, whereupon most of them returned to Nauvoo to mourn and reorganize.

As further evidence of this emerging wider vision, the Council of Fifty discussed several exploration initiatives in the spring of 1844, such as creating a colony in Texas and missions to the American Indians in the Great Plains.<sup>100</sup> These initially had the goal of establishing additional settlements and gathering areas, not of leaving Nauvoo.

The martyrdom did not quell the expansion initiative. After Brigham Young and the Twelve had consolidated the Church in Nauvoo, the stake expansion plan was renewed at the October 1844 conference. Eighty-five high priests were called to various places in the United States. Brigham stated that their purpose was to permanently move with their families to their assigned districts to preside “and build up a stake as large as this.”<sup>101</sup> They wanted more stakes as large as Nauvoo. This is why high priests who could be stake presidents and bishops were needed, rather than the usual elders or seventies who served missions.

It is not certain how many of the called men and their families fulfilled their missions to the stakes-in-embryo, but several are documented.<sup>102</sup> The system functioned especially well in the northeastern United States, where dozens of branches were organized into ten to twelve conferences led by the high priests, all under the auspices of an Apostle living in New York City (William Smith in 1844, Parley P. Pratt in early 1845, and Orson

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99. W. Richards, “Special Conference,” *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 8 (April 15, 1844): 504–6, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasonsVol5/page/n211/mode/2up>. Among them, Kirtland President Lester Brooks is named a counselor in the presidency of Ohio.

100. “Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–January 1846, Volume 1, 10 March 1844–1 March 1845,” Joseph Smith Papers, Church Historian’s Press, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/council-of-fifty-minutes-march-1844-january-1846-volume-1-10-march-1844-1-march-1845/1>.

101. Wm. Clayton, “Conference Minutes,” *Times and Season* 5, no. 23 (December 15, 1844): 696, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasonsVol5/page/n479>.

102. For example, Abraham O. Smoot presided for several months in Alabama. A. O. Smoot, *Diary*, vol. 1, 1836–1846, A. O. Smoot Papers, Perry Special Collections, <https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/MMD/id/27268>.

Pratt in late 1845) and acting as a regional president.<sup>103</sup> The plan did not result in the creation of any stakes before all the presidents were called home in late 1845 to prepare for the exodus from Nauvoo (essentially ending the concerted missionary effort east of the Mississippi for the next fifty years). Despite the exodus, their efforts did have lasting effect. The greatest was in strengthening the succession claim of the Twelve, as missionaries for opposing claimants to prophetic authority (especially James J. Strang) also fanned out to recruit support for themselves in the branches. It has been estimated that only half of the 8,000–10,000 Saints who were scattered in branches across the United States in 1844 eventually made their way to Utah,<sup>104</sup> but the number would likely have been much lower if Brigham Young had kept his most ardent supporters in Nauvoo during the crisis.

Late in the Nauvoo Era (approximately 1845–1846) came two new stake-like organizations: the Northern Pine Expedition and the LaSalle Branch. The first, near Black River Falls, Wisconsin, provided lumber for the Nauvoo Temple, the Nauvoo House, and the city's rapidly multiplying residences. The operation was started in the autumn of 1842 and expanded from 1843 to 1845. It was never a large settlement and was likely never intended to be permanently established, thus not meeting the primary qualification to be a stake. However, it had a dual-leader organization much like the congregational stakes of 1840. This was likely a result of its abundance of leadership, including Apostle Lyman Wight (who served as president of the branch), Bishop George Miller, Nauvoo high councilor Alpheus Cutler, and former Freedom Stake President Henry W. Miller. During the winter of 1844–1845, Bishop Miller was in Nauvoo, presiding over the High Priests Quorum, so the full organization appears to have only existed during the winter of 1843–1844. However, it was a very tight-knit community; most of its members followed Wight to settle near Austin, Texas in 1845, with George Miller eventually joining them.<sup>105</sup>

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103. "Eastern States Mission, 1844–1845," in Plewe and others, *Mapping Mormonism*, 43. See also "The Church in the Kirtland-Missouri Era," in Plewe and others, *Mapping Mormonism*, 36–37.

104. Robin Jenson, "Gleaning the Harvest: Strangite Missionary Work, 1846–1850" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 2005), 39, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1590&context=etd>.

105. In 1848, Wight, Miller, and others were excommunicated by Brigham Young's First Presidency in absentia. Miller soon left to join James J. Strang, but Wight and the rest of his colony formed their own church and even built a small temple; the colony evaporated after Wight's death in 1858. Melvin C. Johnson, *Polygamy on the Pedernales*:

The LaSalle Branch was organized after George P. Dykes baptized several dozen Norwegian immigrants who had settled southwest of Chicago near Ottawa in 1842.<sup>106</sup> As this branch grew, Joseph Smith and the Twelve saw it as a potential starting point for a mission to Scandinavia and a gathering place to settle the converts therefrom. On October 23, 1844, Brigham Young and other leaders met with the Norwegian Saints and reorganized them as the Norway Branch or Stake (depending on the source), with Dykes as president and local convert Reuben Miller as bishop.<sup>107</sup> In keeping with the stake ideal, a city was laid out for gathering and building up to a full stake organization.

However, the LaSalle endeavor was not long-lived. Being halfway between Nauvoo and the home of James J. Strang in Voree, Wisconsin, this stake was literally caught in the middle of the rivalry between the Twelve and its primary opponent. In late 1845, the branch set its stake aspirations aside and prepared to move West with the Twelve, but when Bishop Miller chose Strang in early 1846 (soon becoming his Voree Stake President), he was able to shift the loyalty of most of the branch. Strang held a conference in Ottawa in April that sustained him as a prophet,<sup>108</sup> but within a few months, Miller became disaffected with Strang and returned to the Twelve. Many of the Norwegian Saints reconverted with Miller and went West, including Canute Peterson, who would eventually serve as the president of the Scandinavian Mission and of the Sanpete Stake.<sup>109</sup>

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*Lyman Wight's Mormon Villages in Antebellum Texas, 1845–1858* (Utah State University Press, 2006).

106. Geo. P. Dykes, “To the Editor of the Times & Seasons,” *Times and Seasons* 4, no. 13 (May 15, 1843): 195, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasons18391846/page/n1173/mode/2up>.

107. Norway Branch, Minutes, 1847 July 18–1848 April 15, holograph, image 63, Winter Quarters Municipal High Council Records, 1846–1848, Church History Library, [https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/0ddc178b-8238-4ee7-aca4-b0dce74a6659/0/62; History of the Church, 7:312; Reuben Miller, James J. Strang, Weighed in the Balance of Truth, and Found Wanting \(Burlington, W.T., 1846\), 1, https://archive.org/details/jamesjstrangweig00mill/page/n1/mode/2up](https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/0ddc178b-8238-4ee7-aca4-b0dce74a6659/0/62; History of the Church, 7:312; Reuben Miller, James J. Strang, Weighed in the Balance of Truth, and Found Wanting (Burlington, W.T., 1846), 1, https://archive.org/details/jamesjstrangweig00mill/page/n1/mode/2up).

108. “Conference at the Norwegian Settlement,” *Voree Herald* 1, no. 5 (May 1846): 3, <https://archive.org/details/VoreeHerald1846/page/n22>.

109. Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia: A Compilation of Biographical Sketches of Prominent Men and Women in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 4 vols. (Andrew Jenson History; Deseret News, 1901–36), 1:362, <https://archive.org/details/latterdaysaintbi01bjens/page/362>. Reuben Miller went on to serve as the bishop of the Mill Creek Ward in Salt Lake Valley for thirty years.

The Nauvoo Stake organization survived the death of Joseph Smith, with most of the leaders (high council, bishops, and outlying branch presidents) pledging their loyalty to the Twelve. A notable exception was stake president William Marks, who initially followed Sidney Rigdon, then James Strang, then helped start the New Organization (now Community of Christ).<sup>110</sup> He was replaced at the October 1844 conference by John Smith, in his fourth stint as stake president.<sup>111</sup>

The bishops and high council spent much of 1845 performing the less enjoyable parts of their callings, such as excommunicating members who chose not to follow the Twelve and fending off the self-styled anti-Mormons who were willing to do anything to drive the Saints out of the county. The high council met for the last time on October 18, 1845, after which the Church organization shifted into a mode of preparing for the exodus the following spring.

### The Ward Appears (Sort of)

While the stakes and branches, led by presidents and bishops, continued the model of the Kirtland-Missouri Era, the major innovation in Nauvoo church administration was the *ward*. As the Saints began to regather to their new city in 1839, they now had three bishops: Edward Partridge (from Zion), Newel K. Whitney (from Kirtland), and Vinson Knight (from Adam-ondi-Ahman). As a priesthood office, bishop was considered an ordination for life. Today, that lifetime ordination is still in effect, but usually only appears as an honorific title by which ward members continue to call their previous bishops. In the nineteenth century it was very real; most bishops repeatedly served as bishops wherever they went, often for the rest of their lives.

When the Nauvoo Stake was organized in October 1839, the three bishops had the luxury of sharing the work of the Aaronic Priesthood, so they organized the settlement between them. In the large cities of the East, a ward was and still is a unit of city government: a neighborhood-size district used to localize both representative government and the provision of services. In Nauvoo, which was not yet organized with any municipal government, the presidency simply co-opted the term to serve a similar function in its ecclesiastical governance. Knight was

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110. Cheryl L. Bruno and John S. Dinger, *Come Up Hither to Zion: William Marks and the Mormon Concept of Gathering* (Greg Kofford Books, 2024).

111. Wm. Clayton, "October Conference Minutes," *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 20 (November 1, 1844), 692, <https://archive.org/details/TimesAndSeasonsVol5/page/n475>.

given the “lower ward,” probably the area around Joseph Smith’s home near the river; Partridge took the “upper ward,” likely on the bluff behind the temple site; and Whitney had the “middle ward,” somewhere in between.<sup>112</sup>

After Edward Partridge died, George Miller was called in January 1841 (D&C 124:20–21). Sometime soon after this, Isaac Higbee was called as a fourth bishop. No direct record has been found that shows a corresponding redivision of the stake among the four bishops nor records of their day-to-day activities. A meeting on March 21, 1841, merely mentions “Bishops Whitney, Miller, Higbee, and Knight.”<sup>113</sup> At this meeting, a single city-wide quorum was created for each office of the Aaronic Priesthood, but they divided their work by ward.<sup>114</sup> At the April 1841 conference, the four bishops were sustained, each with two counselors, showing that there were likely four wards by this date.<sup>115</sup>

This corresponded with a parallel secular development. When the Nauvoo municipal government was chartered and a city council organized in February 1841, one of its first actions was to divide the new city into four municipal wards, as was common in other cities.<sup>116</sup> The layout of these wards was likely unrelated to the earlier three Church wards. The municipal wards served a variety of purposes, such as the election of city councilors, police precincts, street maintenance, and animal control.

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112. “Proceedings of the General Conference, held at Commerce, Hancock County, Illinois, on Saturday the 5th day of October, 1839,” *Times and Seasons* 1, no. 2 (December 1839): 30.

113. Secondary sources have given Higbee’s ordination date as either February 19, 1841, or February 29, 1842, and there is no primary source for the event. The latter date is not likely, as he is a bishop on March 21, 1841. Organization of Lesser Priesthood circa 1845, holograph, image 1, Joseph Smith History Documents, 1839–1860, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/70d6ab6c-ec9f-41fd-8a00-b5d3727227c5/0/0>.

114. “A Record of the Quorum of the Lesser Priesthood,” Minutes, 1841 March–1851 January, holograph, Presiding Bishopric Bishop’s Quorum Minutes, 1849–1851, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/3664bcab-178a-4dd8-9409-912ee9135c13>.

115. George D. Smith, ed., *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton* (Signature Books, 1995), 84–85 (April 6, 7, 8, 9, 1841).

116. “Records of the City Council of the city of Nauvoo,” Nauvoo City Council Proceedings, 1841 February–1845 February, holograph, 9–10 [image 52–53], Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/a67c7db2-98d3-43a7-9405-f37832f9c988/0/51>.



FIGURE 5. Wards in Nauvoo, 1841. Based on data from <https://mormonplaces.byu.edu>.

The Church census, conducted in spring 1842, listed each family's ward but not their address; it lists four wards.<sup>117</sup> However, comparing it with land records shows that the four bishop's wards were probably the same as the municipal wards in 1842 (with the exception that the bishop's wards extended beyond the city limits), as shown in figure 5.

This census listed almost 4,000 members of the Church in Nauvoo (including young children and some who had previously died in Nauvoo), divided roughly equally between the four wards. During the year, the population increased rapidly as Saints gathered in from outlying settlements and converts continued to immigrate from Britain. Soon, the growing stake needed a more manageable structure. At the regular meeting of the Nauvoo High Council on August 20, 1842, the following was enacted:

117. Nauvoo Stake, Nauvoo Stake Ward Census, 1842, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/record/2febcd71-25e6-470f-94c1-d1bcb53cdfca/0?view=browse&lang=eng>.

2. Resolved that the City of Nauvoo be divided into ten wards, according to the division made by the “Temple Committee” and that there be a Bishop appointed over each ward, and, also that other Bishops be appointed over such districts immediately out of the city and adjoining thereto as shall be considered necessary.

3rd. Resolved, that Samuel H. Smith be appointed Bishop in the place of Bishop Vinson Knight dec.,<sup>118</sup> also that Tarlton Lewis be appointed Bishop of the 4th Ward, John Murdock of the 5th Ward, Daniel Cairn of the 6th Ward, Jacob Foutz of the 8th Ward, Jonathan H. Hale of the 9th Ward, Hezekiah Peck of the 10th Ward, David Evans of the district South of the city called the 11th ward, Israel Calkins of the district East of the city and South of Knight Street, William W. Spencer of the district East of the city and North of Knight Street.<sup>119</sup>

The boundaries of the wards were not specified, and it appears that there was some resulting confusion. In December, the boundaries were clarified, as shown in figure 6.<sup>120</sup> Also, the initial division did not include assignments for the three existing bishops, and no bishops were assigned to four of the wards. By October 1842, Isaac Higbee was the bishop of the first, second, and third wards, presumably because the northern edge of the city, in which he lived, was only lightly populated.<sup>121</sup> The Seventh Ward bishopric may have been vacant until December 4, when Newel K. Whitney was assigned to it. This left George Miller as the sole unassigned bishop, who by August was getting ready to lead the Northern Pine Expedition to Wisconsin.<sup>122</sup>

Conversely, the city government continued to operate with the same four wards through 1845. In the past, it was sometimes assumed that the ecclesiastical and municipal wards of Nauvoo were identical and that the modern church ward emerged later.<sup>123</sup> But in fact, of the seven-year

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118. Bishop Knight had died on July 31. The day after this meeting, the high council was informed that Samuel H. Smith could not serve as bishop, and he was apparently not replaced.

119. Nauvoo Stake High Council, Minutes, 1842 May 20–1843 February 19, holograph, 7, Nauvoo Stake High Council Minutes, 1839 October–1845 October, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/1a3b9e33-bf31-4e57-afb7-9aa73039034c/0/6>.

120. Nauvoo Stake High Council, Minutes, 1842 May 20–1843 February 19, 17.

121. Nauvoo Stake High Council, Minutes, 1842 May 20–1843 February 19, 14.

122. Allen J. Stout to Hosea Stout, September 10, 1843, typescript, image 5–7, in Allen J. Stout Letters, Wisconsin, to Hosea Stout, Nauvoo, Illinois, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/7bc69e67-56d9-4fff-8c95-a2c1d452fa08/0/4>.

123. William G. Hartley, “Nauvoo Stake, Priesthood Quorums, and the Church’s First Wards,” *BYU Studies* 32, nos. 1–2 (1992): 73–77.



FIGURE 6. Nauvoov wards and bishops' homes in 1842. Based on data from <https://mormonplaces.byu.edu>.

history of the Nauvoo wards, they only coincided with the municipal wards for seventeen months. The eleven wards of 1842 (thirteen if one counts the two bishop's "districts" east of the city) were thus the genesis of the modern ward.

That said, the modern ward had not yet emerged completely. These were not separate congregations; the members of each ward did not meet together on Sundays. Instead, the entire city typically met for worship services in a grove below the temple site, with the Aaronic Priesthood holders of each ward rotating the sacrament responsibilities. These wards were merely a vehicle to facilitate the bishop's work as established in Kirtland and Missouri, an organization that I will term a *semi-organized ward*. It had the following functions:<sup>124</sup>

- The bishop directed the personal ministry of the Aaronic Priesthood holders in his ward (even though they were in stake-wide quorums), who were then called to care for each member (D&C 20:46–47).
- Tithing and other funds were collected and tracked by the bishop.
- The bishops (and deacons) built and managed church buildings, usually schools.
- The bishop took care of the poor and widows in his ward.
- The bishop was the judge in disciplinary actions, but his decisions could be appealed to the high council, and his jurisdiction over Melchizedek Priesthood holders was debatable.

In late 1844 and early 1845, as the population of the wards reached their peak, additional revisions occurred. Several wards organized their own high priest quorums. At least some wards began holding their own prayer meetings (often on Thursday evening); in some cases, these were held in different neighborhoods of the ward.<sup>125</sup> Edward Hunter, the bishop of the Fifth Ward in 1844, records a list of twenty "bishops" in his ward.<sup>126</sup> Without further explanation, or being mentioned in other ward

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124. Hartley, "Nauvoo Stake," 61–63.

125. Nauvoo 5th Ward High Priests Minutes, 1844 December–1845 April, holograph, 29 [image 34], Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/342f513f-eb5e-4c9a-b468-2f7bc2350cbc/0/33>.

126. Edward Hunter, Bishop's Record, 1844–1848, 1850–1856, 1865, holograph, 17 [image 7] (1844), Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/b8a29293-b2fc-436c-ab73-71b1204c9969/0/6>.

records, it is unclear what their role was, whether this was a widespread practice, or how long it lasted. Only a few of these bishops were high priests, which was required to be an ordained bishop. It is possible that these men were merely acting as bishops, a role usually assigned to a quorum of teachers, who were Aaronic Priesthood agents of the bishop who conducted ward business directly with ward members.

## **Conclusion**

As the sojourn in Nauvoo ended in increasingly violent clashes with its neighbors, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had some elements of local organization that are familiar to twentieth-century Saints, such as a regional stake centered on a city and organized into wards. Beyond Nauvoo, hundreds of branches operated across the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, with simpler organization and simpler regional administration. However, there appears to have been an underlying philosophy of local administration in the early Church that was quite different from today, especially the concepts of stake-as-gathering-place and the general branch, which produced many differences in the details of how stakes, wards, and branches operated compared to the modern Church.

These concepts and structures would further develop as the Church moved West between 1846 and 1851, a time of unique circumstances that bred unique organizational solutions, while retaining the same basic philosophy. That will be the focus of the next article.

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# The Wonder *Is* Scripture

Jared Halverson

It's an honor to be associated in any way with this institute, as it's my second-favorite thing named after Elder Neal A. Maxwell. The first is my eldest son, whose middle name was an obvious choice, largely because my wife loves Elder Maxwell even more than she loves me, which might be a problem were it not for the fact that I agree with her. I once spent so much time in this library creating a compilation of Elder Maxwell's talks that by the time I was finished, my wife had called the police to report a missing person. When they suggested that I was probably just hanging out with friends, my wife responded in panic, "He doesn't have any friends!"

Thankfully, then and now, I have a few more friends than my wife gives me credit for. But admittedly, many of them I've never met in person—only on the page. Ours is a bookish bond, but that is anything but a fictional friendship. The friends I've made in scripture, for example, have influenced me as deeply as any living relationship, and it is that *living, relational, and transformative* influence that to me constitutes—and even crowns—the *wonder* of scripture. As I'll argue today, without *that* type of wonder, it wouldn't be *scripture* at all.

I'll zoom in on scriptural wonder in a moment, but first, allow me to zoom out on the wonder of reading.

Perhaps like you, I choose books to read based on the worlds I inhabit. Or is it the other way around, my books creating my worlds? Does my to-do list determine my booklist, or is my library card a passport, transporting me to places that no longer feel foreign? Like travel, reading creates reality, and not through instruction but by immersion. I ranged

across Middle Earth long before meeting Tolkien; I entered Narnia through the wardrobe, not Lewis's life or letters. Even having grown up in the Church, with bishops to guide me through all of life's stages, one of the priesthood's profoundest impressions came from a bishop I borrowed from Jean Valjean, who called me to conduct a one-man neighborhood food drive my sophomore year of college just by stuffing silver candlesticks into a convict's bulging sack.

Knowing my love of literature, my well-read eldest daughter gave me a book for Christmas, and knowing my love-hate relationship with the comic iconoclasm of Mark Twain, she chose one that could not have been written without him. The book is called *James*, written by Percival Everett, and the titular character is none other than Jim, the escaped slave that Huckleberry Finn is not "Christian" enough to turn in. In Everett's imaginative rendering, Twain's Jim is both well-read and well-spoken but is careful to sound uneducated because he is smart enough to know that "the better [Whites] feel, the safer [Blacks] are."<sup>1</sup> As he explains to his equally intelligent children, "White folks expect us to sound a certain way and it can only help if we don't disappoint them."<sup>2</sup> Self-effacement would be key to self-preservation.

Far more than "Jim" the slave, "James" was in fact a master, at least of the linguistic art he was teaching to his children. His term for it is fascinating—"situational translation"<sup>3</sup>—the act of translating inner thoughts into an outer vocabulary that reflects the rhetorical situation in which a speaker finds himself. In terms of the racism that defined James's social position, this meant reducing elevated expression to the lower level of a culturally constructed slave-speak that was more in keeping with the assumptions—indeed, the enforceable expectations—of Jim's supposed superiors.

Situational translation is new to people familiar with Jim's antebellum America, but the concept should not be new to students of the scriptures. For those familiar with the principle of divine accommodation, "situational translation" includes God's willingness to speak "after the manner of [our] language" instead of his, an act of condescension in which he stoops to the level of weak "servants . . . that they might come to understanding" (D&C 1:24; see also 2 Ne. 31:3).

Yet there is more to this than placing heavenly "treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Cor. 4:7), as the Incarnation of Christ would suggest. As we are

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1. Percival Everett, *James* (Knopf Doubleday, 2024), 23.

2. Everett, *James*, 21.

3. Everett, *James*, 22.

learning from deeper digs into Joseph Smith's miraculous processes of scriptural production, "translation" has more meanings than one. Yes, it can mean "to render into another language" (the sixth of seven definitions in Webster's 1828 *American Dictionary*), but far higher on Webster's list is translation's ability "to bear, carry or remove from one place to another" (his first definition), or more specifically, its power "to remove or convey to heaven, as a human being, without death" (his second definition).<sup>4</sup> This is the sense we use when we speak of "translated" beings, and it is in this sense that I want to wrestle with the concept of "situational translation." As I see it, the concept not only captures what God is doing when he *gives* us scripture but also tells us what we must do to fully *receive* it.

In the case of James the slave, situational translation was a re-rendering of words, but in the case of *James* the novel, it was a repositioning of people. Everett imaginatively entered a world first created by Mark Twain, and he invites his readers to do likewise. We are brought into the lived experience of Huck Finn and his old friend Jim, who we finally see as a very different "James." In other words, we are "translated" (or moved) into their "situation."

What's more, such situational translation allows for an act of situational creation as well. In Everett's case, once he'd been translated into Twain's created world, he could continue Twain's creative act, making for Jim a world in which a slave could utter his own Magnificat. Even more importantly, this creation-born-of-translation not only changed life retroactively along the nineteenth-century Mississippi but also has the potential to affect life proactively in the racially charged situations of our day. How might recent history have been different if we looked at people like Trayvon Martin, Ahmaud Arbery, or the Black worshippers at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church not as two-dimensional Jims but each as a James worthy of profound recognition?

Everett's creative acts of situational translation are truly moving—emotionally, yes, but also temporospatially. He moves us to another time and place in hopes of changing us before we head back to the present. Without that change, no real translation has occurred; we haven't occupied that world long enough or deep enough to want to change our own. For that to happen, we'll need to feel the throbbing in our own leg when James is suffering from the snake bite. We'll need to spend a few sleepless nights worrying about our own children still in chains. Somehow—imaginatively, emotionally, vicariously—I'll have to look down at my soft,

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4. American Dictionary of the English Language, Webster's Dictionary 1828, under "translate," <https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/translate>.

white hands and see the black, calloused hands of James, my twin brother. That is reading a book. That is allowing the words to be made flesh.

Or perhaps you didn't know that I was here to talk about scripture! As John begins his Gospel, so we begin our understanding of how to study it—with the Word that awaits us “in the beginning” of any spiritual endeavor, a Word that lets us be “with God” and makes us more like God (John 1:1). To do all that, the Word (as in Jesus) had to be “made flesh, and dwell[1] among us” (v. 14), or in our case, we have to “dwell” in the word (as in scripture) and imprint it on our living flesh. We must wrap ourselves in scripture the way Jesus “wrap[ped] our injured flesh around” his perfect premortal spirit.<sup>5</sup> We must clothe ourselves in the canon, an endowment of power from every page. This would be situational translation of the highest order, and by being translated into the word of God, we can translate that word into our world. In short, we can open the book, enter the page, and come back different.

But before we try that here, let's take the idea of situational translation from Percival Everett and add to it a concept from Kenneth Burke, one of the leading lights of mid-twentieth-century rhetorical studies. Unlike his peers reaching as far back as Aristotle, Burke defined rhetoric less as persuasion and more as identification, which he felt was a better term for what rhetorical acts are trying to accomplish. Coming from a French and Latin term that means “to advise” (*suadere*) “through” (*per*) to completion, to persuade is to successfully induce someone to agree with you, typically by appealing to reason.<sup>6</sup> To identify, meanwhile, suggests not just one's sense of identity but one that is essentially identical to that of someone else. Sameness and oneness are inherent in the term; in the mid-seventeenth century, “identification” involved “treating [one] thing as the same as another” and by the mid-nineteenth century, it had taken on the psychological sense of “becoming or feeling oneself one with another.”<sup>7</sup>

That unified sense of self is what Burke held to be the aim of rhetoric—a convincing and converting that emphasizes the *con* (the “with”) at the heart of true agreement. A motivating connection occurs between speaker and hearer in which they find common ground, or ideally, a common identity. Seen in this way, rhetoric is not as unidirectional and propositional as mere persuasion might imply. Rather, it is

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5. “Welcome to Our World,” by Chris Rice, track 4 on *Deep Enough to Dream*, Rockettown Records released on June 3, 1997.

6. *Oxford English Dictionary*, under “rhetoric (noun<sup>1</sup>),” senses 1.a, 4.a, accessed February 10, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1485006821>.

7. *Online Etymology Dictionary*, under “persuasion (n.),” updated April 15, 2020, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/persuasion>.

cooperative and relational, emotive and empathetic, and deeply experiential throughout. A phrase that Burke uses to capture this oneness of rhetorical identification is of particular interest to us here: he calls it “a doctrine of consubstantiality.”<sup>8</sup>

The theological resonance of this term is unavoidable. Invoked in Trinitarian contexts to describe the oneness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, consubstantiality denotes an identity of substance despite a difference of aspect, a Three that is essentially One. In rhetorical terms, Burke invokes a similar sense of shared-identity-that-outweighs-difference, this time between speaker and hearer, between writer and reader. “A way of life is an *acting-together*,” Burke argues, “and in acting together, men [and women] have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, [and] attitudes that make them *consubstantial*.”<sup>9</sup> Jesus said it far more simply: “Be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine” (D&C 38:27). Even when he spoke of “persuasion,” he couched it in terms that we identify with the character of Christ (and thus want to identify with ourselves): long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, and love unfeigned (see D&C 121:41). Under such influence, I’m not persuaded against my will; rather, my will is “swallowed up” (Mosiah 15:7) in the will of one with whom I instinctively wish to identify.

This level of identification—with God and with others—is what situational translation hopes to accomplish, and what scripture is meant to engender. No wonder Jesus taught in parables! Stories draw us in, presenting us with characters with whom we identify. We are translated into situations that alter our reality and inspire us to alter the reality to which we return. Scripture is an open door to substitutionary experience, to vicarious encounter, to identification with God and neighbor. It is consubstantiality made possible by words made living flesh. “Go, and do thou likewise” (Luke 10:37) is its standing invitation to all who identify with its words.

So what of the “wonder of scripture”? Hopefully the threads of my argument are starting to knit instead of fray. Ask yourself: first, is my experience in scripture an act of situational translation? Am I transported into the text and changed by my time there? Second, do I sense my own consubstantiality with the people I meet within scripture? Do I identify with them in ways that help me identify with God?

This might help explain the reliance of Nephi (Mr. “I Glory in Plainness”) on the writings of Isaiah (Mr. “I Glory in Something Else”). In some ways, their rhetorical construction couldn’t be more different; yet

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8. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (University of California Press, 1969), 21, emphasis original.

9. Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 21.

their rhetorical identification made them consubstantial in wonderful ways. Nephi's "soul delighte[d] in [Isaiah's] words," precisely because those words mirrored Nephi's other soul-deep delights: "the covenants of the Lord," his "grace, . . . justice, . . . power, and mercy," the "truth of the coming of Christ" (2 Ne. 11:2, 4–5). Introducing his longest insertion of Isaiah, Nephi uses words like "prove," "proveth," and "proving" four times to describe why he is calling Isaiah to the witness stand (2 Ne. 11:3–4, 6). Yet it was not the "proof" of empirical persuasion that Isaiah supplied. Rather, it was the pull of spiritual identification, made possible through imagery and symbol that was emotionally evocative and rhetorically resonant. As Nephi affirmed in his first invocation of Isaiah, Mr. Prose was enlisting Mr. Poetry to "more fully persuade [us] to believe in the Lord [our] Redeemer." And this would happen not simply by reading Isaiah's words, but rather by likening them—a term Nephi and Jacob use repeatedly when drawing on Isaiah's rhetorical gifts (see 1 Ne. 19:23, 24; 2 Ne. 6:5; 11:2, 8; for "likening" with Zenos and Jacob, see Jacob 5:3 and 6:1; for Jesus "likening," see 3 Ne. 14:24, 26). Again, mere reading would be woefully inadequate; with scripture, we must enter into its imagery and identify with its transformative intent. We must learn to liken if scripture is ever to "be for our profit and learning" (1 Ne. 19:23). Only then, wrote Nephi, can we truly "have hope" (1 Ne. 19:24), "lift up [our] hearts and rejoice for all men" (2 Ne. 11:8).

That seems to be what scripture is for, when stated in most practical terms: joy for the journey, no matter how daunting the path. Depending on the chosen metaphor, scripture is manna: the sweet and satisfying daily bread that nourishes us through our wilderness wanderings. It is the Liahona: an object of "curious workmanship" that guides us to "the more fertile parts" of our path (1 Ne. 16:16). Scripture is thus both direction and provision, pointing us homeward and sustaining us until we arrive. To repeat the pairing with Lehi's help, although scripture is the iron rod that leads to the tree of life, it is inseparable from the tree of life itself and the incomparable fruit we feast on once we get there.

Consider Nephi's visionary rendering, in which the tree is "the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men" (1 Ne. 11:22). The language of "shedding abroad" suggests a scattering of the tree's healing leaves, a generous distribution of its incomparable fruit, or in keeping with Nephi's prophetic vision, an extension of its beckoning branches. After all, as Nephi saw it, while the iron rod did lead to the tree from the perspective of those at a distance (see 1 Ne. 11:25), it originally extended out from the tree, as exemplified in the ministry of Jesus. When envisioning Christ's condescension, Nephi sees "the Son of God

*going forth* among the children of men” (v. 24, emphasis added)—the tree reaching out all around it. Similarly, Nephi then sees that “the Lamb of God *went forth*” to be baptized (v. 27, emphasis added), and then “*went forth* [again] ministering unto the people” (v. 28, emphasis added). He later saw “the Lamb of God *going forth* among the children of men” yet again, healing the sick, casting out devils, comforting all “who were afflicted” (v. 31, emphasis added).

Looking further into the future, Nephi similarly sees “a book” that is “carried forth” among the Gentiles (1 Ne. 13:20), one that “proceeded forth” from the Jews to spread “the fulness of the gospel of the Lord” (v. 24). Fifteen times in that portion of his vision Nephi promises the extension of God’s word into the world: it is “carried forth” (v. 20), it “proceed[s] forth” (v. 24, 38), it will “go forth” (v. 25, 26, 28, 29), God will “bring [it] forth” (v. 34), it will “come forth” (v. 35, 38, 39) with the help of those who “seek to bring forth my Zion at that day” (v. 37).

Emphatically, Nephi is seeing that through Christ’s mortal ministry, and through the scriptures that contain his living word, the love of God would go forth into a world in desperate need of it. The tree of life would extend in every direction—book-like branches, twig-like texts—reaching out like rods of iron as far as the eye could see. The canon as a canopy under which all can find shelter. As the book of Proverbs says of the wisdom found in God’s word, “She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her” (Prov. 3:18). When we “lay hold” of the iron rod, we take the outstretched hand of God.

That is “situational translation” into the all-encompassing love of God. That is “rhetorical identification” with the One who reaches out to us with His word. Again, that is the “wonder of scripture.” And without that wonder, it isn’t really scripture—at least not to us.

That last point is key, and to make it, I’ll need the help of another writer. Alongside Percival Everett and Kenneth Burke, allow me to introduce you to Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Part Presbyterian minister, part Harvard Islamicist, Smith attempted to give scripture something no one knew it needed: a definition. As he observed, “On close inquiry, it emerges that being scripture is not a quality inherent in a given text, or type of text, so much as an interactive relation between that text and a community of persons. . . . ‘Scripture’ is a bilateral term. . . . It inherently implies, in fact names, a relationship.”<sup>10</sup> This relationship is one of speaker and hearer, of writer and reader, or reader and person being read. Ultimately, it is Giver

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10. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Fortress Press, 1993; 2005), ix, 17.

and receiver, and without both parties participating—identifying—the relationship ceases to exist. *Scripture* ceases to exist.

Thus, what is sacred scripture to one group is to others mere myth or tall tale, ancient literature at best and the stuff of Broadway musicals at worst. Skeptics take all the world's religions and discard their texts as disparate delusions, blind to what Huston Smith called “the winnowed wisdom of the human race.”<sup>11</sup> We must do otherwise, continuing to infuse meaning into the scriptures by infusing the scriptures into our lives. We can do as Alma commanded Helaman, and “keep all these things sacred” (Alma 37:2), which is not the same as merely keeping all these sacred things. In the latter construction, the sacredness is inherent in the things, but in Alma's phrase, the sacredness was maintained by the keepers. Keepers do all within their power to help the scriptures “retain their brightness” (v. 5), even “small and simple things” that others might consider “foolish” (v. 6). As Smith put it, “People—a given community—make a text into scripture, or keep it scripture: by treating it in a certain way.”<sup>12</sup>

I want to speak more about that way of treating scripture in a moment, but first, allow me to speak more personally about Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Almost singlehandedly, he changed the trajectory of my own approach to scripture when I stumbled across an article he had written a few years before I was born. In reading it during graduate school, I was born again, at least as a student of scripture, for it identified—and I identified with—a perspective on scripture that I had long felt personally but had never seen expressed academically. Titled “The Study of Religion and the Study of the Bible,”<sup>13</sup> it helped turn the library at the Vanderbilt Divinity School into an academic Waters of Mormon, for there I came to a knowledge of the type of scriptorian God wanted me to be. Without me even asking it to, it validated the past and outlined the future of my personal, pastoral, and professional study of the scriptures. Not bad for nine and a half pages.

The article begins by describing the kind of religion department that Smith considered worthy of the name, picturing a particular type of course that “would be concerned with the Bible as scripture.”<sup>14</sup> Such a suggestion seems unnecessary at first: of course a religion department would study the Bible. But it is the last two words—as scripture—that demand our attention, for approaching the Bible in that way would

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11. Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (Harper San Francisco, 1991), 5.

12. Smith, *What Is Scripture?*, 18.

13. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “The Study of Religion and the Study of the Bible,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39, no. 2 (1971): 131–40.

14. Smith, “Study of Religion,” 132.

indeed affect the course's content. What is it about the Bible that makes it scripture rather than some other type of ancient literature? What brings it into the homes of millions when most texts from that time interest only scholars or museum goers? Rather than historical artifact, what makes it "a living force in the life of the Church"?<sup>15</sup>

To answer these questions—or more accurately to emphasize them—Smith turned to the Qur'an, one of his specialties, but did so to draw attention to the Bible, which he feared was being pigeonholed in academic circles; the Bible was studied deeply to be sure, but not as broadly as it deserved if it were truly seen as scripture. To summarize his argument, he wondered why Qur'anic studies seemed to focus almost exclusively on seventh-century Arabia, when the book was just as important in fifteenth-century Spain or twentieth-century Indonesia. "The attempt to understand the Qur'an," he wrote, "is to understand how it has fired the imagination, and inspired the poetry, and formulated the inhibitions, and guided the ecstasies, and teased the intellects, . . . and nurtured the piety, of hundreds of millions of people in widely diverse climes and over a series of radically divergent centuries."<sup>16</sup>

Drawing the parallel, Smith then turned to the Bible, through which people "have found not merely ancient history but present salvation, not merely Jesus but Christ, not merely literature but God, [as] millions attest."<sup>17</sup> Consequently, biblical studies must not confine itself to post-exilic Palestine or the first-century Mediterranean world. The Bible was just as important in Luther's sixteenth-century Germany or the nineteenth-century America of Joseph Smith.

What concerned the later Smith (Wilfred Cantwell) was how the Bible was studied, which tended to end too early or begin too late, bracketing out the stage when the book was actual scripture. As he later wrote, historical criticism explores the Bible's "pre-scriptural phase," and literary criticism focuses on the "post-scriptural phase" that emerged in a secular post-Enlightenment. But "the texts' role in human life as scripture—rich, complex, and powerful . . . —was during the long centuries in between. Furthermore," he added, "it is not yet over."<sup>18</sup>

For Smith, the Bible's real life was its afterlife (a fitting concept considering its contents!)—the life it began leading after it came to be seen as scripture. In Smith's view, as important as it is to study what went into

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15. Smith, "Study of Religion," 133.

16. Smith, "Study of Religion," 133.

17. Smith, "Study of Religion," 139.

18. Smith, *What Is Scripture?*, 4.

the Bible, it is just as important to explore what came out of it. As Smith passionately urged, “By all means let us . . . know how it became; but let us study further how and what it went on becoming.”<sup>19</sup>

What Smith’s article did for me was offer a choice as to what kind of scriptural scholar I could become. Some study the world that created the Bible; others study the worlds the Bible creates.

Smith’s article delineated the three worlds of scripture and called attention—and needed commendation—to the oft-neglected third. The three worlds of scripture are the world behind the text, the world within (or of) the text, and the world in front of the text. The first deals with all that went into the Bible’s creation—its preexistence, so to speak. The second focuses on the text itself, exploring its structure, symbolism, and style. The third encompasses the ongoing influence of scripture, how it has been interpreted by subsequent generations, and yes, how it has inspired them.

These three worlds can be distinguished in other ways as well. Whereas the first is author and editor focused, the second is text-based, and the third revolves around the reader. The first is approached historically and culturally, the second textually and literarily, the third theologically and homiletically. In terms of biblical criticism’s subcategories, the first world relies on source, form, redaction, and historical; the second world employs literary, genre, textual, and rhetorical; the third is home to canonical criticism, reader reception history, theological interpretation, and the history of hermeneutics.

Admittedly, such compartmentalization minimizes the overlap and interplay between these three worlds, so flexibility is needed throughout, and not just flexibility, but synergy. This is the final point I wish to make, so let me state it clearly.

For the academic study of scripture to honor its subject *as scripture*, these three separate worlds must undergo a planetary alignment, and it is the third world, not the first, that must set the course. Were it not scripture, this ordering would not be necessary: as an artifact, the Bible as history would be adequate; as a textual object, the Bible as literature would be ideal; but as a “contemporary agent” and “activating symbol” (Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s words),<sup>20</sup> the Bible as scripture must be the perspective of choice. Yes, it must take into full consideration its historical formation and its literary construction, but “with an eye single” (D&C 4:5) to its ongoing influence in the world. The moment our eye loses sight of that is the moment we cease seeing scripture.

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19. Smith, “Study of Religion,” 135.

20. Smith, “Study of Religion,” 134.

I may have just opened a can of worms I won't have time today to clean up, but before I'm run out of town on a rail by my historical and literary superiors, allow me to say what I emphatically am not saying. I am not saying that the first and second worlds of scripture are unnecessary or inferior. Rather, I am saying they are foundational, but only as forerunners, voices in the wilderness crying, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord" (Mark 1:3). They are signposts, not final destinations, and unless they help people progress in their journey to the tree of life, they are no longer rods of iron but something else entirely.

Jesus seems to have had something like this in mind when he told the self-styled scriptionists of his day that they "search[ed] the scriptures" as if they were source instead of signpost. "In them ye think ye have eternal life," he chided, but "they are they which testify of me" (John 5:39). Nephi understood this and never confused his scriptural means with Christ's salvific ends. "Hearken unto these words," he said, noting the importance of scripture, but "believe in Christ," emphasizing the purpose for which he had written them. He even added, "and if ye believe not in these words, believe in Christ," showing he clearly understood the difference (2 Ne. 33:10).

Do scripture scholars understand that today? Or do we sometimes act like "scribes" that prize pages over people? Do we research "mint and anise and cummin" while "omit[ing] the weightier matters"—"judgment, mercy, and faith"—that bless living people? Again, I am not trying to minimize the first and second worlds of scripture—far from it—but I am yoking them to a holier aim. To conclude the verse about "weightier matters," the third world of scripture "ought [we] to have [studied], and not to leave the other[s] un[studied]" (Matt. 23:23).

Speaking of scribes, in one of the few passages in which Jesus says something positive about them, he envisioned a scribe who was "instructed unto the kingdom of heaven" and compared him to "a man that is an householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old." Notice the scribe's orientation, not solely looking down at the text before him, or back at whence it came. Rather, he seems to be looking forward, having been directed "unto the kingdom of heaven." With that intention informing his scribal duties, of course the treasures he discovered would be both "new and old." The old things would likely be deepened exegesis, but the new things would put those insights to work, producing novel applications and relevant likenings that would be helpful to those who similarly need to be "instructed unto the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 13:52).

The Book of Mormon's final scribe, Moroni, put the matter starkly when he compared "the record" to "the plates." Obviously, both were related, with the record impossible without the plates and the plates

empty without the record. But Moroni clearly saw the hierarchy within this synergy: “the plates thereof are of no worth,” he said hyperbolically, “but the record thereof is of great worth” (Morm. 8:14) because of what it would do for its readers. The plates provided necessary means; the record would accomplish ultimate ends.

Seeing this distinction would have come naturally to Moroni, because despite his presence in the past (the world behind the text), he clearly saw our present (the world in front of the text) and spoke directly to us (the world within the text). “I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not” (Morm. 8:35). Though Moroni (and his father Mormon) broke the fourth wall more explicitly than most, they were not alone in aligning the three textual worlds with the third one determining their aim. Malachi was “one of the [ancient] prophets, who had his eye fixed on” the latter-day work (D&C 128:17). Others “died . . . [before] receiv[ing] the promises, but [saw] them afar off” (Heb. 11:13). Jesus told his New Testament Apostles “that many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them” (Matt. 13:17), and he could say the same to each of us today.

In relation to the first and second worlds of scripture, the third has “not come to destroy, but to fulfil” (Matt. 5:17). It is present, the others are past. It is purpose, the others are process. It is helm, the others are anchor and sail. None should be emphasized in isolation; instead, contraries should be proved so that truth can be made manifest.<sup>21</sup> Just as scripture cannot survive as scripture without a continuing community to maintain its “brightness,” neither can it survive without being firmly rooted in the soil that gave it birth. Scripture must be a tree with both roots and branches, ancient fathers and latter-day children reciprocally turning hearts (see Mal. 4:1–6). Eisegesis without exegesis is largely unfounded; but antiquarianism without application is largely irrelevant.

So keep them both; learn to be ambidextrous; train to play both ways. Or at the very least, link arms (and approaches) with other experts, which is something the Maxwell Institute and the BYU Religion faculty do beautifully. Depth perception will come by combining both perspectives. Real study and true Spirit must be one in our hand.

Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery learned this while translating the Book of Mormon, a record that bridges past and future if ever there

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21. “Letter to Israel Daniel Rupp, 5 June 1844,” in Brett D. Dowdle, Adam H. Petty, J. Chase Kirkham, Elizabeth A. Kuehn, David W. Grua, and Matthew C. Godfrey, eds., *Documents, Volume 15: 16 May–28 June 1844*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2023), 128–29.

was one. Having studied ancient texts that spoke of baptism, they then turned to the Lord for current application, and they received it. What's more, they received priesthood ordination and baptismal ordinance, and with a Spirit they had not felt before, they "prophesied many things which should shortly come to pass" (JS-H 1:73)—past informing present, inspiring future. With that, they then reversed direction, returning to the ancient world but with newfound eyes to see. And what did they see? "Our minds being now enlightened, we began to have the scriptures laid open to our understandings, and the true meaning and intention of their more mysterious passages revealed unto us in a manner which we never could attain to previously, nor ever before had thought of" (v. 74). By "meaning and intention," we once again prove contraries. Meaning is set by the writer; intention is embodied in the reader. Meaning is exegesis; intention is application. Meaning is found through critical analysis; intention tells me what to do as a result.

And what are we to do? Channeling the spiritual pragmatism that I learned from William James but brought with me at birth, I say we serve, extending rods of iron—and thus trees of life—in every direction. We theologize with Paul and Peter, but then, like them, we preach and bless and heal. With Moses we plunder the riches of Egypt to later make tabernacle furnishings, excavating antiquities but putting them to their holiest use. Like the writer of Hebrews, we study to become intimately acquainted with every raindrop in our scriptural "cloud of witnesses," but then we let that living water pour, until it washes away "every weight" (Heb. 12:1).

With that, let me end where we began—with wonder. Not the superficial wonder of curiosity (though that matters), nor the academic wonder of discovery (though that too has its place). Rather, I speak of the transformative wonder that occurs when we allow ourselves to be translated into scripture's sacred space, identify deeply with those we meet there, and return changed to a world in need of changing.

This is the wonder that seized Mosiah's people as they "beheld those that had been delivered out of bondage" (Mosiah 25:16). It's the wonder that moved Alma to rewrite his life story after encountering Abinadi's words. It's the wonder that caused Joseph and Oliver to see the scriptures "laid open" in unimaginable ways. In each case, the wonder arose not from historical excavation or literary analysis alone—though both proved essential—but from the living encounter with scripture as scripture.

When we enter scripture's three worlds properly aligned—grounded in history, attentive to text, but oriented toward application and transformation—we extend what Wilfred Cantwell Smith called scripture's

“incredible ongoing career.”<sup>22</sup> The past comes to life not as artifact but as invitation. The text opens not as literature but as lifeline. And our present circumstances shine with new possibility as we recognize, in James’s terms, the need for situational translation in our own time. How might we draw warring partners toward the Prince of Peace? How can we, like Nephi, liken ancient wisdom to present need? How shall we, like Mormon and Moroni, write and teach for future generations that we can see only through the eye of faith?

The answers lie not in choosing between scripture’s worlds but in connecting them. We must be as comfortable with archaeology as application, as fluent in historical criticism as in homiletical creativity. But we must never forget that the purpose of our study is not merely to understand ancient texts but to be transformed by living scripture—and then to help transform the world.

With this call—and calling—in mind, I invite us all to become not just readers of scripture but inhabitants of its worlds and keepers of its gardens. May our study be deep but never divorced from purpose. May our analysis be rigorous but always oriented toward renewal. Above all, may our engagement with scripture be wonder-full—full of the wonder that comes when heaven touches earth through sacred text, when ancient words become living flesh, when we find ourselves translated into holy ground and return bearing fruit from the tree of life.

For in the end, that is the wonder of scripture—not that it exists, but that it persists. Not that it was written, but that it continues to write itself upon human hearts. Not that it was, but that it ever shall be, as long as we approach it as scripture, embrace it as scripture, and allow its transformative power to work in us and through us the wonders that God still has in store.

May we be saints and scholars who keep scripture sacred by treating it so, who help it “retain its brightness” by polishing it with practice. For the wonder *is* scripture, and we are its witnesses.

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22. Smith, “Study of Religion,” 133.

# The Seven Seals, the Age of the Earth, and Ongoing Revelation

Nicholas J. Frederick

One of the more intriguing elements of the book of Revelation is its mention of a book sealed with seven seals (Rev. 5:1). As John’s vision progresses over the next two chapters, each of the seven seals is broken. These have been interpreted by scholars in a variety of ways. One interpretation, typically known as the “historicist” view, saw the seals as representing periods of time in the earth’s history, whether the entirety of the earth’s history from Adam on or just parts, such as early Christian history.<sup>1</sup>

With regard to Latter-day Saint debates over the age of the earth, the seven seals become particularly relevant due to an 1832 revelation titled “Revelation Explained.”<sup>2</sup> Received “in connection with the translation of the scriptures”<sup>3</sup> (that is, the Joseph Smith Translation process), it was first printed in the *Times and Seasons* on August 1, 1844, and canonized in 1876 as section 77 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Presented as a series of questions and answers and referring to the scroll of Revelation 5:1, it asked, “What are we to understand by the seven seals with which it was sealed?” (D&C 77:7). The answer Joseph received was, “We are to understand that the first seal contains the things of the first thousand

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1. For further information, see Nicholas J. Frederick, “Section 77 and Book of Revelation Scholarship,” *Religious Educator* 22, no. 2 (2021): 47–71.

2. Matthew C. Godfrey, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., *Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2013), 209.

3. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” 192, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed November 12, 2021, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/198>.

years, and the second also of the second thousand years, and so on until the seventh” (D&C 77:7). Reflecting a “historicist” interpretation, the seals represented periods of time in the earth’s history, with the first seal presumably beginning with Adam and Eve and the seventh signaling the millennial age. It has thus become common for many Latter-day Saints to speak of the earth having roughly a seven-thousand-year history since the Fall (what’s sometimes referred to as the “millennial day” theory; compare 2 Pet. 3:8).

Often omitted in these conversations about the age of the earth and the seven seals are statements made by Joseph Smith later in his life. In 1843, Joseph declared that “none of the things John saw had any allusion [to] the days of Adam, Enock Ab[raham] or Jesus—only as represented to John & clearly set forth—John saw that which was shortly to come to pass. . . . those things that John saw in h[eaven] had no allusion to any things that had been on the earth because John saw what was to shortly come to pass—John saw beasts that had to do with things on the earth—but not in past ages.”<sup>4</sup> Joseph’s statement here casts the seven seals in a much different light than section 77, more in line with the historicists who interpreted the seals as corresponding with historical events limited strictly to the Christian era. I am not sure that we can say why Joseph began to teach a view of the temporal context of the book of Revelation that differed from Doctrine & Covenants 77. It is certainly possible that subsequent revelations and experiences along with a deepening understanding of scripture led Joseph to provide a different answer in 1843 than he had provided in 1832, as sometimes happened with the JST and other revelations. What we should be wary of, though, is privileging one source over the other. To cite Doctrine & Covenants 77:7 as the final word on the age of the earth when Joseph would preach a very different perspective a decade later leaves us using only half the pieces of the puzzle.

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4. David W. Grua, Brent M. Rogers, Matthew C. Godfrey, Robin Scott Jensen, Jessica M. Nelson, and Christopher James Blythe, eds., *Documents Volume 12: March–July 1843*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2021), 187.

# What Are We to Make of the Gold Plates?

*Richard Lyman Bushman*

During the winter of 2020–2021, I worked on the manuscript that was eventually published as *Joseph Smith's Gold Plates: A Cultural History* (Oxford University Press, 2023). The book was an attempt to describe the many ways the plates had been imagined from the time they were first described as a “Golden Bible” in the June 1829 *Wayne Sentinel*<sup>1</sup> down to the Sunday School and missionary lessons today. I marveled at the enduring interest in the plates over time, not only among Latter-day Saints but also among other American writers. In my lifetime, the plates had appeared in the Book of Mormon musical and as the situational framework for Tony Kushner’s Pulitzer Prize–winning *Angels in America*, first performed in 1993. I was convinced the plates’ endurance was partly due to the belief of the Saints. The fact that millions of people believed in their reality gave them heft. Without that belief, the plates would have become an easily forgotten historical oddity. It seemed to me that in the retelling of the plates’ history in the American imagination, the state of belief among Latter-day Saints today was a relevant piece of information.

To find out how belief in the plates stands today, I asked a group of scholarly believers to write a paragraph or two on how they currently think of the plates. Here is the letter I wrote:

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1. “[Just about in this particular region],” *The Wayne Sentinel* (Palmyra, N.Y.), June 26, 1829, facsimile 2, BYU Digital Collections: 19th-Century Publications About the Book of Mormon (1829–1844), Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, <https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/BOMP/id/4374/rec/1>.

Dear Friends:

Thanks to the extra time provided by the pandemic, I am nearing completion of a manuscript titled “Joseph Smith’s Gold Plates: A Cultural History.” It is essentially a survey of the way the plates have been treated in all kinds of literature and art forms from 1823 to the present.

As I approach the end, I realize it would be interesting to add an appendix containing current Latter-day Saint views of the plates. I am not thinking so much of Church manuals and websites as the personal views of thoughtful and informed Latter-day Saints. How do we currently feel about this distinctive feature of our history?

I am hoping to collect comments of a paragraph to a page. Would you be interested in contributing? I would like to have enough statements by the middle of January to form a respectable appendix.

If you would like to participate, let me know. Once I have the comments collected, I will send them around to the contributors for revision and editing.

All the best,  
Richard

Eventually, I received twenty responses, which I included as an appendix in the manuscript I sent to Oxford University Press.<sup>2</sup> But they never made it into print. The editor thought there was no place for the statements in the book, and they were left out. He may have felt that the implicit testimony-bearing did not belong in a scholarly volume, even though I had included my own testimony on the first page.

What did the scholars have to say? We all know the gold plates are among the most exotic of our beliefs: There is nothing quite like them in religious history, and they were a bizarre item to appear in nineteenth-century rural culture. Do we even know for sure they ever existed? Joseph Smith’s refusal to show them to anyone other than specially selected witnesses arouses suspicion, and it does not help that they were taken away by the angel after translation and now are no longer accessible. I was interested in how the prevailing skepticism had affected Latter-day Saint scholars. Was belief fading?

The most significant result of my modest poll is that the plates still have a place in Latter-day Saint thought. All respondents accepted the reality of the plates; only one respondent questioned the materiality of the plates. This one exception, the media scholar John Peters, acknowledged the

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2. I began asking for statements on the plates in December 2020 and had assembled them by April 2021. I emailed thirty-seven requests and received twenty statements. They currently reside in my files.

significance of Joseph Smith's claim. Peters observed that the plates were a bold stroke against the flow of religious thought at that time.

The plates tied Joseph Smith's revelations and claims to authority to material objects in time and place. They cut wonderfully against the grain of other religious thinkers in his time eager to consign ritual and history to the realm of metaphor. Smith's contemporary Ralph Waldo Emerson, for instance, resigned as a Unitarian minister in 1832 because he could not in good conscience administer the Lord's Supper: he found it a historical anachronism and "a painful impediment." He wanted a faith free of what he thought was misplaced concreteness. The plates, in contrast, seemed to stake a claim in tangible reality and have a rather literal thingliness. There is a long history since Moroni retrieved them of thinking about the plates as things among things like billiard balls, stones, and trees.

While admiring Joseph Smith's bravura in claiming to have gold plates, Peters takes issue with this "thingliness," not because he thinks the plates are obviously fantasies—the objection most would raise—but for aesthetic reasons. "This fraud-or-fidelity way of thinking about the golden plates has always felt to me like a painful impediment. There are more edifying and less brittle ways of thinking about faith-contingent objects." Peters feels the plates are more elusive than that: "The witnesses described them as sacred if bulky objects that materialized and vanished at the command of angels." The ability to see them depended on the viewer's righteousness, not the natural eyes.<sup>3</sup> Peters thinks the plates "were more grounded than metaphors but less leaden than profane objects." That's what I mean by aesthetic objections to plates that were as solid as billiard balls. Seeing them as things makes them leaden. Peters is seeking for something more elusive and evocative than a heavy stack of metal sheets.

Peters was the only contributor to finesse the question of the plates' material existence. Many of the comments acknowledged the pressure

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3. See Michael Hubbard MacKay, Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, Grand Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2013), 82–85, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/revelation-june-1829-e-dc-17/1>; Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Mark Ashurst-McGee, and Richard L. Jensen, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2012), 314–16; "Lucy Mack Smith, History, 1844–1845," p. [11], bk. 8, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 9, 2024, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/lucy-mack-smith-history-1844-1845/103>.

of modern skepticism, but they all held on to the plates' physicality. They felt the plates just went with being a Latter-day Saint. Philip Barlow, a historian of religion, observed that "my people are given to wonders and portents intrinsic to the stories of their origins: angels and revelation, seers and seer-stones, healings and gifts of the spirit. The gold plates are but one among these otherworldly strains." That's what it means to be a Latter-day Saint, Barlow is saying: You believe in marvels.

Barlow was not "tempted to bracket the plates or other tokens of the supernatural from the story. They came as a parcel." The plates flow together with other miraculous encounters in Latter-day Saint culture. Cherry Silver, my sister and a literary historian, wrote that "on a very few occasions I have experienced connections with loved ones beyond this mortal life. With this evidence of the divine, it is only a step more to accept that an infinite being could choose to use ancient writings on gold plates as a way to bring forth light and understanding to his children."

The writer Glen Nelson, who composed an operatic libretto about the gold plates, put it another way: "For me and for the people I imagine experiencing these works, we are so confident in the story that we are comfortable teasing out humor, theater, and art from it."

Barlow, Silver, and Nelson live in two worlds: the world of modern rationalism and the world of belief—a division Latter-day Saints understand. Like the three of them, most Latter-day Saints are committed to a world of wondrous happenings overlaying the world of common-sense rationalism. They have made a choice to live in both worlds and are happy with this decision.

Acceptance has not always implied engagement with the plates. The historian Jed Woodworth wrote that each day he walks by a sculpture of the witnesses viewing the plates in a bas-relief on the wall of the Church History Library in Salt Lake City. He pays them little heed even though he believes implicitly in their reality. "I am not inclined to pass off the plates as mere metaphor as other Christians have done with their sacred stories. . . . I accept God's intervention in human affairs and the plates as an actual, physical artifact, just as Joseph Smith and the witnesses described them." But "as I pass these panels from day to day, I don't agonize over them. The depictions do not call forth my resistance." On the other hand, "the events depicted in the panels do not overawe me either. Despite the unavoidable presence of the plates in my life, they are a distant presence for me, a relic from the past. God had a work to do, and He did it through the plates. God's work today calls forth different methods and means."

The philosopher James Faulconer feels much the same. “The truth is that I don’t think about the Gold Plates very much. I suppose that in their regard I am a naïve believer: Part of my experience of conversion was the acceptance of their reality. . . . I’m interested in . . . the revealed text, more than in the physical object to which it is somehow or another correlated or in that correlation itself. I take the existence of the plates as a given, but not one that draws my attention.” For Woodworth and Faulconer, belief in the plates is implicit in their faith, but the plates no longer matter that much. Later in this paper, I will challenge this attitude, but I think it likely that most Latter-day Saints feel the same way. We simply have no reason to think much about the plates. We don’t defend them; we don’t speculate about them. They are on deposit somewhere in our memories, and that is about all.

I would say that all the respondents were aware that the plates are an affront to common sense and ordinary reason, but they were perfectly content with that. The historian Kathleen Flake saw the plates as an antidote for any inclination to make our religion seem perfectly rational. Too many miracles appear in the story. “I am mostly amused,” she wrote, “by how effectively the golden plates challenge efforts, academic or otherwise, to rationalize Mormonism.”

As I said before, most of us live in two worlds: a rational, common-sense world on the one hand and a marvelous world of miracles and gold plates on the other. The theologian Kim Matheson finds the demand for a degree of credulity bracing. “Mormonism’s gold plates serve as a religious embarrassment of the very best kind,” she wrote. “They are the kind of thing that force my devotions into tangibility, that root me to the material commitments of my faith tradition, and that prevent me from escaping into more respectable spiritualized abstractions.” Matheson doesn’t mind that the plates seem out of place in modern thinking. She even thinks that the plates are purposely provocative, comparing the plates to the Resurrection. “I think of the gold plates the way I think of the body of Jesus: tangible and suspiciously absent, whose logic (crazy-and-yet . . . , laughable-but-still . . . ) performs the very structure of faith.” In other words, the embarrassment of the plates is in some ways briskly beneficial; it requires us to exercise faith. The plates and Jesus’s return from the tomb both run against common sense and disrupt our complacent acceptance of the ordinary.

The cultural historian Terry Givens argues that this demand is on purpose, perhaps even essential.

It would seem that the brute physicality of the plates—their brazen resistance to allegorizing or spiritualizing—has to be the point. It would have been so much more prudent, so much safer, for Smith to claim the Book of Mormon derived from a personal revelation, or spirit-led automatic writing, or—as with Doctrine and Covenants 7—a transcription of a visionary artefact. Why articulate instead the most testable, the most implausible, the most seemingly disprovable of claims? Actual plates of gold written by ancient Israelites and hidden in an upstate New York hillside. The artefactual concreteness of this origin story seems a deliberate, essential parallel to the Resurrection of Christ himself. As a “scandal of Christianity” (in Emil Brunner’s words), the Resurrection was an assertion that went as far as possible against the universalizing of Christianity’s claims. It was a barrier, a threshold, that one could not pass without sacrificing the tenacious hold of one’s inherited cultural and rational suppositions. Both accounts—early Christian and Restorationist—defied casual belief, or painless discipleship.

The fantastic nature of the plates, Givens is saying, is meant to disrupt our assumptions and require a sacrifice of us. We must endure the shame of a belief at odds with today’s common sense.

In one form or another, others asked about the plates providing access to another world. Are they designed to give us a glimpse of something marvelous and magnificent? Philip Barlow wondered, “Might Joseph Smith’s visions provide a glimpse of realities that operate upon principles beyond what we detect in everyday life with our five humble senses—like wormholes that warp time and space or like the ‘bizarre’ quantum laws governing entangled particles that are light-years apart?”

Judge Tom Griffith feels the plates are all the more challenging because there is substantial evidence that they actually existed. “As with the first Christians, eyewitnesses claim that this modern miracle is a historical reality. Those gold plates were seen, touched, hefted, and examined by many who then believed that history had once again ‘been invaded by God in Christ’ in a way that changed everything. And while we know little about the ancient New Testament eyewitnesses, we know much about the more recent eyewitnesses to the gold plates who left abundant records of their lives.” The eyewitnesses confront us with physical evidence for God’s intervention. That makes the plates a challenge. Griffith adds that “the gold plates prod the skeptic to allow for the possibility that reality includes God and Christ and angels and moral laws that shape and mold us into different types of beings than we might otherwise be, and that God in Christ has undertaken a major project for

all the world in our time.” The plates lead us to a God who points us to a higher life than what we find on earth.

The plates as a prod turned up in other statements. The historian Matt Bowman wrote that the plates may lead us to question our most basic cultural assumption: the dominance of science. Bowman suggests that science may not be as secure in its foundations as we think. The plates “may be relevant even beyond believers in Joseph Smith’s revelations because they remind the world that our scientism, our empiricism, our rationality is only one way human beings have sought to engage with the world, and however useful it has been, it still remains the product of history and therefore subject to its own limitations and fragility.”

I identify with the confidence of these scholars. We are miles away from having made the case that science is fragile and other worlds are possible, but these writers sense the potential. They know what they are up against in questioning the prevailing orthodoxy. But given the fact that there is a respectable body of evidence that the witnesses actually saw and held the plates, the eyewitness accounts challenge rationalists to think twice about the supernatural world.<sup>4</sup>

Another category of respondents were less preoccupied with the rationalist challenge than in asking what we learn from the plates about God’s care for his children. These contributors interpreted the plates’ story as they would a parable. “The plates remind me,” said the historian Kate Holbrook, “of how generations of mortals (writers, collectors, editors, and translators) were asked to do more than they were capable of—and agreed to try anyway. They worked without any promise God would protect their sincere efforts from derision. They worked, in fact, knowing that those who found worth in their words would experience ridicule for that belief. These gallant souls never believed God would make a masterpiece of their contributions, only that he would augment their contributions just enough to fulfill his purposes.”

Similarly, Margaret Hemmings, recent editor of *Exponent II*, values the plates for conveying hundreds of human stories. The Book of Mormon plates bore a record less of God’s words than of his people’s struggles.

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4. Steven C. Harper, “The Eleven Witnesses,” in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, ed. Dennis L. Largey, Andrew H. Hedges, John Hilton III, and Kerry M. Hull (Religious Studies Center; Deseret Book, 2015), 117–32, <https://rsc.byu.edu/coming-forth-book-mormon/eleven-witnesses>.

The text is, overall, much more a narrative about people than a sermon from God. It is a record of individuals and societies struggling internally and with one another. A huge portion of the Book of Mormon concerns itself with human endeavors: corruption, violence, slavery, systems of government, and establishing churches. . . . The stories of people, with all their failings and foibles and mistakes and successes, are sacred. . . . The very existence of the Book of Mormon—a book of records, a book of stories that is so important it was written on golden plates for preservation—signals God’s regard for human narratives.

These are warmhearted responses to the Book of Mormon from observers with compassion and insight.

In the same vein, J. B. Haws, a Maxwell Institute historian, wrote the following claim about the plates: “Humans created them, and God imbued them with the power to transmit his grace in the form of a message that can transform the reader. The plates’ survival and sheer existence witnessed that God had acknowledged their existence, had preserved them, had endorsed them, had blessed them. This really is the story of God’s way of dealing with all of humanity.” The plates are a demonstration of God using human history to reveal himself and his purposes.

Alone among the contributors, the literary scholar Rosalynde Welch took off in another direction entirely, one that particularly interested me. She addressed the mystery of translation. How are prophets called and inspired to speak divine truth via “oracular” objects such as the plates or the seer stones? Welch implicitly addresses a puzzle we now have concerning the plates’ role in translation. What was their purpose when much of the time they lay on a table covered with a cloth? Was anything on the plates getting through to Joseph Smith when he did not even look at them? How does the Urim and Thummim or the seer stone bridge this gap? Welch finds clues in the Book of Mormon itself: “The paradigm for this account of prophecy is the episode of Lehi’s discovery of the brass ball at his tent door in 1 Nephi 16. In this theologically and typologically charged scene, the two figures, prophet and oracular object, seem to call one another into their sacred roles.” That statement is worth repeating for emphasis.

The two figures, prophet and oracular object, seem to call one another into their sacred roles. . . . Each is necessary for the full realization of the other’s power: The object mediates the prophet’s mantic authority, while the prophet’s gaze accesses the object’s oracular power. A similar account of immanent prophetic authority is seen in the Book of

Mormon prophet Mosiah and his interpreter stones, the Jaredite seer and his illuminated stones, and arguably in Nephi and the sword of Laban. These episodes, it seems to me, may illuminate the phenomenological process by which Joseph's own experience of prophetic power emerged in his encounter with physical plates.

In other words, there was some kind of interaction between seer, seer stone, and gold plates comparable to Lehi learning from the Liahona. We are not told exactly how translation of the plates worked, but it is useful to compare other instances of a prophet resonating with an object and the two together producing a message from God. We don't understand the mechanics, but we glimpse the possibilities.

Welch, along with Joe Spencer and Grant Hardy, also sees the plates as a complication. They pose an interesting conundrum: How do we understand the current Book of Mormon text when we lack access to the original? Most translations can be checked against the original to detect any distortions introduced by the translator. We can determine what was actually in the original and what was added or altered by the translation. But we can't evaluate the text of the Book of Mormon when we lack access to the original on the plates. As Welch put it, "The absence of an authoritative original text inscribed on the plates—an absence repeated in the disappearance of the first 116 pages of the manuscript—conditions the way in which the Book of Mormon can be interpreted as scripture, ruling out interpretive fundamentalism that seeks a stable, anchoring original text." We can't adhere exactly to the words given to the Nephite prophets when we cannot know exactly what they said. All we have is a translated text, one that necessarily departed from the original as all translations do. Welch wrote, "Mediated social translations of the Book of Mormon—not unlike Lehi's brass ball with its continually revised divine writing—are the only texts available for interpretation. And as a matter of general hermeneutics, the absent plates recommend a mode of reading scripture attuned to plurality, improvisation, and performativity." How much the translated text and gold plates text conform with one another—this we cannot check for ourselves.

I believe it was because of these circumstances that the textual scholar Joseph Spencer wrote that the plates should be left out of consideration when we approach the Book of Mormon. The task assigned in the scripture itself is "to read the words of the Book of Mormon, quite regardless of the plates." Under the circumstance, Spencer wrote, the plates are a distraction. We can believe with Royal Skousen that the translation Joseph received by revelation was tightly controlled; the translator spoke

only what was revealed to him.<sup>5</sup> But how far that revealed translation conformed to the text on the plates cannot be known. We could waste a lot of effort guessing at what Nephi wrote and what Joseph spoke. It is better, I think Spencer is telling us, to work with the Book of Mormon as it is—there on the printed page—rather than try to guess how translation altered the original Nephi.

Thinking along the same lines, a historian of both Asian culture and the Book of Mormon, Grant Hardy, elaborated the problem. “Our English version cannot have been a literal translation of the Nephite record, since anachronistic phrasing from the King James Bible, as well as other elements of nineteenth-century Christianity, indicate a rather free rendition, or an updating of the ancient source.” Hardy is not saying that Joseph Smith contrived the Book of Mormon himself. He tells us that “I personally believe the text was revealed to Smith in a fairly exact form.” Hardy is simply saying that the Book of Mormon as revealed to Joseph Smith may have expanded on the ancient writing, introducing a lot of nineteenth-century material in order to reach a modern audience. We don’t know how much of the text existed in the original and how much was added in the process of inspired translation.

In this state of uncertainty, what is the role of the plates? Should we choose not to consider them to avoid being distracted, as Spencer recommends? No, Hardy says, they have a critical function: “The plates, assuming their ancient construction, would have been evidence to Joseph, his early associates, and modern believers that there was some historical basis for the scriptural narrative he published in 1830.” Underlining Hardy’s point, Savannah Eccles Johnston wrote that “the reality of the plates asserts the historicity of the Book of Mormon. If the gold plates are real, then the civilizations documented on the plates were real.” The Book of Mormon was not purely a nineteenth-century revelation. The plates created a link between modern readers and the ancient prophets.

As you can see, then, the solicited comments lead us into deep water. I appreciate the merit in all of them. To sum up, I have divided the responses into five categories:

1. John Peters prefers to understand the plates as an elusive creation of faith rather than a leaden reality.

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5. See 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): 22–31.

2. Others accept the plates because they are one with Latter-day Saint belief in miraculous happenings. Yes, they are at odds with modern scientific belief, but as a people, we accept such things.
3. The plates are a calculated provocation. Like the Resurrection of Christ, they lead us into world of divine visitations and miracles, challenging smug secular materialism.
4. The plates can be read as a parable of how a kind Heavenly Father honors the life stories of his people.
5. Finally, the plates—or rather their absence—complicate our understanding of the Book of Mormon. Without them, we can never pin down how much of the text was in the original and how much translation shaped the result. We can only deal with the text as we have it.

What about my own view of the plates? When I solicited these statements from other scholars, I thought it only fair that I include my own views among them. Here is what I wrote:

If you want to believe in the gold plates, as I do, a case can be made. Accepting their reality does not require a complete abandonment of rationality. Foremost among the evidences are the eleven men besides Joseph Smith who say they saw the plates. Their statements, printed in the Book of Mormon, were never repudiated. I am impressed that Oliver Cowdery wrote a friend about the experience in October 1829 soon after the vision of the plates was alleged to have occurred.<sup>6</sup> The witnesses saw something.

Beyond the witnesses are all the people who touched or lifted the plates while they were in Smith's possession. The evidence for Smith having something like the plates was strong enough to persuade Dan Vogel, a skeptical historian, that Smith possessed some object with their shape, size, and weight, perhaps a set of tin plates he fabricated.<sup>7</sup> I don't subscribe to Vogel's tin-plate hypothesis, but I do think the plates were a tactile reality to the people around Smith.

Then there was a personal experience with the Egyptologist Richard Parker. While I was at Brown University on a fellowship in 1965, I asked Parker, a member of the faculty, about an article by Ariel Crowley on the Anthon Transcript. Crowley examined the characters copied from the plates for Martin Harris to show to the Columbia linguist

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6. To read about this interaction, see Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith's Gold Plates: A Cultural History* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 56.

7. Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Signature Books, 2004), 98.

Charles Anthon. Crowley compared each character on the transcript to characters from Egyptian lexicons. Every one of over two hundred characters had an Egyptian equivalent.<sup>8</sup> When I called on Parker to ask about the validity of Crowley’s argument, I was surprised to learn that Parker himself had helped Crowley locate the characters. Were they really Egyptian? I asked. Not really, he said. They were more like Meroitic, an upper Nile language that was written in Egyptian characters but was an independent tongue. That seemed to me to fit the idea of Hebrew being written in Egyptian as the Book of Mormon describes its own text. The experience left me with a conviction that Joseph had access to Egyptian from somewhere, and perhaps it was from the plates. All of this—the witnesses, the many touches and lifts, and the Anthon characters—makes an argument for the plates that I can buy.

In addition, the plates are embedded in a story that concludes with a published text, the Book of Mormon, which is itself a marvel. I cannot conceive of Joseph Smith writing that book on his own. It is too complex, too weird, too compelling to be a product of his twenty-four-year-old mind. For me, the book’s text disrupts any simple explanation of its origins. Adding gold plates and an inspired translation to the mix seems to me in keeping with the extraordinary nature of the book.

I have lived with the gold plates long enough—all my life—not to be offended by their existence. They seem beautiful and strange in a wonderful way. They don’t strike me as an excrescence or offense. A gold book telling the story of two fallen civilizations written in a mysterious hybrid of Egyptian and Hebrew is astounding. It is a fitting introduction to the unusual qualities of Mormon theology. I am happy to live in a world I share with the gold plates.

Comparing this statement with the other entries, mine seems more old-fashioned and less sophisticated. It falls into the category of straight apologetics: what reasons we have to believe in the plates.

Taken together, these comments, every one of them useful, offer a complex account of the plates’ meaning for Latter-day Saints today. The comments of my friends got me to thinking. What if the plates gradually faded from our stories, our manuals, our thoughts? We are certainly not

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8. Ariel L. Crowley, “The Anthon Transcript I,” *Improvement Era* 45, no. 1 (January 1942): 14–15, 58–60, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/162fc54a-0d84-4b4e-b94f-fbc2b3d0ad0b/0/0>; Ariel L. Crowley, “The Anthon Transcript II: The Identification of the Characters as Egyptian,” *Improvement Era* 45, no. 2 (February 1942): 76–80, 124–25, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/e7d3d9e1-2271-4d9d-a895-ea559e929d1c/0/0>; “History of Joseph Smith,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 13 (May 2, 1842): 772–73, [https://archive.org/details/per\\_utah-and-the-mormons\\_times-and-seasons\\_1842-05-01\\_3\\_13/page/n5/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/per_utah-and-the-mormons_times-and-seasons_1842-05-01_3_13/page/n5/mode/2up).

repudiating the plates, but the fact is that they are rarely mentioned in sacrament talks or in any branch of our preaching. They are touched on only once in the missionary lessons and then but briefly. We no longer make much of the biblical evidence for the plates—the stick of Joseph and the stick of Judah in Ezekiel 37 that were key bits of evidence at one time.<sup>9</sup> Given our current lack of interest, would anything of value be lost if we forgot them altogether?

One way to assess the plates' importance is to examine them against the backdrop of the Protestant Reformation. One among many of the transformations that Protestantism wrought in the sixteenth century was to move the center of religious life from the historical to the psychological. The Catholic imagination was rooted in events headed by the birth of Christ, the Crucifixion (often described in gory details), and the Resurrection. Gospel events were followed by the miracles wrought by the Saints and the valiant acts of the crusaders. Individuals were elevated to sainthood only if they had performed a miraculous act. Everywhere there was vivid miraculous action involving supernatural beings intervening in human life. For a time, every church was expected to have a relic under its altar, fragments of bone, hair, furniture, or clothing memorializing a Saint's miraculous acts. The walls and windows of Catholic churches were covered with depictions of Moses and the tablets, events in Christ's life, miracles wrought by the Saints, and the heroism of Catholic warriors. Catholics lived in a world of constant divine action. As the political scientist Louis Midgely said in his response, "Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox have been and still are much concerned to constantly remind themselves that Christian faith consists of and is also grounded in and rests upon certain crucial historical events."

Protestants changed this emphasis. They denuded the walls of their churches, erasing images of divine events. They were iconoclasts who dismissed accounts of saints and their miracles as purely superstition. Godly miracles were declared to have ended with Christ and were no longer needed. Post-Christ, only Satan performed miracles; if an angel appeared, the evil one was behind it. Worship came to focus on preaching and the word. What mattered to Protestants were the dramas of the

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9. *A Systematic Program for Teaching the Gospel: Prepared for the Use of Missionaries of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1952), 95–108; *A Uniform System for Teaching Investigators* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1961), 29–38.

soul—faith and the workings of the heart. Religion became increasingly psychological and intellectual. The basic events of the Incarnation and the Resurrection remained in Protestant sacred history, of course, but at the heart of Protestant religion was belief and faith.<sup>10</sup>

The Latter-day Saint Restoration unavoidably drew from its Protestant environment. We too have emphasized the psychological: how we feel in our hearts and what we believe. Our crucial life passage is gaining a testimony, which we acquire by praying and listening to the feelings God plants in our hearts. As we mature, we seek comfort from Christ, promptings to do good, and spiritual confirmation that our doctrines are true. In turn, we teach our children to listen to the Spirit. Following in the Protestant tradition, our religion as practiced today is heavily psychological, by which I mean internal—of the heart, the spirit, the mind.

But while Latter-day Saint religion is deeply psychological, we also share the Catholic emphasis on the historical. Our faith is based on actual events that occurred in historical time. We do not populate the world with either witches or saints performing miracles, but we do believe in angels visiting the earth and occasional visits of the Father and the Son. Our religion began with a series of momentous happenings: the appearance of Christ and God; Moroni in Joseph's bedroom and at the hill; John the Baptist bestowing priesthood; Peter, James, and John with further priesthood; Christ in the temple as well as Moses and the ancient prophets. These events lie at the center of the Restoration. We are not a purely psychological faith. We believe that actual events in time and space inaugurated the Restoration. In fact, the historical events are central to our faith. The Book of Mormon, the priesthood, and temples were all founded on earthly visitations from heavenly beings.

How do we hold on to the historical events of the Restoration—the appearances, the ordinations, the translations, the bestowal of ancient records? Over the past two centuries, the historical parts of religion have been the ones under the greatest pressure. A number of the scholars mentioned in this article acknowledge the strong headwinds of secular, material culture pressing against belief in historical events. The gold

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10. For large-scale commentary on the Catholic-Protestant transition, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 146–211; Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Oxford University Press, 1971); and Philip M. Soergel, *Miracles and the Protestant Imagination: The Evangelical Wonder Book in Reformation Germany* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 33–46.

plates run against the grain of standard modern truth, as do all angelic and divine communications.

In Christianity generally, the twentieth century saw a deep erosion of faith in the heroic events of Judeo-Christian religion. The visions, the healings, and above all the Resurrection were spiritualized, transformed into metaphors, and stripped of their historical reality. Secular pressures were too much for liberal Protestant scholars and clergy trying to live in both the realm of historic Christianity and the modern skeptical world. For many Protestants, especially the intellectuals, faith in a series of literal supernatural events slowly faded.

We still live in the midst of that ongoing struggle. How is it affecting us? Recently, a path has opened for Latter-day Saints to follow the course of liberal Protestants. Ann Taves, a highly respected scholar of American religion with deep and sympathetic interest in Mormonism, has told the story of the gold plates in a way that deals with these pressures. She writes with remarkable empathy of a Joseph Smith who truly experiences visions and has plates. He is not lying about them, and he is not self-deceived, she says. The plates are real—but real like the wafer in the Eucharist, where the priest and the communicants truly believe that the wafer is the body of Christ. Taves believes Joseph Smith was as sincere as those priests; there were gold plates as surely as the body of Christ dwells in the wafers. She offers us a set of plates that are real for Joseph Smith and perhaps for all who believed him, just not quite historically or materially real.<sup>11</sup>

That is the way we might go if we were to follow the course of twentieth-century liberal Protestantism: Hold on to the plates but yield a little on their historicity. Is that our destiny? Does anything stand in the way of these trends, or, perhaps more accurately, what has God provided as a defense of our historical faith?

If we look to the Resurrection as a precedent for the plates, as several scholarly respondents did, we remember all the ways that Christ assured the disciples of the living reality of his Resurrection: the appearances, the conversations, the instructions after he died, the meals eaten together. We recall the response to the doubter Thomas. Christ invited him to “reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing”

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11. Ann Taves, “History and Claims of Revelation: Joseph Smith and the Materialization of the Golden Plates,” in *The Expanded Canon: Perspectives on Mormonism and Sacred Texts*, ed. Blair G. Van Dyke, Brian D. Birch, and Boyd J. Petersen (Greg Kofford Books, 2018), 93–120.

(John 20:27). To a doubter, Christ offers a touch of his wounds—a palpable sensory feeling.

Again, in the memorable scene in 3 Nephi on Christ's visit to America, Jesus told the multitude to "arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hand and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world" (3 Ne. 11:14). Christ again offered touch as the sensory basis of belief.

We were not there and did not feel the wounds, but we take the reports as testimony of the reality of Christ's return from the grave. In my opinion, the gold plates are the wounds of the Restoration. As John Peters said, they stand apart from other forms of witness in their billiard-ball tactility. They were a thing, a heavy stack of metal sheets Joseph had to lug home from the hill. They were hidden under the floorboards and covered with a cloth. They were held and balanced on a knee.

Moreover, witnesses saw and felt the plates. "The translator of this work, has shown unto us the plates of which hath been spoken, which have the appearance of gold; and as many of the leaves as the said Smith has translated we did handle with our hands; and we also saw the engravings thereon."<sup>12</sup> We may not review the witnesses' statements very often or teach them in our classes, but they remain there in the front of every copy of the Book of Mormon as a tactile obstacle to disbelief. The gift of the witnesses and the publication of their statements in every Book of Mormon indicates to me that we are meant to remember the plates, to value them as evidence much as Christ's wounds testify of the Resurrection.

For me, this is the meaning of the plates. They are the most durable, forceful support for the historical side of our religion. They tie us primarily to one figure—the angel Moroni. But in leaving space for him, they open a way for other heavenly visitors. The plates prop open the door to an ensemble of angelic beings entering ordinary life.

If we give up on the plates by letting them fall into disuse, never having them in mind, never discussing them, we lose the most tangible proof of divine persons entering history. We risk letting the historical side of our faith slip away. We may not dwell on the plates or always expound on them, but we certainly do not want to forget them.

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12. "The Testimony of Eight Witnesses," in Joseph Smith Jr., trans., *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013), viii.

I would like to end with one final comment, a point not mentioned by any of the commentators: I am impressed with the beauty of the plates. As described by those who saw them, they were a stack of hammered gold sheets, dusky with age, bound with gold rings, engraved with mysterious characters, telling the story of a doomed civilization that brought about its own destruction through rebellion against God. For me, that is a glorious image. Add the fact that the plates were a material witness of an angelic visitation, and we have an artifact worthy of our regard.

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# James Walks Home from Nain

—*Luke 7:11-17*

A pleasant place, he thinks as they descend the steep hill where sparrows dance, making their way among the tombs that line their narrow path. He imagines the lives and dreams of the inhabitants of these stone rooms. The way their voices have flown like leaves, the way they abide like trees.

Song-bright peak of Mt. Hermon white in the distance like some memory of laughter and the green plains an ocean all around and the children of the city playing their invisible flutes, mourning their invisible lost, dancing an imaginary grief and humming their mirth, he marvels that anyone could ever believe in death.

He looks for the light in the footprints of his master, perceives a glow where the worn sandals touched dirt. The way Jesus opens himself to the world, the way he smiles with his arms, embraces all faces of the sky. The bees around him echo the buzz of exuberance filling his soul, sensing a hidden sweetness everywhere.

Looking at a blue so vast so eternal so real, he wonders why some clouds are flat along the bottom, imagines them sitting atop some invisible eternal table where God dines on songs and hope, surrounded by the joyful transformed. Then he thinks of that poor widow and her son sitting down to their supper together tonight, wondering what to say.

What will soup taste like on a tongue returned from the darkest night? How will his laughter fill all the empty spaces in his mother's heart, dancing the light in her eyes, singing its weight and spiraling toward fullness? The son closes his eyes to offer a blessing over their meal but she cannot take hers off his ordinary, miraculous face.

—Robbie Taggart

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This poem won third place in the 2025 BYU Studies Poetry Contest.

# “Struck with Wonder and Amazement”

## On Reading the Book of Mosiah

Joseph M. Spencer

**T**he Wonder of Scripture”: that’s the title of this lecture series.<sup>1</sup> Book of Mormon scholar that I am, that title draws my mind to a passage in our keystone scripture. It’s a passage where the word “wonder” is used in connection with people’s responses to sacred records—to scripture. Tucked away somewhere most of us wouldn’t think to look, the Book of Mormon stages a remarkable scene that’s *precisely* about the wonder of scripture. I can’t help seeing that as just a little too appropriate, so I’d like to examine that scene. I’m going to argue that Mormon, serving simultaneously in his role as prophet of the Lord and in his role as literary architect, intends for readers of that scene to reflect on whether they’re responding in the right way to the written word of God.<sup>2</sup> This intention is only subtly present in the text; Mormon does this particular literary work delicately. Yet his literary intention can, I think, be brought out with some real spiritual force. And for my money, seeing what Mormon does in this passage, both prophetically and literarily, might teach us much about what it means to recognize the wonder of scripture.<sup>3</sup>

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1. This essay began its life as a talk given on November 8, 2024, as part of the Wonder of Scripture lecture series sponsored by the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, held at Brigham Young University. I have edited it only lightly, laboring to retain as much as possible the spirit of its original delivery.

2. For an excellent introduction to Mormon’s literary artistry, see Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 87–213.

3. Throughout this essay, I speak of Mormon’s (deliberate) literary intentions. It could of course be that Mormon was unaware of what he was doing literarily. Ultimately,

As you might be sensing already, what I'm going to do here is a bit scholarly. Things will grow a bit technical—even as I'm trying to make the text's spiritual power perfectly clear. And some might be just a little nervous about whether it's a great idea to talk so academically when looking at something sacred like the Book of Mormon. It might be well to say a word about that before turning directly to the text of the Book of Mormon. Allow me to begin, therefore, with a few preparatory remarks.

## Reading with Wonder

There are, broadly speaking, two very different kinds of *feelings* that call us to the task of rigorous thinking—that call us to pick up the tools of reason and apply them to something. The first is a feeling that *something is wrong*, that the way things are don't match up with the way things ought to be. When this feeling mobilizes scholarship, thinking tends to take on an instrumental shape. That is, thinking tends to give itself to figuring out how to get from Point A (how things are) to Point B (how things ought to be). Further, note that you can't have this feeling without believing that you're ignorant only of means and methods. That is, you don't put thinking to the task of righting a wrong unless you feel that you already know both how things are and how things ought to be; you don't think about whether you're right about any of that, but rather only about how to move the world in the direction you're sure it ought to be heading.

There's the first kind of feeling. But there's a fundamentally different sort of feeling that can call us to the task of rigorous thinking. It's a feeling of—and here's that word again—*wonder*, a feeling that the marvelous mystery of what is cries out for devoted reflection. When this other feeling mobilizes scholarship, thinking tends to take on a philosophical shape. That is, thinking tends to refuse the impulse to produce results or to change the world; it's enough just to celebrate something marvelous by giving your mind devotedly to it. Further, it's worth emphasizing that this second sort of feeling begins—and usually ends—in a deep sense of one's own ignorance. That is, you wonder precisely because you don't know, and you never assume that your understanding will be fully adequate to the thing, given its immensity and mystery; you're happy just to be among those who celebrate it (see fig. 1).

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it matters little to me whether he was fully conscious of what he was accomplishing literally; it is enough that the literary features of the text are there, right within scripture and thus embraced as a feature of the inspired text.

1. The feeling that something is *wrong*.
  - a. Thinking tends to be instrumental, aimed at replacing the way things are with the way things ought to be.
  - b. Thinking takes both the way things are and the way things ought to be for granted.
2. The feeling that something is a *wonder*.
  - a. Thinking is philosophical, aimed at understanding but without any worry about changing things.
  - b. Thinking confesses its own ignorance and hopes only for greater intimacy with what one can't know perfectly.

FIGURE 1. Two feelings that prompt scholarship.

Now, it's no exaggeration to say that the first of these two feelings has largely drowned out the other in the world of scholarship in the twenty-first century. The prevailing dogma of our times—one that's shared across the political spectrum and is just as much at home in religious as in secular contexts<sup>4</sup>—is that we ought to invest our resources only in what yields concrete results. That attitude has driven a decades-long campaign that has deeply penetrated the territory of scholarship. Once, we held that our taxes and our tithing, our time and our tuition, were worth lavishing on institutions where people study for the sheer love of the good, the true, and the beautiful. Today, by contrast, the university is often a battleground where different visions of what's wrong lead to competing parties vying for scarce resources as they devise means and methods for righting the world (as they, of course, severally see it). The university is thus a place today where principle has largely given way to strategy, and agendas are the order of the day. And an institution that

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4. It is essential to emphasize that the change has been spurred by developments all along the political spectrum, rather than the work of any one party. No one in particular is to blame for this change because it represents a much larger cultural sea change. It is nonetheless something that deserves to be resisted, above all out of faith in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Hugh Nibley liked to quote Brigham Young's insistence on this point: "Will education feed and clothe you, keep you warm on a cold day, or enable you to build a house? Not at all. Should we cry down education on this account? No. What is it for? The improvement of the *mind*. . . . Truth cleaves unto truth *because* it is truth, and it is to be adored, because it is an attribute of God, for its excellence, for itself." Hugh Nibley, "Educating the Saints—a Brigham Young Mosaic," *BYU Studies* 11, no. 1 (1970): 83, emphasis original.

was never built for *production* has found that it can't really meet the demands being made of it. One of the very last spaces secured for devotion to something higher is being lost.

There's much reason, then, to rejoice at the very title of this lecture series. Three cheers—a *thousand* cheers!—for Brigham Young University's sponsorship of thinking that still begins in wonder. So yes, I'm going to get a little scholarly here. I'm going to let you see the deepest devotion I can muster as an academic: the covenanted consecration of my mind to the word of God. The Book of Mormon, with its witness of our Savior and its articulation of the covenant work that President Russell M. Nelson has taught is the most important work happening “on both sides of the veil,”<sup>5</sup> deserves nothing less than the best my mind can offer. And the best my mind can offer gets, well, a little technical at times. So, if you're willing to wonder with me, let's get started.

### **Mormon's *Mise en Abyme***

The scene from the Book of Mormon that's calling me today is found in Mosiah 25:1–11, and it takes place just after a major reunion of peoples in the land of Zarahemla. The book of Mosiah tells of a Nephite colony settled in the midst of the Lamanites, far from the Nephite capital of Zarahemla. After relative peace during the time of the colony's first king, King Zeniff, and then a string of atrocities during the time of his son, King Noah, King Limhi and his people found themselves in bondage to the Lamanites surrounding them. Moreover, after Noah's regime murdered the prophet Abinadi, a small group from within the colony fled with Alma to settle in the wilderness, but they also soon found themselves in bondage. Thanks to God's everlasting goodness, however, both Limhi's people and Alma's people escaped Lamanite bondage and arrived in Zarahemla to safety.<sup>6</sup> The gathering reported in Mosiah 25:1–11 constitutes the public meeting in which all those who had “tarried in the land” of Zarahemla during this complicated history learn about what has been happening elsewhere (v. 7).<sup>7</sup>

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5. See Russell M. Nelson and Wendy W. Nelson, “Hope of Israel,” Worldwide Youth Devotional, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, June 3, 2018, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2018/06/hope-of-israel>.

6. All these stories appear in Mosiah 9–24.

7. In general, I use as my base text for the Book of Mormon here Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, 2nd ed. (Yale University Press, 2022). I take the liberty of altering Skousen's punctuation wherever it seems best to me, and I also omit

The gathering of peoples reported here is just as much a gathering of *records*. Once the people had come together, "Mosiah did read, and caused to be read, the records of Zeniff to his people, . . . and he also read the account of Alma and his brethren" (Mosiah 25:5–6). And then here's what especially calls me to think: "When Mosiah had made an end of reading the records, his people which tarried in the land was struck with wonder and amazement" (v. 7). Encountering these sacred records produced *wonder* in Mosiah's people.

I'll come back to some other details in this passage later, but it's important first to examine what Mormon seems to be doing in presenting us with a scriptural scene about people responding to scripture. The scene is, I think, a marvelous example of a literary device that usually goes by the French name of *mise en abyme*.<sup>8</sup> In pictorial art, *mise en abyme* just names the inclusion, within a work of art, of a smaller version of the same larger work of art. Imagine, for example, that you're standing in a museum, looking at a painting that's hanging on the wall before you. It's, provocatively, a painting of a gallery filled with paintings on the walls. But then, when you look closely, you see that one of the paintings hanging on the wall in the painting is a smaller reproduction of the very painting of the gallery that's hanging on the museum wall before you (see fig. 2). The result is a kind of reflection to eternity, because you know that, if you could blow the painting up big enough, you'd be able to see within the painting hanging on the wall within the painting hanging on the wall yet another painting hanging on a wall that reproduces the painting hanging on the wall in the painting hanging on the wall that you're standing in the museum and looking at. If you could keep blowing the picture up, this could go on forever.<sup>9</sup>

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from the text a full line Skousen has added to Mosiah 25:6 ("And he also read the account of Ammon and his brethren and all their afflictions"). Intriguing as the conjectural addition is, I find its inclusion ultimately unmotivated. For the full argument Skousen makes for its inclusion, see Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, part 3: *Mosiah 14–Alma 17*, 2nd ed., *The Critical Text of the Book of Mormon 2* (Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and Brigham Young University Studies, 2017), 1523–27.

8. For the standard scholarly treatment of the device—in literature as much as in art—see Lucien Dällenbach, *The Mirror in the Text*, trans. Jeremy Whiteley and Emma Hughes (University of Chicago Press, 1989).

9. A somewhat more comical version of pictorial *mise en abyme* is common in design for popular consumerist products, such as an oatmeal box that features a picture of a woman holding that very oatmeal box, which in turn has a picture of that same woman holding the oatmeal box . . . and so on.



FIGURE 2. Courtesy Jacob A. Spencer.

That's great fun, but there are subtler forms of *mise en abyme*. One subtle form, for example, wouldn't have the *same* painting hanging on the wall within the painting that's hanging on the wall before you, but it might make clear in various ways that you're looking at a painting *about painting*, so that the painting you're looking at, if you interpret it wisely and well, tells you something about how you ought to look at it (because it says something about what a painting is).<sup>10</sup> Thus, *mise en abyme*, whether in this subtler or in the more overt form, gives a work of art a kind of self-consciousness, a reflexivity that allows it to say something to the viewer about what the thing is supposed to mean. The savvy viewer is supposed to feel drawn into the work of art, not only by its beauty or its straightforward content but also by the question it seems to pose deliberately about itself.<sup>11</sup>

10. This is in fact extremely common in the history of painting. Indeed, one way of understanding the so-called "modernist" break in art is that a modern painted work was about the medium of painting rather than about its alleged subjects. See especially Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison (Routledge, 1982), 5–10.

11. Worthy of note is just how commonly students of the Book of Mormon point to the striking self-awareness of the Book of Mormon: its careful tracking of its sources, its

Uses of *mise en abyme* can be found throughout the world of visual art, but they're just as common in the world of literature. Think of a novel in which the very novel you're reading is part of the plot of the novel. That's overt *mise en abyme*, but again there are subtler forms. A novel about a struggling novelist presumably means to raise questions about how much you should trust the story you're reading. Or a tragic novel that contains a scene in which characters discuss the nature of tragedy is likely asking you to reflect on what makes the very novel you're reading tragic.<sup>12</sup>

But since *mise en abyme* can be a feature of literary texts, let's now bring this back to Mosiah 25:1–11. King Mosiah gathers his people and reads two records to them. The text calls the first of these "the records of the people of Zeniff, from the time they left the land of Zarahemla until the time they returned again" (v. 5). The text calls the second record "the account of Alma and his brethren, and all their afflictions, from the time they left the land of Zarahemla until the time they returned again" (v. 6). Those titles should jump out to a particularly attentive reader of the book of Mosiah. Why? Because the reader has already encountered them, or something very much like them. Just before the start of Mosiah 9, readers find a kind of title, "The Record of Zeniff," with a line or so of explanation following: "An account of his people from the time they left the land of Zarahemla until the time that they were delivered out of the hands of the Lamanites." And then again, just before the start of Mosiah 23, readers find something similar: "An account of Alma and the people of the Lord, which was driven into the wilderness by the people of King Noah" (see fig. 3).

These titles or headings aren't exactly the same as what appears in Mosiah 25:5–6, but they're more than close enough to set a careful reader thinking.<sup>13</sup> Mormon, as the author of Mosiah 25:1–11, seems to be asking the reader to imagine Mosiah's people hearing their king read to

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explicit awareness of its composition, its prophetic anticipation of the circumstances of its coming forth, and so on.

12. My favorite example—because I think it may be the most beautiful—is to be found in Wallace Stegner, *Crossing to Safety* (Modern Library, 2002), where an astonishingly rich portrait of happiness features key scenes where the characters discuss the very possibility of portraying happiness artistically without falling into sentimentality or producing kitsch.

13. One might account for some of the differences simply by noting that Mormon creates strict parallelism between the two accounts in Mosiah 25:5–6 with the repeating formula "from the time they left the land of Zarahemla until the time they returned again." Incidentally, it is Mormon's apparent intention to create parallelism between the two records as they're read that, I think, shows that there is no "difficult reading" to be

**Mosiah 25:5–6**

And it came to pass that Mosiah did read—and caused to be read—the records of Zeniff to his people. Yea, he read *the records of the people of Zeniff from the time they left the land of Zarahemla until the time they returned again*. And he also read the account of Alma and his brethren and all their afflictions from the time they left the land of Zarahemla until the time they returned again.

**Title and Heading above Mosiah 9**

THE RECORD OF ZENIFF. *An account of his people from the time they left the land of Zarahemla until the time that they were delivered out of the hands of the Lamanites.*

**Heading above Mosiah 23**

An account of Alma and the people of the Lord, who were driven into the wilderness by the people of King Noah.

FIGURE 3. *Mise en abyme* in Mosiah.

them the very texts that readers have just themselves been reading. We have, in short, a bit of a *mise en abyme* in this scene. Within the book we're reading, the book of Mosiah, the very people whose story is told in the book are themselves reading the part of the book we've just finished. Mormon seems to hope we'll see in them a mirror image of ourselves.

All this lends to Mosiah 25:1–11 a kind of reflexivity, or even a kind of self-consciousness. It's as if, at this moment, we hear the book of Mosiah posing a question to us about how we're supposed to react to, or how we're supposed to think about, what we've read so far in the book of Mosiah.<sup>14</sup> We shouldn't overlook the literary fact that Mormon, just as soon as he asks us to imagine the people reading the previous sixteen chapters of Mosiah, begins talking about how those people react to the

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addressed with the addition of an allegedly missing line—as Skousen suggests. Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, 3:1523.

14. Of course, there are places where the Book of Mormon's authors ask their readers to do this far more overtly, far more straightforwardly. To take just a particularly familiar example, Moroni in the run-up to his famous promise of Moroni 10:4 asks his specifically Lamanite readers to reflect on the mercy they have seen displayed toward their ancestors in the volume. See the beautiful summary in Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Bookcraft, 1968), 491: "We noticed in the first chapter of Moroni's book that he was much concerned about the future of the Lamanites. It will be observed also in Chapter 10 that he is still thinking of the Lamanite remnant in the latter days. . . . Beginning with verse 3, he exhorts the Lamanites of the latter days to remember how merciful the Lord has been to mankind from the creation of Adam even down to the time that they shall receive his words. He promises them that if they will read the contents of the Book of Mormon with a sincere heart and with real intent, having faith in Christ, the truthfulness of this scripture will be manifested unto them by the power of the Holy Ghost."

records we've just read. How can that *not* subtly pose the question to us of whether we're reacting to the records we've just read in the right way? Here are the lines Mormon dedicates to describing their reaction: "And now, when Mosiah had made an end of reading the records, his people which tarried in the land was struck with wonder and amazement, for they knew not what to think!" (vv. 7–8). With his subtle *mise en abyme*, Mormon here asks us whether we're appropriately struck by what we've been reading, whether we're filled with wonder and amazement, and whether we're at all sure what we ought to think.

If I'm not simply seeing more in the text than is actually there, Mormon uses a clever literary device to ask us as readers whether we're rightly attuned to the wonder of scripture—to ask what it is that gets us thinking as we read the scriptural volume that he prophetically produced for us. It's as if Mormon has mustered his literary resources here to make us stop reading scripture for a few minutes to reflect on just what we're doing when we *do* read scripture. "What have you been reading?" he seems to ask. "How has it struck you? What do you think about it?"<sup>15</sup> And he lets us reflect on what it might mean if we aren't ourselves sitting in wonder like Mosiah's people—unsure about what to think but ready to give all our minds to the text.

Such, I suggest, is Mormon's literary intention. But I suspect that I've been underselling all of this so far. I think that the force of Mormon's move here is meant to be much stronger than I've been letting on up to this point. This, though, is something we can't see unless we pay attention to even subtler details. I want to go deeper, then, and that requires a little further setup.

### Enriching the *Mise en Abyme*

Readers of the Book of Mormon are increasingly familiar with the fact that, in 1879, Elder Orson Pratt produced a new edition of the Book of Mormon that was intended for study (see fig. 4).<sup>16</sup> He divided the volume's longer

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15. There is obviously a pedagogical or even didactic dimension to Mormon's *mise en abyme*. At the same time, he really seems interested in ensuring that we do some thinking about these matters without him at our elbow telling us what to make of it all. It is in this spirit that I paraphrase Mormon here with language drawn from the spirit of the educator Joseph Jacotot, contemporary with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and justly celebrated in Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford University Press, 1991).

16. For an excellent introduction to Elder Pratt's labors, see Paul Gutjahr, "Orson Pratt's Enduring Influence on *The Book of Mormon*," in *Americanist Approaches to "The*

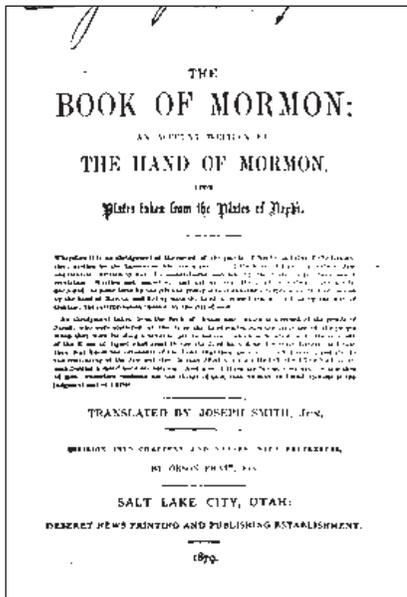


FIGURE 4. Title page for Orson Pratt's new 1879 edition of the Book of Mormon.

chapters into smaller ones, divided the whole text into verses for the first time, and introduced cross-references and interpretive notes at the bottom of the page. That new edition marked a major advance in Book of Mormon study, and it quickly became the standard text for citation and commentary. The new edition did so much good, but one important side effect was that readers soon became unfamiliar with the original chapter divisions in the Book of Mormon. These chapter divisions were part of the inspired translation process and can be shown to be integral to the shape of the book.<sup>17</sup> When we're trying to understand the literary form of the Book of Mormon, we'd do well to pay attention to original

chapter breaks instead of the otherwise indispensable chapter breaks introduced by Orson Pratt.<sup>18</sup> The latter weren't intended to reveal anything about literary form; instead, they were meant to create a standard system of citation and yield something approaching consistency in chapter length. Those are helpful tools for many kinds of readers, but they can't serve all purposes.<sup>19</sup>

*Book of Mormon*," ed. Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman (Oxford University Press, 2019), 83–104.

17. The use of literary devices at the boundaries between original chapter breaks and structural features of whole books that depend on original chaptering show that the divisions are immanent to the book itself, rather than being arbitrary divisions imposed on the text as a foreign apparatus. For some examination of the literary devices and structural features in question, see Joseph M. Spencer, *A Word in Season: Isaiah's Reception in the Book of Mormon* (University of Illinois Press, 2023), 151–74.

18. The original chaptering is easy to find today, especially helpfully laid out in Grant Hardy's various study editions of the Book of Mormon. See, most recently, Grant Hardy, ed., *The Annotated Book of Mormon* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

19. It can't be emphasized enough just how important Orson Pratt's 1879 edition has been for the study of the Book of Mormon—both at the everyday devotional level and at the more specialized scholarly level. It can probably be safely said that no one would have come to recognize the importance of the original chapter breaks had Elder Pratt not inaugurated serious scholarly study of the Book of Mormon with his crucial edition.

Why is all this business of original chapters relevant here? Well, if you're familiar with the story of the book of Mosiah, it might surprise you to learn that the whole of Mosiah 23–27 is one original chapter (the original chapter XI). The scene we've been considering *doesn't*, as you might naturally feel it should, come at the beginning of a new original chapter. It comes, rather, very much in the middle of a longer story. But why might it feel natural to have Mosiah 25:1–11 come at the beginning of a new original chapter? Certain parts of the book of Mosiah—chapters 9–22 and then chapters 23–24—function as long flashbacks that both follow startlingly abrupt interruptions, and it is only in Mosiah 25 that these long flashbacks come to an end.<sup>20</sup> Hence, when Mormon describes King Mosiah reading the accounts of Zeniff's and Alma's peoples to the multitude, each record recounting events "until the time they returned again" to Zarahemla (vv. 5–6), it feels as if Mormon has decidedly *closed* the two flashback periods of Nephite history in the book of Mosiah. Our passage in Mosiah 25:1–11 feels like it brings us as readers back to where we were forced to leave the story (at the end of Mosiah 8) and read those interruptive but deeply instructive records of Zeniff and Alma. Now, though, the interruptions are over, and we're free to get back to normal life in Mosiah's kingdom (see fig. 5).

That's certainly how Mosiah 25:1–11 felt to me for a long time: as if it were intended to mark new beginnings. But when I came to learn of the original chaptering in the book of Mosiah, I found myself far less sure that I should have been thinking that way. Indeed, a few surprising things came to light once I considered the original chapters in Mosiah.

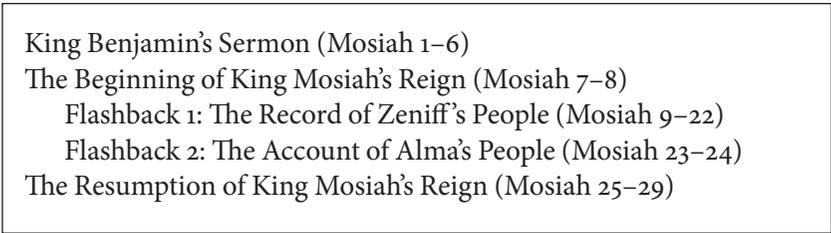


FIGURE 5. A common way of understanding the book of Mosiah.

On this point, see Amy Easton-Flake, "Knowing the Book Better: Orson Pratt, George Reynolds, and Janne M. Sjödahl on the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 30 (2021): 41–61.

20. The interruptions are astonishingly abrupt, unlike anything else in the Book of Mormon. Readers feel like they go over the edge of a literary cliff unexpectedly when they come to Mosiah 9, and again (although to a lesser extent) when they come to Mosiah 23. Elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, major flashbacks are far more smoothly prepared for the reader—as in, for instance, Alma 17:1–5.

**Table 1. Original chapters in the book of Mosiah**

Original Chapter	1879 Assigned Chapters	Content
Chap. I	Mosiah 1–3	King Benjamin’s Speech I
Chap. II	Mosiah 4	King Benjamin’s Speech II
Chap. III	Mosiah 5	King Benjamin’s Speech III
Chap. IV	Mosiah 6	King Benjamin’s Speech IV
Chap. V	Mosiah 7–8	Ammon Discovers Limhi
Chap. VI	Mosiah 9–10	Zeniff’s Reign
Chap. VII	Mosiah 11:1–13:24	Abinadi’s Speech I
Chap. VIII	Mosiah 13:25–16:15	Abinadi’s Speech II
Chap. IX	Mosiah 17–21	The Zeniffites until Ammon
Chap. X	Mosiah 22	Limhi’s People Escape
Chap. XI	Mosiah 23–27	The Fate of Alma’s Church
Chap. XII	Mosiah 28:1–19	A Crisis in the Monarchy
Chap. XIII	Mosiah 28:20–29:47	Mosiah Institutes Judges

First, it’s true that the beginning chapters (Mosiah 1–8 today; the original chapters I–V) flow smoothly through a continuous story that begins with King Benjamin’s sermon and moves into the start of King Mosiah’s reign (see table 1). However, the final scene of the last original chapter of that continuous story—the final scene before the abrupt interruption by the record of Zeniff—doesn’t take place in Mosiah’s kingdom. It takes place, instead, among Limhi’s people. It’s true that the scene features one of Mosiah’s subjects, a certain Ammon, alongside King Limhi. But this is because the last original chapter before the abrupt interruption (the original chapter V, today’s Mosiah 7–8) tells the story of how Ammon leads a group from Mosiah’s kingdom to search for the survivors of the Zeniffite colony. The group finds Limhi’s people and learns of their sorrowful situation. After Limhi introduces Ammon and his companions to his people, the chapter ends (in Mosiah 8:5–21) with an apparently private conversation between Limhi and Ammon about a mysterious set of plates discovered by Limhi’s people (plates that turn out to contain the record of the Jaredites).<sup>21</sup>

21. To end the original chapter V (again, today’s Mosiah 7–8) with exclamations about the mystery of a set of recently discovered plates, and especially to follow that scene with long flashbacks that leave all the questions raised by the plates very much unanswered, is to create a particularly forceful literary effect. Mormon’s decision to

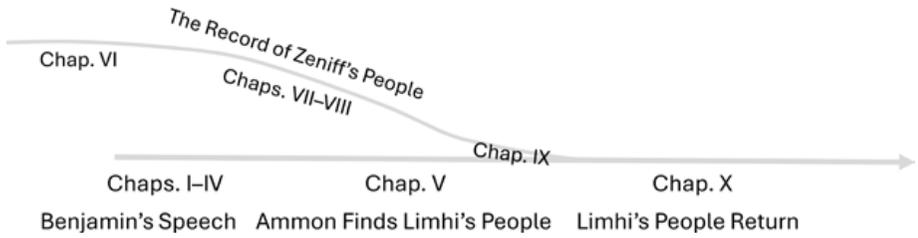


FIGURE 6. Chronological events of the book of Mosiah with original chapter numbers.

Since that's where the interrupted opening narrative of the book of Mosiah ends (namely, at the end of Mosiah 8), it can't be said that it's Mosiah 25 that forcefully brings readers back to Mosiah 8. Readers have in fact *already* returned to the end of Mosiah 8 in Mosiah 21, when the record of Zeniff catches back up to the story of Ammon's arrival in Limhi's kingdom and mentions the mysterious plates discovered by Limhi's people.<sup>22</sup> That is, it's the original chapter IX—and not a story in the middle of the original chapter XI—that brings the reader back to the end of the original chapter V. And after the original chapter IX resumes the story from the end of the original chapter V, the text provides a continuation of the resumed story in the original chapter X (recounting the escape of Limhi's people and their return to Zarahemla) before staging a further flashback in the first part of the original chapter XI (which concerns the whole story of the people of Alma, their escape out of King Noah's clutches, and their eventual return to Zarahemla).

Figure 6 attempts to capture this. In it, the straight arrow running from left to right tracks the series of chronological events that make up the main storyline in the book of Mosiah through the original chapters I–X

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make that scene the abruptly interrupted one causes Limhi's exclamations about the mystery of the record to echo off the walls of the cliff the reader unexpectedly goes over as the record of Zeniff begins. Evidence in the text can, in fact, be mustered to show that Mormon likely moved that scene out of its original place in his sources to make it the last scene before the abrupt interruption. To spell out that evidence would require more space than can be given it here, but the very possibility that Mormon deliberately shaped the story to make the record of Zeniff interrupt such a charged scene says much about his literary intentions.

22. The scene from Mosiah 8:5–21 is thus repeated, but with a totally new staging, in Mosiah 21:25–28. It should also be noted that Mosiah 21:28–31 strikingly anticipates Mosiah 25:1–11 in other ways, with its alternating pattern of reporting positive and negative feelings about what someone learns from a recounting of recently past events.

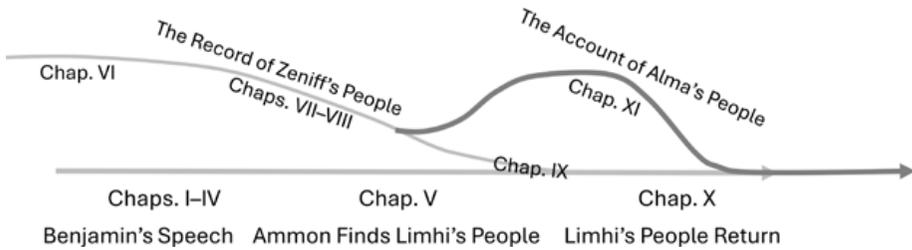


FIGURE 7. Chronological events of the book of Mosiah with Alma's account.

(today's Mosiah 1–22). The record of Zeniff's people interrupts the flow of the chronology when it shows up, unannounced, right after the original chapter V (after today's Mosiah 8). But then it flows right back into the chronology at the end of the original chapter IX (toward the end of Mosiah 21 today), so that the original chapter X (today's Mosiah 22) can just continue with the story.

Of course, the original chapter XI (today's Mosiah 23–27) follows all this, and it also interrupts the flow of the chronology. But, against expectation, it *doesn't* end like the original chapter IX—that is, by flowing right back into the main storyline. Rather, it catches back up to the main storyline *and then keeps going*, so that chapter XI ultimately *supplants* rather than *supplements* the story Mormon has been telling. This is what figure 7 attempts to capture. Literarily, the record of Zeniff's people is *subordinated* to the story of the people in Zarahemla (chapters I–V and X engulf chapters VI–IX), but the record of Alma's people *subordinates* the story of the people in Zarahemla *to itself* (chapter XI supplants the predominance of chapters I–X). The story of Alma's people isn't a necessary-but-ultimately-very-brief bit of backstory, as it might feel when we read it today; it's a story coming out of nowhere that suddenly proclaims itself the new principal story in the book of Mosiah, and it changes what the reader initially *thought* was the main storyline into a backstory.

This is confirmed by a few points, all of which could be expanded on. First, it's certainly of interest that the original chapter XI is the *longest* original chapter in the whole of the book of Mosiah.<sup>23</sup> Its sheer length

23. The chapter clocks in approaching 6,000 words, longer by far than any other original chapter in the book of Mosiah. The next longest is the original chapter IX, which is more than 450 words shorter. At the other extreme, of course, are astonishingly

suggests its importance and perhaps underscores its emergence as the new dominant narrative once it arrives. Second, as this same original chapter continues to develop past the scene in Mosiah 25:1–11, it tells how both King Limhi from the Zeniffite colony and King Mosiah in Zarahemla surprisingly defer to Alma and his authority when it comes to religious matters—despite the fact that these two kings have each presided over temples and priesthoods.<sup>24</sup> Third, this same original chapter comes to its real climax with the famous story of the conversion of Alma's son and several sons of Mosiah. And when Alma the Younger stands and addresses the people after several unconscious days and nights, he quotes and thus brings together both the words of King Benjamin, the clear spiritual leader in the Zarahemla story from the original chapters I–V, and the words of the prophet Abinadi, the clear spiritual leader in the Zeniff story from the original chapters VI–X.<sup>25</sup> Everything

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short chapters, such as the original chapter X (today's Mosiah 22), which is just over 600 words long, and especially the original chapter IV (today's Mosiah 6), which is just over 300 words long (just over a twentieth of the length of the original chapter XI)!

24. Already in Mosiah 21:32–35, the text reports Limhi's interest in forming his people into a church under Alma's authority. Later, in Mosiah 25:17–18, this actually happens. In a parallel but obviously different gesture, Mosiah allows Alma to establish churches throughout the land of Zarahemla in Mosiah 25:19. That Mosiah had priests of his own and therefore oversaw some kind of establishment religion in Zarahemla is perfectly clear from Mosiah 27:1, and that Limhi had priests before his departure from the Zeniffite colony's lands is extremely likely, given that both his father and grandfather had priests attached to their thrones (see both mentioned in one verse in Mosiah 11:5). This deferral to Alma's authority, when these kings had religious institutions of their own to oversee, is both surprising and telling. My argument here, then, is that these kings' actions within the narrative reflect the larger shape of the narrative. Kings and their regimes cede religious authority *and narrative predominance* to the newly formed "church of God" (Mosiah 25:18, 22).

25. This point would require more space than is available here to justify, but a brief sketch might give an idea of the issues. When Alma the Younger first speaks after his conversion, he claims that all must be "redeemed of God" and "becom[e] his sons and daughters" (Mosiah 27:25). On the one hand, prior to Alma's speech, it is only Abinadi and those who believe his words who use the language and imagery of redemption to speak of the effects of Christ's Atonement (see Mosiah 13:32, 33; 15:1, 9, 11, 12, 18, 19, 23, 24, 26, 27; 16:2, 4, 5, 6, 15; 18:2, 7, 9, 13, 20, 30; 26:26). On the other hand, prior to Alma's speech, it is only Benjamin who speaks of becoming God's sons and daughters through a second birth (see Mosiah 5:7). Alma fuses the teachings of these two quite disparate religious authorities. To feel the force of that fusion, it is particularly important to recognize how the book of Mosiah arguably contrasts the radically distinct political contexts in which Abinadi's and Benjamin's preaching occurs, with major implications for the nature of covenant. For a brief analysis of the way the text stages this contrast, see

in the book of Mosiah, it seems, has long been setting the reader up for the emergence of a new ecclesiastical era.

And, as if to put an exclamation point on all this, Mormon concludes the original chapter XI with a few words of celebration about the new work that Alma the Younger and the sons of Mosiah do after their conversion as they press forward with the work of the Church. Significantly, Mormon borrows his concluding celebratory words directly from Isaiah 52:7, part of the passage that Noah's priests force Abinadi to interpret earlier in the book (Mosiah 12:20–24). Abinadi interprets Isaiah's words as pointing toward a coming era of Christian preaching (Mosiah 15:14–19), and Mormon's use of those words at this later point in the book suggests that he wants his readers to see this ongoing work of the Church as a first fulfillment of Isaiah's and Abinadi's prophecies.<sup>26</sup> "And how blessed are they!" Mormon nearly shouts. "For they did publish peace; they did publish good tidings of good; and they did declare unto the people that the Lord reigneth" (Mosiah 27:37).

All this suggests that figure 7 might be best reworked to highlight the emergently dominant role of the original chapter XI (Mosiah 23–27) and the way that all earlier narratives seem to be ultimately preparatory to it. An attempt at capturing this can be found in figure 8. The real story in the book of Mosiah seems to be that of Alma's people—from the time they settle themselves in the wilderness and solidify their new Church to the time they're collectively delivered from dissension in Zarahemla, thanks to the conversion of Alma's and Mosiah's sons.<sup>27</sup> This real story is the story told in the original chapter XI. The passage we're focused on here, Mosiah 25:1–11, comes only in the *middle* of that original chapter. It thus doesn't mark *new beginnings* in Zarahemla so much as it helps to *narratively subordinate* everything before it to the story of the Church's survival and success. Or again, it doesn't announce that life can get back to normal in Zarahemla; rather, it emphasizes that people in Zarahemla

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Joseph M. Spencer, "One Prophet's Vision of a Nonviolent Atonement: The Book of Mormon as Theological Resource," in *Latter-day Saint Perspectives on Atonement*, ed. Deidre Nicole Green and Eric D. Huntsman (University of Illinois Press, 2024), 235–50.

26. For a full elaboration of Abinadi's interpretation of Isaiah, see Spencer, *Word in Season*, 29–76.

27. Alma and his people are of course introduced at the heart of the record of Zeniff, since Alma organizes the Church at the waters of Mormon in response to Abinadi's preaching, on the border of Noah's Zeniffite kingdom (see Mosiah 18, positioned in the middle of the original chapter IX).

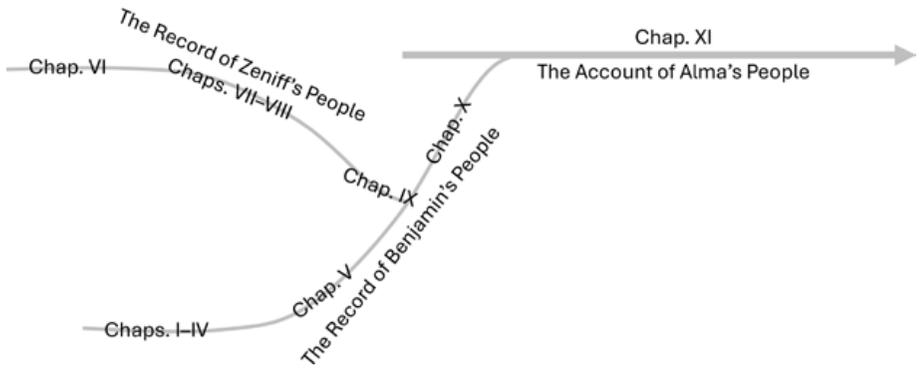


FIGURE 8. Narrative dominance given to Alma's account.

don't at all know what to think about where things stand, and it paves the way for the Church to enter a new and complicated era.

Now we can come back to the question of what Mormon's doing in his *mise en abyme*. Considering the records' placements in the original chapters, we can now say that when Mosiah 25:1–11 asks its readers to pause and reflect on what they've been reading in the book of Mosiah, it's actually doing two things at once. First, it asks its readers to reflect on the story of Zeniff's colony, from its beginnings in Mosiah 9 (at the outset of the original chapter VI) to its decisive conclusion in Mosiah 22 (the original chapter X). "Look back," Mormon seems to say, "and reflect on that long but now totally completed digression from the story of the people in Zarahemla and see what you make of it. How might you think about that?" Second, though, the same passage asks its readers to reflect on the story of Alma's people, *which we now realize we're only in the middle of*. It had a preliminary beginning in Mosiah 18 (in the middle of the original chapter IX), but it's unfolding now in Mosiah 23–27 (throughout the original chapter XI). "Now," Mormon seems to add, "I want you to look at another story, one that might initially feel like a digression but actually isn't. It's the story you're still in the middle of reading (you can see that this chapter won't end for a little while), and so I want you to reflect on a story that doesn't yet have an ending. What do you make of it so far?"

Mormon wants his readers to pause and reflect on the Zeniffite record, to look back from the original chapter XI to the original chapters VI–X, and decide, with Mosiah's people, what they think of it all—to wonder at it. Any conclusions drawn might in fact be final because, from the vantage point of the original chapter XI, the Zeniffites' story is over.

But Mormon also wants his readers to pause and reflect on the story of Alma's people, which would be to try to tackle the meaning of the original chapter XI *while still reading that chapter*. Any conclusions drawn can't at all be final because, from the vantage point of the original chapter XI, the story of Alma's people remains largely to be told. To reflect as Mormon directs at this point is to ask something like "What's going on right now?"

Mormon's *mise en abyme* is thus, I think, a good deal cleverer even than it first appeared. It's not just that he wants his readers to reflect with Mosiah's people on the scripture they've been reading. It's also that he wants them to see something that Mosiah's people perhaps could not have seen in their own immediate circumstances—but something that readers can see thanks to the basic fact that the original chapter XI isn't over at the outset of Mosiah 25. He wants his readers to contrast a certain *closed past* reported in scripture (Zeniff's record) with a certain *open present* (the story of the new Church organized at the waters of Mormon). To ask readers to reflect on whether they're responding rightly to the book of Mosiah at this point is to situate them between what's decisively over and done with and what's rich with potential for the future.<sup>28</sup> Kingdoms are no longer the vehicle for the delivery of the Christian message because the Church has emerged, and the Church promises to carry Christian faith into the future.

This final point of reflection, however, deserves some expansion, and it might allow us to wind our way to a conclusion here.

## What to Think?

I've suggested that Mormon wants his readers to compare their own reflections on Zeniff's record and the ongoing story of the Church with the reactions of Mosiah's people reported in the text (in Mosiah 25:1–11). I've as yet, however, said nothing about what those reported reactions are. A close consideration of these might allow all the technical work we've been doing to give us some real spiritual punch. What does Mormon say about how Mosiah's people react to the two records—one complete, one incomplete—that were read to them?

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28. Note that even the introduction of Alma and his people in Mosiah 18, in the middle of the original chapter IX, serves a key literary purpose. The Church has taken its rise within a closed chapter of history, the concluded record of Zeniff, but it has outlived that closed chapter of history by having laid new foundations in the land of Helam at the start of the original chapter XI (in Mosiah 23).

There are in fact two very different sorts of reflections reported in the text. For that reason, always with an eye to Mormon's *mise en abyme*, we can say that there are two different ways that Mormon expects us as readers to be struck with *wonder* and two different ways we too might not know what to *think*. It's interesting, of course, that we already have reason to wonder what to think about differently when we're looking back on the Zeniffite story, fully concluded, and when we're considering the story we're still very much in the middle of—the story of Alma's people and the Church. It turns out that the quite different reactions Mormon reports line up with the two different records. In Mosiah 25:8–9, we get the people's reflection on the Zeniffite colony. Then, in verses 10–11, we get the people's reflection on Alma's people and the Church.<sup>29</sup> So it is that there are two things to wonder at here, two ways we might experience—right within scripture—the *wonder of scripture*.

Here, then, is Mormon's report of the people's reflection on the Zeniffite colony's history: "For when they beheld those that had been delivered out of bondage, they were filled with exceeding great joy. And again, when they thought of their brethren which had been slain by the Lamanites they were filled with sorrow and even shed many tears of sorrow" (Mosiah 25:8–9). What does this tell us? Note that there's so much of God's goodness on display in the colony's story, but the colonists were slow to see it—with the result that many unnecessarily lost their lives as they struggled to free themselves from a mess of their own making.<sup>30</sup> What's the wonder of the scriptural past here, then? It seems to have a specific form. Scripture is wonderful here because it draws from events in the past where God's goodness can be seen right in the middle of messy things. Scripture, in this case, refuses to let the light swallow up

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29. One could, of course, read some of these details differently. Because Mosiah 25:8 only speaks of "those that had been delivered out of bondage," one might wonder whether it refers to Zeniff's people *and* Alma's people. That the deliverance of Alma's people is taken up in verse 10, though, suggests that a narrower scope governs verse 8. Moreover, it seems to me that a much tighter symmetry organizes the report if one takes verses 8–9 to report the response to one record and verses 10–11 to report the response to the other. Should one hope for symmetry in the passage? Given the way that verses 8 and 10 clearly report happiness and verses 9 and 11 clearly report sadness, and given the way that verses 8 and 10 both focus on deliverance from bondage and verses 9 and 11 both concern themselves with the Lamanites, there is already a good deal of unmistakable symmetry in the passage. Completing the symmetry, if we understand the first two verses as contrasting the good and bad news from Zeniff's colony, then the last two verses contrast the good and bad news from Alma's people in turn.

30. All these stories are told in the original chapter IX, today's Mosiah 17–21.

the darkness, but it also and especially refuses to let the darkness swallow up the light. Looking back into the scriptural past, we're reminded of a key aspect of what we believe: that God is there in the midst of terribly unfortunate things, always calling to his children in mercy.<sup>31</sup>

That's a first thing to wonder at, a first thing to think rigorously about. But there's a second, of course, because next comes Mormon's report of the people's reflection on the unfinished story of Alma's people: "And again, when they thought of the immediate goodness of God, and his power in delivering Alma and his brethren out of the hands of the Lamanites and of bondage, they did raise their voices and gave thanks to God. And again, when they thought upon the Lamanites, which was their brethren, of their sinful and polluted state, they were filled with pain and anguish for the welfare of their souls" (Mosiah 25:10–11). Here, it seems, we get an illustration of the kind of wonder Mormon seems to want us to experience when we're considering the *continuity* between the scriptural past and the present. Why do I say that? Because, once again, Mosiah 25:1–11 shows up right in the middle of the original chapter XI, which contains "An account of Alma and the people of the Lord, which was driven into the wilderness by the people of King Noah." Verses 10–11 therefore show us what it looks like for a people to wonder at, to struggle to think about, a story that's still going on. Here we have on display, then, a kind of wonder we're to experience when we aren't thinking about the scriptures as merely reporting the ancient past; instead, we can see them as telling a story that continues with our own concrete present. What's the wonder of scripture when we aren't applying the past to the present, but we're instead living out a story scripture tells that, although it begins in the past, hasn't yet concluded?

Well, what do Mosiah's people see in the story of Alma's people? Note that they see God's goodness as much more "immediate" in this story than in that of Zeniff's people. And this increases their joy to the point that they apparently can't keep quiet—"they did raise their voices and gave thanks to God" (Mosiah 25:10). Looking back to the first part of the unfinished story, they react with joyful gratitude. But then, *don't miss this*, they also look forward to what remains to be told of this unfinished story. The story of God's "immediate goodness" isn't over because, well,

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31. For a brilliant reflection on this matter elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, see Sharon J. Harris, *Enos, Jarom, Omni: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2020), 71–76.

*there are the Lamanites*. Mormon gives his readers an enormous hint here, telling them what the continuation of the story of Alma's people will amount to. What does that new Church, formed at the waters of Mormon, make possible? For the first time since the Nephites separated from the Lamanites shortly after father Lehi's death, this very Church—this very people of Alma—will oversee the conversion of Lamanites to Jesus Christ.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, before the original chapter XI is through, we'll have the sons of Mosiah fully converted and thus prepared to be inspired with the idea to go preach among the Lamanites (successfully, as it will turn out!). We'll also have Alma the Younger fully converted and thus prepared to take responsibility for the Church that will receive those Lamanite converts when they require refuge.<sup>33</sup> It's precisely as the story of Alma's people continues that the "pain and anguish" felt at first by Mosiah's people will in fact be alleviated.

Here, then, is a second form that the wonder of scripture takes. Mosiah's people let an unfinished story within scripture orient them toward the still-future fulfillment of centuries-old prophecies. They let the story of Alma's people turn them toward what remains to be done by way of redeeming the children of Laman and Lemuel. And they'll indeed live to see the real fulfillment of those prophecies. You see, it's one thing to wonder at what God has done in historical scripture, extract marvelous principles from otherwise dead letters, and then apply those principles to our present circumstances.<sup>34</sup> But it's another thing entirely

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32. This is something too often overlooked. There are, according to the Book of Mormon's own account, no conversions among the Lamanites until after the rise of Alma's Church—despite the fact that "many means were devised to reclaim and restore the Lamanites to the knowledge of the truth" during all those years (Jacob 7:24). What arguably makes the difference is simply this: Once the Church has been organized as something distinct from the Nephite monarchy (distinct from the Nephite state), a Lamanite can convert to Christ without therefore necessarily becoming in some sense a Nephite. The Church's independence from national identities makes for the possibility of conversion to Christ without political strings being attached.

33. All these stories of conversion and then reception among the members of the Church appear in Alma 17–29.

34. It must be underscored that the extraction and then application of principles from past stories is a beautiful thing. Mosiah 25:1–11 directly endorses it. And yet, there is nonetheless always a sense in which this very common approach treats the scriptures as a dead letter, something that has to be given life from something outside of it (some principle or another). I take it that Mormon, through his *mise en abyme*, endorses this because there are texts that have little to say directly to a reader. But it has to be said that something rather different happens when the prophetic word is seen to be so alive that it

to wonder at what God, according to prophetic scripture, is still very much in the middle of accomplishing—to see that God is, right here and right now, at work in fulfilling the living promises contained right within the sacred text. This is therefore the second thing that’s wonderful about scripture, or a second way to wonder at scripture: to see that we’re in the flow of a still-sacred history that God has chosen to enter and to bend toward the fulfillment of his covenantal promises.

Here’s the final force of Mormon’s *mise en abyme*, then. “Wonder!” he cries to us. “And give your best thinking to scripture! But let that wonder and that thinking be of two sorts!” What two sorts? First, look back to the very real history that scripture reports on. Find God delivering his people again and again in that history. Sift those ancient events. Sort them into principles that can guide your life of faith. Live righteously and well as you look to what the past can teach you.

But then, second, begin to recognize that scripture isn’t locked into the past; it isn’t about ancient history. It’s about a story that begins in the past but continues into and beyond the present, continues into and beyond the time when we’re reading scripture. Find in the writings of the ancient prophets so many reasons to look forward in faith to Israel’s full redemption—because you’re living through it right now. The scriptures aren’t past; they’re present, and when we read them rightly, they’re pointing us squarely into a redemptive future. So, do all you can to understand those prophecies. Sort scripture’s promises into something that can guide the work you might do for a whole lifetime in faith. Watch for God’s good work to go forward as you see what you can contribute to it.

## A Word of Conclusion

Now, is all that in Mosiah 25:1–11? I really think so. And as I sit with the Book of Mormon, I’m struck with wonder and amazement. I don’t myself know what to think, though I know just how much thinking this book gets me to do. The thing is a marvel, astonishingly artful if we read it carefully enough to see how it operates. And I thrill at the way that the book puts all its artfulness to the exalted purpose of convincing us that Jesus is the Christ, and that God will fulfill his covenant with Israel.

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proves unnecessary to ask what principles the text has within it, when the word can be read as speaking directly and prophetically to the moment when one is reading. And a real danger lurks in a temptation to turn *all* scripture into mere vessels for principles and doctrines.

We'll never catch up to the Book of Mormon's remarkable witness, but I'm thrilled to give my mind, every day, to see what more of it I can grasp.

Oh, and by the way, it isn't only Mormon who tries to convince us that this scripture is a wonder. Far less subtle—far blunter—is Nephi, who, borrowing language from Isaiah, simply speaks of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon as “a marvelous work and a wonder,” the kind of thing that makes worldly wisdom and human understanding perish (2 Ne. 25:17; 27:26; see Isa. 29:14). I'm with Nephi. The book is a wonder, and its work—its prophetic work, its pastoral work, its literary work, its historical work, its theological work—is marvelous. The Christ I know, Wonderful Counselor that he is, is the Christ the Nephite prophets have set before me. The covenant work I'm engaged in, announcing this wonder to the world, is the work this book has set me to. And so, I'm happy to add my witness to the Book of Mormon's, my willingness to bear record of that Christ and to testify of the promises he gave to the ancient prophets.

It's all real. And it's all a wonder to me.

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# Seam Allowance

*Sarah Hafen d'Evegnée*

*And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse (Mal. 4:6).*

*A transitional person is one who rejects the unhealthy or evil family patterns of previous generations and sets a new course for future generations by adopting healthy and godly patterns. Transitional persons are gifts to themselves and potentially to thousands of progeny, with effects rippling across time and social networks. The transitional person exemplifies Christlike love by becoming a participant with the Lord in helping to redeem others.<sup>1</sup>*

The shirts hang like a battalion of cotton soldiers on the large metal rack sticking out of the wall. I remove them from the hangers one by one, letting my fingers linger over the stripes, checks, and plaids. Some of them still feel new. The laundry room mingles the freshness of laundry soap with the odor of aging linoleum and tangy, rusty overtones—the same way it has for the past twenty-five years. My children's younger faces, their grins all gaps and crowded teeth, peer out at me from an assortment of paper flowers glued to a frame on the wall.

The colors and patterns in his shirts are consistent, controlled, and somehow sweet and boyish. They are all shades of blue and one of the shirts seems to have cloned itself at least three times. There's not a single stain.

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1. Allen E. Bergin, *Eternal Values and Personal Growth: A Guide on Your Journey to Spiritual, Emotional, and Social Wellness* (BYU Studies, 2002), 229.

I think I might be stealing. A two-bit Gen-X criminal in leggings and Birkenstocks, I'm making off with nearly every dress shirt and some of his jeans. I abandon the white shirts. I stuff the button-down shirts that are his daily staple in a Barbie pink duffle bag, checking to make sure my sister-in-law isn't looking; I only pause when I see the navy gingham shirt. "Wow! That shirt looks so good on you!" I had bubbled, noting the way the compliment both pained and pleased him. He muttered a grumpy "thank you," sucking air skeptically through the gap between his front teeth, his blended New York and French accent peeking out of the vowels; he wore the shirt more often after that.



When we finally arrive home after the long flight from JFK, I babysit the bag into the house before I fall into bed and sleep and sleep and sleep.

I can't face the shirts for six days.

They keep calling to me from the bag. And I ignore them because I'm not ready.

And even though I'm still not ready, I march my sewing machine to the dining room table and place my cutting mat and rotary cutter nearby like the good friends that they are. I pull the zipper on the bag and release arms and torsos, collars and cuffs. I smooth the 200-thread-count cotton.

I half-expect him to burst into the room, seething the way he did more often in his younger days, "Those are mine! My shirts! I still wanted to wear those!"

But I am determined. He won't come into the room. He won't be angry. He won't be anything.

I breathe in through my nose and puff air out of my mouth, Lamaze style. I am a feminine Sweeny Todd poised above her Jos. A. Bank wrinkle-resistant victims. I start to cut, recklessly removing sleeves, slashing seams. The shirts are plucked chickens, and I am breaking down their bodies, snapping off appendages, separating flesh and bone, ripping away skin, their buttonhole mouths gaping.

I cackle. My dining room table turned violent craft-fair-slaughterhouse makes me laugh out loud—not because I'm hysterical but because the process of breaking down a chicken carcass is called fabrication. *Fabrication*. I am fabricating fabric to create something beautiful out of something dead.

To *fabricate* also means to lie or to make up a story. I am fabricating fabric to create something beautiful out of something ugly.



Holding one of my catalogue-worthy specimens by its collar, I notice new tear stains on the arms. I'm wearing my heart on his sleeves. I started the project too soon. I drop the sewing scissors, letting them sloppily slide across the table. The words Baby Daddy pop up on my phone, and I'm relieved to have an excuse to leave the cloth-laden operating table, desperate for a break from my craft trauma. I try and sound cheery and breezy, like I hadn't just been dismantling half of my husband's dead father's wardrobe.

"How are you," he asks, his tone answering the twin question I might have asked. I fabricate a response, as I brush a rogue piece of white thread off my pants, "I'm fine."

"Today is the anniversary of my mom's death," I hear him say as if he's describing the weather forecast.

I accidentally started sewing the quilt for our missionary daughter on the anniversary of the day my husband watched his mom die in a car crash when he was ten. The two of them were on their way home from getting dinner when the father of one of his classmates swerved drunkenly into their lane, scarring my husband's face and killing his mother.

"Did you realize that I'm an orphan now?"

Yes. I did. And I know that a whole truckload of quilts can't cover that coldness.

When we were newlyweds and I was still becoming familiar with the family tree I had grafted myself into, my husband and his sister often laughed in sibling synchronicity, handing the conversational baton back and forth as they shared details about their childhood trauma. The violent divorce. The constant fighting. Ironically, I was somehow missing the punchline in their stories about being hit. They were speaking a foreign tongue, and I searched my catalogue of familial experiences for a suitable translation guide to understand the joke, but I couldn't find one. The worst thing about my childhood was that my mother forced me to practice both the piano and the violin before I could play with my friends.

My father-in-law was born in Belgium in 1942. He remembers leaving the church building after Primary one afternoon and seeing a dead German soldier hanging from a nearby tree. His father lost an eye and most of the fingers on his right hand when he picked up a grenade as a child, thinking it was a toy. My childhood was full of apricot trees and popcorn blossoms.

It was impossible to tell if anything you had done was acceptable to Fran. He was a gourmand. He loved to eat. I love to cook. You'd think

we would fit together seamlessly. But during his visits from Connecticut, I could never seem to make anything he enjoyed, no matter how much I researched his preferences and used my children as guinea pigs to perfect one of his favorite recipes. If I made meatballs, he'd say mid-bite, "Do you know who makes the best meatballs? Debbie. Ah. Her meatballs are delicious." Someone always was better than I was at making whatever dinner graced our plates.

I knew what would happen if the menu wasn't erudite enough to excite his European tastebuds. For dinner one night, I dared to create something as mundane as pasta and tomato sauce. Fran entered the kitchen at dinner time and asked what we were having for dinner. I told him we were having spaghetti and instead of grabbing a fork, he grabbed his jacket and said, "I'm going out" and unceremoniously left the house.

After we had completed our eleven-step bedtime ritual and our flock of children had been read to and prayed with and brushed and scrubbed and pajamaed, my husband couldn't find me anywhere in the house. I was hiding in our rickety Suburban in the garage with all the lights off. I was crying and eating a Peanut Buster Parfait in the driver's seat, staring ahead into the dark windshield and wishing I were going to a place that was far, far away. I hadn't had any sugar for months. I crunched on the stale peanuts and slurped up the melting ice-milk, the dregs of the chocolate forming pools of shame in the plastic cup. My husband leaned in the door and tried not to laugh as he asked me what I was doing. "I can't please him. I can't make him happy." I inhaled another huge bite of lukewarm hot fudge.

My husband picked up a napkin from the paper bag on my lap and wiped a splatter of rogue chocolate off my shirt. "When are you going to stop caring what he thinks? You can never make him happy. But you make me happy." He kissed me on the forehead.

At the airport, my kids encircled their grandpa like a flock of hungry geese, each of them taking their turn engaging him in an awkward hug, their easy "I love yous" both sincere and well-practiced, the way they squeezed him tight full of unquestioning admiration. An annoyed traveler honked their horn as they drove by our bustling farewell party, and Fran stopped mid-goodbye and yelled, "Go to hell!" The kids laughed with simultaneous respect and horror and admiration.

There's a long list of grievances I would like to share with my father-in-law. I want to be angry at him for making my husband come home to a dark and empty house night after night all through the years after he lost his mother. I want to be angry at him for not ever saying he was

proud of his children. I want to be angry at him for being distant and cold and unapproachable. I want to be angry at him for refusing to make a will for his motherless children, for making them pay for all of the funeral expenses because he feared his own mortality. I want to be angry at him for forcing his only daughter to have a conversation with his only son on the day he passed away that included her speaking out loud the phrase, “Can you bring a checkbook with you to help pay for your half of the cremation?” I want to be angry at him for not being a better father, but what good will it do to be angry at someone who is an exceptional grandfather to my children?

I don’t have to fabricate any of the ways he made my children feel loved. Even though he lived 2,292 miles away from us, he made himself a near and present presence in my children’s lives. He never forgot a birthday or an interest or a hobby. He greeted each grandchild with “Hey! It’s the Ballerina!” or “Look out for Peter the Great!” or “How’s the Artist?” to demonstrate not only his interest in their interests but his ability to connect with them in ways that only a really good grandpa could. When he visited his grandkids, he was right there in the middle of the action, whether it was selling lemonade, watching cartoons, or fishing. He was still himself with them—still so very Fran—cracking absurd jokes, teasing anyone who wasn’t at the table with photos of whatever delicious food he was enjoying that they weren’t, grumbling about politics, swearing expertly at bad drivers—but he was softer with them too. He’d rave about his love for folk music and show us video after video of Rhiannon Giddens, closing his eyes, leaning into the sound, and asking us if we liked it too. He sent temple cards, hundreds of them, so they could do the work for ancestors whose names he had lovingly discovered himself after long hours of searching with professional-grade skill. He bought us authentic New York Pepe’s Pizza and Mike’s Ice Cream and Egg Sandwiches and French Onion Soup and with a mischievous smile, he’d suggest we send a photo to whichever family member wasn’t right there with us at the restaurant. He prayed with us, his voice cracking just slightly as he thanked God for his family.

What more do I want from him? An apology wouldn’t erase the neglect while my husband was healing from the car accident that killed his mother. But good grandparenting should probably qualify as some kind of repentance for bad parenting.

Maybe grief tells you what is still left to forgive and what has already been repaired through the “process of time.” My grief reports that my brain is holding on to grudges that my heart has long ago abandoned.

In the end, my grief tells me that there just isn't that much left to forgive.



So I help myself to his shirts. I take apart one thing and I make it into something else. I reconstruct practical, lived-in shirts of the past and make them into a present-day comforter. And maybe that's all you can do with the past, especially if the past is as perplexing and war-torn and scarred as it is absurd and hilarious and unifying.

I examine the pieces of the butchered shirts after my meatless fabrication is complete. Now I will make the limp and lifeless limbs of fabric into perfect squares. My end goal is to create eight-inch squares out of sleeves and backs and fronts and then to create two-inch by ten-inch strips out of the jeans. I lean in close, my glasses slipping down my nose as I measure each piece, keeping my fingers clear from the blade as I zip the rotary cutter through the fabric. One of my friends—a talented seamstress and quilter—became distracted as she was fabricating fabric and she fabricated the tip right off her left forefinger at an exacting ninety-degree angle, her blood staining her project, her finger rendered permanently disfigured. Her scarred hand is now a part of my creative process; the memory of her finger points at me every time I use my rotary cutter. Keep your fingers out of the way lest you lose them.

I organize the quilt squares into rows and patterns, creating a storyline out of the shirts. The buzz of my sewing machine is satisfying. We careen through seams as a team, and I want to pat her on the head and say, “Good job,” as she wags her bobbin thread tail at me.

Once I finish a row of the quilt, I set it on the carpet in the living room right next to the scorch mark caused by our Christmas-tree lights sixteen years ago, our first Christmas in our new house. We didn't leave the lights on overnight after that, but we haven't been able to afford to replace the carpet. I think the singed carpet fibers give our living room character.

Once the quilt is finished, I find a box to mail it to our missionary daughter. But I can't bear to put it in the box, to bury it there. I text my best friends and ask them if they'll come and give the quilt a hug; it's a strange request, but they gladly take turns coming to my house or letting me stop by theirs. They speak words of comfort and squeeze me as much as the quilt. I've created an accidental wake, a viewing for a blanket.

At the post office, I'm jittery as I stand in line fifteen minutes before the doors open. Once my daughter sees the quilt, the fact that her grandpa is

dead will be real, his departure represented by a tangible arts and crafts project. As soft as the batting between the quilted layers might be, this object is the bearer of bad news, and I know it will prick her heart as much as it will help to heal it.

Christmas morning, we're on Facetime watching our nametag-bedecked daughter happily open her Christmas package. She uncovers the top layer and joyfully oohs and aahs at the homemade stocking dressed in sister missionary garb right down to the missionary nametag with her own name on it, the peter-pan collar and jaunty plaid belt completing the stocking's ensemble. I feel sick knowing that the quilt sits at the bottom of the box. After a new sweater and some socks are opened, I know the quilt is next.

"Oh. What's this?" Her eyes take in pockets and buttons on some of the fabric squares and she pieces together what the quilt is made from. "Is it . . . ? Is this . . . ?" She can't finish the seam of her sentence, the threads of thought pulling her in two directions as her voice and my resolve not to cry both break. We create a duet of sniffles, and I say, "Yes. It is."

"I miss him too," I whisper.

"Mom, I can't believe you sewed this. I love it so much. It's beautiful." We're both still crying, sharing nearly identical smiles. But the slight gap between her front teeth comes from her grandpa.

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This essay by Sarah Hafen d'Evegnée won third place in the 2024 BYU Studies personal essay contest.

# Royal Skousen's Book of Mormon Critical Text Project

Roger Terry

Between 1984 and 1986, the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) published a critical text of the Book of Mormon. While this early publication was useful in certain ways, it was also woefully inadequate. It was, for instance, based on a computerized text of the 1830 printed edition of the Book of Mormon rather than on the remnants of the two handwritten manuscripts.<sup>1</sup> Recognizing its inadequacies, Brigham Young University linguistics professor Royal Skousen began in 1988 what would become a thirty-seven-year endeavor and his life's work: a fully professional critical text of the Book of Mormon.<sup>2</sup>

Skousen's critical text, when completed in 2025, will include the following: seventeen hefty reference books, the Yale University Press–published *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, and an electronic, searchable collation of the extant portions of the two handwritten manuscripts and twenty significant editions of the Book of Mormon published by both The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS, now Community of Christ).

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1. Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 5: Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian's Press, 2021), xxxiii–xxxviii, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/the-papers/revelations-and-translations/jsppr3/jsppr3-sub-om>.

2. For details on how to purchase any of Skousen's critical text volumes, see the BYU Studies website, Book of Mormon Critical Text Project Series, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/book-of-mormon-critical-text-project>.

Although associated with FARMS at the outset, Skousen’s project was independent. But in 2001, it became part of BYU when FARMS was folded into the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship. In 2015, the project moved to BYU Studies, and from that time until my retirement as editorial director in spring of 2024, I was the primary in-house proofreader for the volumes published by BYU Studies. Needless to say, I became very familiar with Skousen’s work, and through this familiarity, I came to two conclusions: first, that it would be very difficult to overstate the importance of this project, and second, that there is likely no one else on earth who could have produced this monumental work of scholarship.

### Why a Critical Text?

Before we can understand why a critical text of the Book of Mormon is so essential, we must understand what, exactly, a critical text is. A critical text is a product of textual criticism, which

is a branch of textual scholarship, philology, and literary criticism that is concerned with the identification of textual variants, or different versions, of either manuscripts (mss) or of printed books. . . .

The objective of the textual critic’s work is to provide a better understanding of the creation and historical transmission of the text and its variants. This understanding may lead to the production of a **critical edition** containing a scholarly curated text. If a scholar has several versions of a manuscript but no known original, then established methods of textual criticism can be used to seek to reconstruct the original text as closely as possible.<sup>3</sup>

This is a fairly accurate description of the work Skousen has been involved in for the past thirty-seven years.

Skousen’s own definition of “critical text” lines up well with the foregoing description. In a 1990 *BYU Studies* article announcing his own project, he wrote,

A critical edition is composed of two main parts, the critical text itself and an apparatus (consisting of notes at the bottom of the page, below the critical text). Usually the critical text attempts to represent the original form of the text, while the apparatus shows the textual variants and their sources. The editors of the critical edition decide which textual

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3. “Textual Criticism,” Wikipedia, accessed January 16, 2024, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Textual\\_criticism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Textual_criticism), bold in original.

variant best represents the original and put that in the critical text. The apparatus shows all the (significant) variants of the text and the sources for those variants (manuscripts, published texts, and conjectures). The apparatus thus allows the reader to evaluate the decisions of the editors.<sup>4</sup>

Skousen then identified several reasons for creating a critical edition of the Book of Mormon. First, the validity of any analyses of the Book of Mormon “may well depend on the text the analyses are based on.”<sup>5</sup> Second, “a critical edition of the Book of Mormon is to facilitate studies of linguistic influences.” For instance, “numerous studies have been made on the question of Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon. Yet it turns out that the original text actually contained a number of potential Hebraisms that have been removed by later editing.”<sup>6</sup> A third reason a critical edition is needed is that “there are still textual errors that have thus far escaped correction,” such as errors introduced when copying the printer’s manuscript from the original manuscript. There has also been considerable editing of the text over the years, and “sometimes this editing has introduced errors into the text.”<sup>7</sup>

To produce a critical text, it was necessary to gain access to the primary textual sources. Unfortunately, most of the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon no longer exists. In 1841, “Joseph [Smith] placed this manuscript in the cornerstone of the Nauvoo House . . . ; when it was retrieved in 1882, most of the manuscript had been destroyed by water and mold. Today, only about 28% remains, most of which is held by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”<sup>8</sup> Skousen “received on loan from the LDS Church Historical Department a set of black-and-white ultraviolet photographs of the original manuscript.”<sup>9</sup> Several other fragments of the original manuscript also existed, as well as a few forgeries created by Mark Hofmann. Skousen gained access to these fragments,

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4. Royal Skousen, “Towards a Critical Edition of the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 30, no. 1 (1990): 41.

5. Skousen, “Towards a Critical Edition,” 42.

6. Skousen, “Towards a Critical Edition,” 42.

7. Skousen, “Towards a Critical Edition,” 44–45.

8. Daniel C. Peterson and Royal Skousen, “A Critical Text: An Interview with Royal Skousen,” interview conducted via email September 10, 2019, published January 11, 2020, The Interpreter Foundation, <https://interpreterfoundation.org/a-critical-text/>.

9. Royal Skousen with Stanford Carmack, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon*, part 1, *Grammatical Variation*, The Critical Text of the Book of Mormon 3 (The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and Brigham Young University Studies, 2016), 3.

identified the forgeries and, in 1988, began making a transcript of the surviving portions of the original manuscript.

Fortunately, a second handwritten manuscript was created, mostly by Oliver Cowdery, which is known as the printer's manuscript. This is the copy that was taken to E. B. Grandin's print shop in Palmyra and used by compositor John Gilbert to set the type for most of the 1830 printed edition. Of this manuscript, all but three lines at the bottom of the first leaf have survived. The printer's manuscript was in the possession of the RLDS Church when Skousen began his project. The RLDS Church made available to him clear photographs of the entire printer's manuscript. By 1992, however, Skousen realized he needed color photographs of the manuscript, so he arranged for his brother Nevin (a professional photographer) to photograph the manuscript at the RLDS library in Independence, Missouri.

From the photographs he received, Skousen and paid research assistants were able to make initial transcripts of both manuscripts and "then check them against the actual manuscripts, including newly discovered fragments of O [the original manuscript] held by the Wilford Wood family that accounted for 2% of the original text."<sup>10</sup> Creating the transcripts consumed the first thirteen years of the critical text project, but these transcripts made possible the "apparatus" that makes up the bulk of the published critical text.

## The Published Volumes

In May 2001, the first two volumes of the critical text were published. Volume 1 was *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text*. Volume 2 was *The Printer's Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Entire Text in Two Parts*. Skousen explained, "A typographical facsimile presents an exact reproduction of the text in typescript. The text is transcribed line for line and without any corrections or expansions. Original spellings and miswritings are retained. All scribal changes in the manuscripts—whether crossouts, erasures, overwriting, or insertions—are reproduced. A continuously running text for the extant portions of the original manuscript is provided, with conjectured text placed sublinearly. . . . With the publication of these two volumes, all the legitimate manuscript sources for the Book of Mormon text were now accessible."<sup>11</sup>

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10. Peterson and Skousen, "Critical Text."

11. Skousen, *Grammatical Variation*, 1:6.

Initially, Skousen intended to publish volume 3, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon*, next, but he “quickly realized that in order to determine the history of the text, . . . [he] first needed to figure out just what that original text was.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, he first undertook a thorough, verse-by-verse analysis of the two handwritten manuscripts and twenty significant published editions of the Book of Mormon. To complete this analysis, he created an electronic, searchable collation that compared the text across all these manuscripts and published editions. Volume 4, then, includes six books, or “parts,” that examine every significant non-grammatical variation in the text over time, as well as several conjectural emendations.<sup>13</sup> *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon* (ATV) was published between 2004 and 2009.

“My goal,” wrote Skousen, “has always been to determine the original text of the Book of Mormon—to the extent that it can be determined by scholarly means. Of course, this goal is never fully achievable since one cannot be sure that the proposed original text is the actual original text, especially since we are missing 72 percent of O [the original manuscript]. So we end up with what I have termed the earliest text.”<sup>14</sup> *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* was published by Yale University Press in 2009 and does not represent either the original manuscript, the printer’s manuscript, or any of the printed editions. Instead, it is the text Skousen believes Joseph Smith dictated to the scribes, based on his analysis of the various sources. Consequently, *The Earliest Text* is the version of the Book of Mormon that serious scholars refer to when doing Book of Mormon research. It is a distillation of Skousen’s careful analysis of every word in every verse of Mormon’s book.<sup>15</sup>

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12. Skousen, *Grammatical Variation*, 1:7.

13. Explaining conjectural emendations, Skousen wrote, “Sometimes we have a passage where the reading just doesn’t make sense. When anyone proposes a new reading for a questionable passage, one that they believe works better, we examine all the evidence for accepting (and rejecting) that conjectural emendation. . . . Conjectural emendations have always been a part of the text: Oliver Cowdery and other scribes made conjectures when they copied the text, as did the 1830 typesetter. . . . Later editors have made numerous conjectural emendations, especially Joseph Smith for the 1837 and 1840 editions as well as James E. Talmage for the 1920 edition.” Peterson and Skousen, “Critical Text.”

14. Royal Skousen, “The Language of the Original Text of the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2018): 82.

15. See Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, 2nd ed. (Yale University Press, 2022). *The Earliest Text*, 2009 edition, is available on the Scripture Central website, “The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text,” <https://bookofmormoncentral.org/content/book-mormon-earliest-text>. The 2022 paperback second edition is available for purchase, <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300263374/the-book-of-mormon/>.

The Yale edition introduces two major innovations. First is its textual accuracy. Second is the presence of 606 readings that have never appeared in any printed edition. “Most of these new readings, 493 of them, come from manuscript sources. There are also 113 new conjectural emendations in the Yale edition. Some might be surprised by this number. Yet overall, the Yale edition has only 354 conjectured readings while the current LDS text has 654.”<sup>16</sup> Of these emendations, 187 appear in both editions.

The most important textual question regards how many of these new readings actually make a difference in the meaning of the text. Or, as Skousen puts it, how many of these new readings would make a difference when translating the text into a foreign language? The answer is 241.<sup>17</sup>

By the time Skousen finished the six parts of volume 4 (ATV), he had made occasional “adjustments to [his] analyses, and sometimes [he] revised [his] proposed reading of the original text.”<sup>18</sup> These adjustments were published in ninety-eight pages of addenda appended to part 6 of volume 4. Since this was not an ideal way to deal with these corrections, in 2017, he published a second edition of ATV, where these new readings (and a few that he added after the first edition was published) appear in their proper place in the six parts of volume 4.

Once ATV was complete, Skousen was ready to tackle volume 3, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon*. Initially, he had planned for volume 3 to contain six parts, but as the research and writing unfolded, he realized he had more material than would fit in six books, so he added two parts. The first two parts of volume 3 are titled *Grammatical Variation*. In creating ATV, Skousen did not include a complete list of all the grammatical changes that had occurred in the text over its long history. And there were many grammatical variations, enough to fill 1,281 pages with examples and analysis. After *Grammatical Variation* was published, Skousen told me that I was one of only five people in the whole world who had read it cover to cover, and I can attest that it is no page-turner. It is a reference volume intended for serious researchers. But it is a testament to the careful, detailed attention Skousen always gave to the text of the Book of Mormon.

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16. Skousen, *Grammatical Variation*, 1:8.

17. For a sample of these significant emendations, see Royal Skousen, “Some Textual Changes for a Scholarly Study of the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (2012): 99–117.

18. Skousen, “Language of the Original Text,” 82.

Much of the work done by *Grammatical Variation* was to show how editing changed the text of the Book of Mormon, and most of that editing removed nonstandard English from the book, including some archaic King James language. But one significant point of *Grammatical Variation* is that much of the nonstandard usage found in the Book of Mormon original text was not part of Joseph Smith's regional dialect. Rather, it was part of Early Modern English, a stage in the development of the English language that lasted from the late 1400s to the early 1700s. Much of the evidence for this claim comes from linguist Stanford Carmack, who is listed as a collaborator on the title pages of all parts of volume 3 except part 6. His work is particularly prominent in parts 3 and 4, *The Nature of the Original Language*.

Skousen's introductory description of parts 3 and 4 offers a succinct summary of this portion of his project:

Here in *The Nature of the Original Language*, again with the assistance of Carmack, I present the linguistic and historical evidence that persuades us that this archaic interpretation of the original Book of Mormon text applies not just to the nonstandard grammar but to all aspects of the Book of Mormon. Here in parts 3 and 4 we lay out the considerable evidence that virtually all the original language of the Book of Mormon—its words, phrases, expressions, grammatical forms, and syntactic patterns—are archaic English. In addition, I argue that the themes of the Book of Mormon are not the issues of Joseph Smith's time and place, but instead represent the religious and cultural issues that were prevalent during the Protestant Reformation (through the 1500s and 1600s).<sup>19</sup>

Parts 3 and 4 include such topics as archaic and late vocabulary, archaic grammar, archaic phrases and expressions, historical contexts, nonarchaic language, unique language, archaic syntax, Joseph Smith as author, King James vocabulary and phrases, and King James grammar. Part 3 begins, however, with a fifty-three-page essay by Skousen titled "The Original Text: Its Language and Issues." This essay discusses three common views regarding the translation of the Book of Mormon, views that Skousen accepted as reasonable early in his work on the critical text:

1. Joseph Smith received ideas and expressed them in his own language.

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19. Royal Skousen with Stanford Carmack, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon*, part 3, *The Nature of the Original Language*, *The Critical Text of the Book of Mormon 3* (The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and Brigham Young University Studies, 2018), 3.

2. The language in the text is Joseph Smith's upstate New York dialect, and the meaning of the words represents Joseph's understanding.
3. The Book of Mormon is "for our times," meaning that the book deals with religious and political issues prevalent in Joseph Smith's time and place.

A result of Skousen's work, however, is that he now believes all three of these views are wrong to one degree or another. The evidence, he concludes, indicates that the text was revealed word for word, and the actual language of the original text did not come from either Joseph Smith or his environment. And Skousen presents a lot of evidence.

Part 5 of volume 3 is *The King James Quotations in the Book of Mormon*. Anyone who is acquainted with the Book of Mormon knows that it contains several long excerpts from the King James Bible, particularly the Sermon on the Mount and several chapters from Isaiah. But there is much more King James language in the Book of Mormon than these long quotations. In his analysis of this language, Skousen set parameters to determine what he considered a quotation. He somewhat arbitrarily determined that a passage in the Book of Mormon that was identical to the standard King James text and was sixteen words or longer could be considered a quotation. Because many of the long passages that come from the King James Bible include multiple word changes, Skousen found only thirty-six word-strings that he considered quotations.

There are more strings that are shorter than sixteen words. These Skousen classified as paraphrastic quotations. He lists eighty-three examples of paraphrastic quotations, including all strings that are between seven and fifteen words long and "a few cases of textual blending where the longest string of identical words can be as low as one or two."<sup>20</sup>

Skousen's analysis of biblical language in the Book of Mormon yields some surprising findings. First, nearly every biblical quotation comes from the King James Bible, but not the original 1611 version. Most likely, the printing that is quoted in the Book of Mormon was published between 1770 and 1820. However, one particular quotation ("and upon all the ships of Tarshish," Isa. 2:16, 2 Ne. 12:16) comes from the Masoretic Text, which is both unexpected and puzzling.

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20. Royal Skousen with Stanford Carmack, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon*, part 5, *The King James Quotations in the Book of Mormon*, *The Critical Text of the Book of Mormon 3* (The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and Brigham Young University Studies, 2019), 10.

Second, “when the Book of Mormon biblical quotation differs from the King James reading, we often find that the original Book of Mormon form of the biblical quote is ungrammatical.”<sup>21</sup>

Third, there are three anachronistic problems involving biblical quotations: (1) Words appear in the Book of Mormon biblical quotations that the King James translators got wrong; there are also cultural translations that are historically incorrect. (2) The Book of Mormon includes text from the Textus Receptus (the text King James translators relied on) that does not appear in the earliest biblical manuscripts. (3) The Book of Mormon identifies text as being from Isaiah that biblical scholars associate with a “Second Isaiah,” who lived after the fall of Jerusalem, long after Lehi and his family departed. Skousen points out that there are ways to deal with the Second Isaiah problem, but “it isn’t necessary to do so.”<sup>22</sup>

These anachronisms, Skousen concludes, are problematic “only if we assume that the Book of Mormon translation literally represents what was on the plates.” But the evidence presented in parts 3 and 4 of volume 3 suggests that the Book of Mormon text is based on Early Modern English and that the themes in the book are more connected to the Protestant Reformation than to either Joseph Smith’s time or ancient America. “What this means is that the Book of Mormon is a creative and cultural translation of what was on the plates, not a literal one. Based on the linguistic evidence, the translation must have involved serious intervention from the English-language translator, who was not Joseph Smith.”<sup>23</sup> This translation was then transmitted to Joseph Smith word for word, which he read to the scribes, who sometimes imperfectly recorded Joseph’s words in the original manuscript.

Part 6 of volume 3, *Spelling in the Manuscripts and Editions*, is exactly that, an analysis of all the spelling variations that appear in either handwritten or printed versions of the Book of Mormon. This book, then, is all about the scribes. Skousen deals with three important questions regarding scribal misspellings: First, did John Gilbert, Grandin’s typesetter, adopt Oliver Cowdery’s misspellings, or did he correct them? Second, how good were the scribes? And third, can misspelled words tell us anything important about the Book of Mormon and its dictation? To answer the first, Gilbert did correct many of Cowdery’s misspellings.

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21. Skousen, *King James Quotations*, 5:12.

22. Skousen, *King James Quotations*, 5:6.

23. Skousen, *King James Quotations*, 5:6.

Regarding the scribes, Martin Harris was a relatively good speller but had a high rate of scribal slips; Oliver Cowdery's spelling improved over time, and his scribal slips were consistently low; and both Christian Whitmer and Hyrum Smith were terrible spellers. Lastly, scribal misspellings do reveal clues about the translator, including how Joseph Smith pronounced certain names, such as Amalickiah (stress on the first syllable, not the second, as we now say it) and Mosiah (identical to Messiah), and how Joseph sometimes spelled out names and other times did not. Misspellings by the scribes have also been useful in detecting forgeries.

Part 7 of volume 3 is titled *The Early Transmissions of the Text* and “describes the history of the Book of Mormon text, beginning with its initial dictation in 1828–29 by Joseph Smith to his scribes (chiefly Oliver Cowdery), which resulted in the original manuscript.”<sup>24</sup> Skousen then discusses the creation of the printer's manuscript and the publishing of the 1830 printed edition as well as the two editions (1837 and 1840) that were edited by Joseph Smith. Skousen stresses the importance of the original manuscript, even though only 27.8 percent of it is extant. It gives us “details of how Joseph Smith translated, including specific evidence in the manuscript that supports what eye-witnesses of the dictation claimed about his translating.”<sup>25</sup>

A major chapter “examines the statements by all the individuals who witnessed firsthand the translation process and compares those statements against the evidence found in the manuscripts.”<sup>26</sup> The next chapter discusses the three earliest transmissions of the text—from the original manuscript to the printer's manuscript and from each of these manuscripts to the 1830 edition—giving evidence that the copying of the text caused it to become longer and more difficult, which is not what textual critics expect. Skousen then delves into the changes themselves, examining all 1,005 substantive changes made in copying from the extant portion of the original manuscript to the printer's manuscript and all 741 substantive changes made by John Gilbert, the typesetter.

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24. Royal Skousen with Stanford Carmack, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon*, part 7, *The Early Transmissions of the Text*, *The Critical Text of the Book of Mormon 3* (The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and Brigham Young University Studies, 2024), 11.

25. Skousen, *Early Transmissions*, 11.

26. Skousen, *Early Transmissions*, 11.

The last three chapters analyze the first three printed editions. The in-press changes in the 1830 edition “show Gilbert’s unrelenting effort to make the printed . . . text read as accurately as possible.”<sup>27</sup> Skousen devotes 196 pages to the 3,168 changes that Joseph Smith made to the 1837 edition. Smith “worked hard to reduce the ungrammatical usage and the archaic language style of the original text of the Book of Mormon.”<sup>28</sup> In the final chapter, Skousen analyzes the changes that were made in the 1840 edition, where Joseph used “the original manuscript to restore some of the original readings that were lost when Oliver Cowdery had earlier copied the text”<sup>29</sup> from the original to the printer’s manuscript.

Part 8, *Textual Criticism of the Book of Mormon*, is scheduled to be published in 2025. Of it, Skousen writes,

In this last part, I will consider the principles of textual criticism and how they have been followed (or not followed) in the transmission of the Book of Mormon text. There will be a history of previous attempts at doing critical text work on the Book of Mormon along with, of course, a detailed history of this critical text project (which began in 1988). Finally, I will turn to various issues that have continually beset those attempting to do critical text work on the Book of Mormon. One particular issue has been the question of conjectured emendations and the degree to which they have been allowed in the text.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, volume 5 of the critical text project, *A Complete Electronic Collation of the Book of Mormon*, will be released after all eight parts of volume 3 have been published. It is a “computerized collation, with its WordCruncher searchable electronic comparison of the two manuscripts against 20 significant editions of the Book of Mormon (from 1830 through 1981), showing every difference in the text (not only word differences, but also every difference in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing, chapter system, and versification).”<sup>31</sup> This electronic collation will be indispensable for anyone doing research on the text of

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27. Skousen, *Early Transmissions*, 13.

28. Skousen, *Early Transmissions*, 14.

29. Skousen, *Early Transmissions*, 14.

30. Royal Skousen with Stanford Carmack, *The History of the Text of the Book of Mormon*, part 6, *Spelling in the Manuscripts and Editions*, *The Critical Text of the Book of Mormon 3* (The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies and Brigham Young University Studies, 2020), 4–5.

31. Skousen, *Spelling*, 5.

the Book of Mormon. Skousen will make this available free of charge. This is a very generous gesture and demonstrates his commitment to encouraging further research on the Book of Mormon text, to which he has dedicated nearly forty years of his life.

In the foreword to part 7, Skousen mentions four other digital or print publications that resulted from the critical text project:

*The Book of Mormon: The Original Text, with Grammatical Tagging*, 2023. This is a grammaticalized version of the original text available in WordCruncher.

*1830 Book of Mormon*, 2018. This book “allows WordCruncher access to an accurately reproduced electronic version of the original first edition of the Book of Mormon, along with its many in-press changes.”<sup>32</sup>

*Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, 2015. This volume of the Joseph Smith Papers includes a facsimile transcription of the printer’s manuscript and photographs of all pages in the printer’s manuscript.<sup>33</sup>

*Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*, 2021. This volume of the Joseph Smith Papers includes a facsimile transcription of the extant portion of the original manuscript along with photographs of the pages and page fragments.<sup>34</sup>

## A Few Observations

Having been involved in proofreading almost all of volume 3 of Skousen’s critical text project and having referred quite often to volume 4, I am fairly well acquainted with the scope and depth of his work, and it is an astounding accomplishment. Skousen’s research has answered many questions about the Book of Mormon text, but it has also raised many questions—some of them unexpected and even disconcerting. But one attribute of Royal Skousen that I have come to admire is his willingness to simply follow the evidence where it leads. And sometimes it leads to inconclusive outcomes. Skousen is very open about his spiritual testimony of the truthfulness of

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32. Skousen, *Early Transmissions*, 4.

33. See Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3, Part 1: Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi 1–Alma 35*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2015); Royal Skousen and Robin Scott Jensen, eds., *Revelations and Translations, Volume 3, Part 2: Printer’s Manuscript of the Book of Mormon, Alma 36–Moroni 10*, Joseph Smith Papers (Church Historian’s Press, 2015), <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/the-papers/revelations-and-translations/jsppr3/jsppr3-sub-pm>.

34. See Skousen and Jensen, *Revelations and Translations, Volume 5: Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon*.

the Book of Mormon, but he is also determined to tease out as many scholarly insights from the text itself as time and energy will permit.

Another of Skousen's enviable qualities is his willingness to give others credit for their discoveries and for pointing him in certain directions. One example is Renee Bangerter, Skousen's research assistant in the 1990s. Under his direction, she "investigated the historical change that various Book of Mormon words had undergone. Most of her research [which appeared in her master's thesis] dealt with words that had changed in meaning since the 1830 publication of the Book of Mormon."<sup>35</sup> In her work, she discovered many words, such as *break*, *mar*, and *sermon*, whose meanings in the Book of Mormon date back to the 1500s and 1600s. This finding led to Skousen's search for other early English words and syntax in the book. Eventually, Skousen became acquainted with Stanford Carmack, whose research has unearthed a long list of Early Modern English words and usages in the Book of Mormon.

The prevalence of Early Modern English in the Book of Mormon is both fascinating and perplexing. It raises questions about not just when the Book of Mormon was translated into English but also what exactly this book is. It is obviously not a product of the imagination of Joseph Smith. It contains not only a variety of early English words and terms that survived into Joseph Smith's time but also various early meanings that had dropped out of English usage before Joseph received the translation.

Despite the presence of so much Early Modern English in the Book of Mormon text, Skousen is adamant that the Book of Mormon is not an Early Modern English text. Even though Skousen and Carmack claim that the words and phrases in the book "mainly date from the 1530s through the 1730s" and the syntax in the book "best matches that of the second half of the 1500s,"<sup>36</sup> the Book of Mormon is not an Early Modern English book. All you have to do is look at a book from the late 1500s to understand this. For instance, here is an excerpt from John Calvin's commentary on the first epistle of St. John, translated into English and published in about 1580:

Againe, as he is the onely true Priest, who is sanctified of God to offer vnto hym a most sweete Sacrifice to reconcile vs vnto hymself, and

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35. Skousen, *Nature of the Original Language*, 3:9; Renee Bangerter, "Since Joseph Smith's Time: Lexical Semantic Shifts in the Book of Mormon" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1998), 16–18, 41–43, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/4500/>.

36. Skousen, "Language of the Original Text," 105.

as by his alone execution of this office, and offering of hymself, we haue by hym a sure peace and free entrance into the presentes of the Lorde, as by hym all enmitie is doen awaie, and there remaineth inaccountable peace and fauour for euermore, so we are most strongly to cast out of sight the sleights of Sathan and all the deuises of men, as moste vnclene filthinesse for euer, and not to set our selues, or admit others of what sorte soeuer, to stande for vs in this duetie, to spoyle vs of assured safetie, and the Lorde Iesus of this honour, that he alone and none but he is the Priest of his Church, and hath fully and alsufficiently performed whatsoever appertaineth to their peace for euermore.<sup>37</sup>

The most obvious difference here is the archaic spelling, but even if the spelling were modernized, this text would not be as readable as the Book of Mormon, which is not known for its flowing prose. This excerpt includes the word *inaccountable*, which is unfamiliar to modern readers and not found even in the Oxford English Dictionary. It is possible that this word is a transcription error, but Early Modern English used many words that are unfamiliar to modern readers, such as Shakespeare's use of "even-pleach'd"<sup>38</sup> (evenly intertwined) or "unanel'd"<sup>39</sup> (not having received extreme unction) or "muddy-mettled"<sup>40</sup> (dull-spirited). Skousen has observed of the Book of Mormon that "the vocabulary of the text has been filtered so that no truly obsolete words from Early Modern English get through (except in the long quotations from the King James Bible, with its archaic examples like *besom*, *carbuncle*, *tabret*, and *crisping pin*). Nonetheless, the words that occur in the Book of Mormon proper are recognizable as current words in English, but they often take on archaic meanings that neither Joseph Smith nor his scribes understood."<sup>41</sup> The obvious next question here is, who did this filtering? Skousen doesn't hazard a guess and suggests we may never know in this life exactly who actually translated the text or filtered it for modern readers.

Skousen and Carmack's claim that the Book of Mormon's vocabulary, usage, and syntax derive largely from Early Modern English also

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37. *The comentaries of M. Iohn Caluin vpon the first Epistle of Sainct Ihon, and vpon the Epistle of Iude wherein accordyng to the truthe of the woordes of the holie Ghost, he most excellently openeth and cleareth the poinct of true iustification with God, and sanctification by the Spirit of Christ, by the effects that he bryngeth forthe in the regeneration*, trans. W. H. (London: Ihon Kyngstone [and T. East], for Iohn Harrison the yonger, ca. 1580), [vi], Early English Books Online 2, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo2/A17649.0001.001/7:2>.

38. William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, act 5, scene 2, line 42.

39. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 1, scene 5, line 77.

40. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 2, scene 2, line 567.

41. Skousen, "Language of the Original Text," 106.

raises questions that a peer reviewer mentioned to BYU Studies in his blind review of an article by Carmack: “This approach leaves a host of questions unasked, such as why God has a particular investment in early modern English. As an early modernist, I am anything but opposed to this proposition, but that language has no obvious connection either to Book of Mormon peoples or to the 19th century American frontier.” Also, referring to the Carmack article’s tendency to simply list a variety of examples where Book of Mormon vocabulary appears in Early Modern English texts, the reviewer commented, “Seeing William Caxton (1473) appear alongside Richard Baxter (1673) as evidence of the same language strikes me as odd. English underwent massive transformation during those two centuries: reading a Caxton incunabulum and a Baxter treatise are two very different experiences, both materially and linguistically. Which English are we really talking about?”<sup>42</sup>

These are questions for future researchers to investigate, and certainly more will arise as our collective understanding of the book increases. If Skousen’s work has proved anything, it is that the Book of Mormon is an incredibly complex document. I have likened it before to a million-piece jigsaw puzzle,<sup>43</sup> and we have barely begun to put the border together. But, to mix metaphors, Skousen has taken us miles down the road toward a more complete understanding. The questions he has answered have been invaluable, but the questions his work has raised have opened doors for research in a variety of directions. Skousen’s critical text of the Book of Mormon is a work that will be relevant for decades to come. It is unquestionably the crowning achievement of a dedicated, careful, and gifted scholar.

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Roger Terry was editorial director at BYU Studies for eighteen years. Before that, he was a senior editor at the *Ensign* and *Liahona* and an instructor at BYU’s Marriott School of Management.

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42. Peer review of article submitted to BYU Studies, in author’s possession and used with the reviewer’s permission.

43. Roger Terry, “The Book of Mormon Translation Puzzle,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 23, no. 1 (2014): 177, <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol23/iss1/10>.

*Focusing the Lens of Exploration:  
Elizabeth Dennistoun Wood Kane, a Photographic Journey  
Through the Life of a 19th Century Polymath*  
By the Kane Historic Preservation Society and  
Brigham Young University

PRC Book Printing, 2024

*Reviewed by Jeffrey Paul Thompson*

*Focusing the Lens of Exploration: Elizabeth Dennistoun Wood Kane, a Photographic Journey* is a fitting tribute to early female photographer Elizabeth Dennistoun Wood Kane. The 160-page book is primarily a photography book with text portions comprising only about ten percent of the volume. The book's purpose is to provide a retrospective of Elizabeth's photographs that she took from the mid-1850s to the early 1900s in and around Kane, Pennsylvania. It also includes portraits of her and her family members and reproductions of some pages from her personal writings to provide context.

The book is a collaboration between the Kane Historic Preservation Society and Brigham Young University's Special Collections in the Harold B. Lee Library. Both institutions have Elizabeth's photographs in their collections and came together to showcase these holdings. Both institutions are listed as coauthors, but the actual text portions were written by several individuals: a foreword and an afterword written by two great-great-grandsons, Andrew O'Neill Kane and William G. Kane, respectively; an introduction by Dennis Driscoll and a biography of Elizabeth by Wendy Oakes, both of the Kane Historic Preservation Society; and a biography of her husband, Thomas Kane, by Ryan Lee, archivist in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections at Brigham Young University. As family members and custodians of the photographs, these people are the ones most familiar with Elizabeth's work, and their short articles provide good biographical and contextual information for the images featured in the book. The research appears grounded, but because footnotes were not used extensively, those seeking the original documents will have to do a little sleuthing to find those sources.

According to the biography, Elizabeth was born in England in 1836 and then immigrated with her family to New York in 1844. She married

her second cousin, Thomas, at age sixteen and moved to Philadelphia. Despite being a city girl, she would eventually end up with her husband in rural western Pennsylvania and be instrumental in the settlement of a town that would bear their name.

Elizabeth's husband was very supportive of her various endeavors, including her attending medical school. By the mid-1850s, she had developed an interest in photography and started taking pictures. Photography was still nascent, only having been introduced a few years earlier in 1839. In its early years, photography was (1) predominantly a professional activity, (2) usually confined to a studio, (3) primarily focused on formal portraiture as subjects, and (4) for the most part, the domain of men. Elizabeth's experience as a photographer is remarkable in that she completely bucked these trends. She was not a professional photographer; she did not have a professional studio; and she was not a man. She was an amateur with an intense interest in the landscapes and natural scenery around her. Although her photographs featured humans, they were not the typical sober portraits of the time; instead, they were usually taken outside and with more candid poses. The only thing that she did have in common with other photographers of the time was that she did the chemical developing and printing of her own pictures.

*Focusing the Lens of Exploration* will be of most interest to citizens in and around Kane, Pennsylvania as these photographs document the early years of that area. Many amateur photographers only took pictures of their families and so often there was not much interest beyond a specific clan. Elizabeth's photography is notable because she also took pictures of the various buildings around town (the hospital, church, and hotel) and the natural beauty in the area (the river, the forest, the hills). She documented places that no one else did. That said, the book highlights an otherwise unknown female photographer and will be useful for other scholars studying such women in the nineteenth century. It is a valuable addition to a small corpus of such work.

I didn't understand why Brigham Young University was involved in a book about a woman from Kane, Pennsylvania, who wasn't a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, until I read the biography of Thomas Kane at the end of the book. Although not a Latter-day Saint himself, Thomas was a friend and ally of the Church during the nineteenth century and continually advocated on its behalf. During the winter of 1872-73, Thomas and Elizabeth visited Utah, traveled extensively, and stayed with polygamous families throughout the territory. Elizabeth subsequently published a book about her visit titled

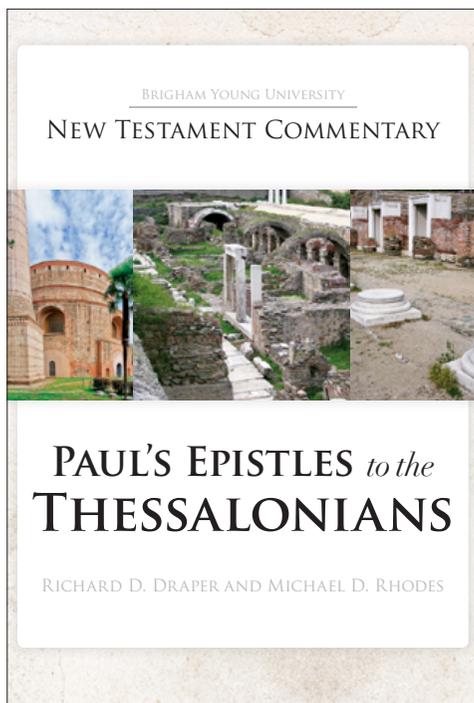
*Twelve Mormon Homes Visited in Succession on a Journey from Utah to Arizona in 1874*. The book was sympathetic to the Church and helped provide a better understanding of polygamy and the Saints in Utah. It is because of her book that BYU has had an interest in collecting her papers and photography.

The hardcover book is handsomely printed on sturdy 8½ × 11" semi-gloss paper with a landscape orientation. These aspects are all very fitting for a book of photography since it allows for larger reproductions and a generous layout, with many of the photos given full-page treatments.

*Focusing the Lens of Exploration* is a nice volume celebrating the life and photography of a nineteenth-century female photographer. It will be of most interest to those focused on Pennsylvania and women's history but certainly has some beautiful images that will be appreciated by the general reader as well.

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Jeffrey Paul Thompson has a JD from Brigham Young University and a master's of Library and Information Science from UCLA. He worked as a photo archivist at Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation in Los Angeles for over a decade and was the photo editor and coauthor of the official corporate history *Twentieth Century Fox: A Century of Entertainment* (Lyons Press, 2017). He just published his second book *Miracle on 34th Street: The Making of a Christmas Classic* (Lyons Press, 2024). He has also published articles in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem* (FARMS, 2004) and *Business and Religion: The Intersection of Faith and Finance* (Deseret Book and Religious Studies Center, 2018). He is currently an archivist/librarian at the Church History Library of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City.



*Paul's Epistles to the  
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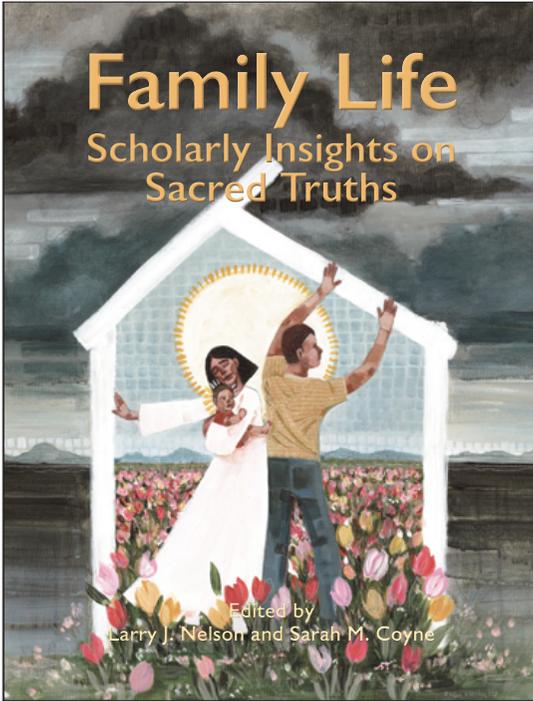
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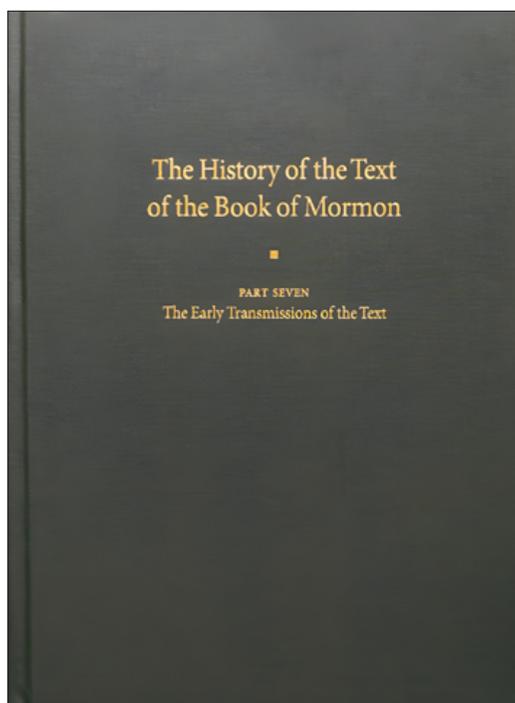
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*The History of the Text  
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Transmissions of the  
Text*

by Royal Skousen



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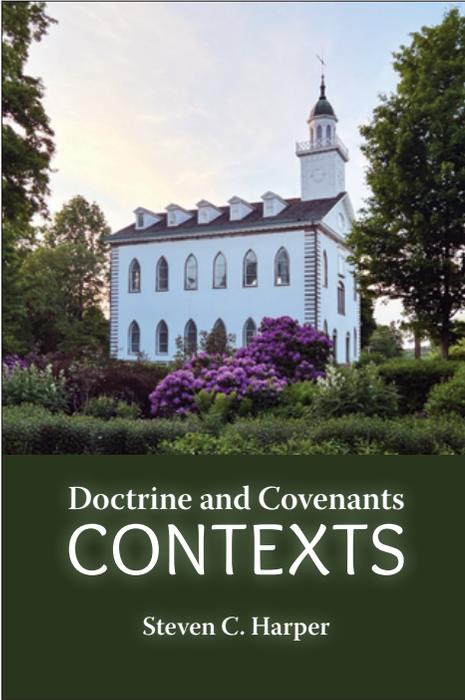
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Royal Skousen’s Book of Mormon Critical Text Project



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