

Learning to Read with the Book of Mormon

Jared Hickman

Good morning, brothers and sisters. It's my pleasure today to speak about something that absolutely distinguishes Mormonism from other religious traditions—namely, the book from which it takes its name. Say it with me now: the Book of Mormon. To put the cart ahead of the horse, let me simply state the main point I hope to get across today: among the many important functions often ascribed to the Book of Mormon—whether validating Joseph Smith's prophethood or providing “another testament of Jesus Christ”—one of its most important functions may be to invite us to rethink entirely our practices of reading scripture and, more broadly, our sense of how revelation works. In what follows, I hope to begin to substantiate this claim.

I should begin by disclosing that I may bring a somewhat unique perspective to the Book of Mormon. I am an English professor who studies nineteenth-century American literature and religion, and I regularly teach the Book of Mormon in a course called American Bibles that examines nineteenth-century texts that were biblical in their inspirations, aspirations, and proportions. One of the things we talk about in that course is how the Book of Mormon interacted with the intensely Bible-focused culture of early nineteenth-century American Protestants, who, in the era of the Book of Mormon's publication, went “all-in” on the Bible as perhaps no group before ever had. They took Martin Luther's Reformation doctrine of *sola scriptura*—Latin for “by Scripture

alone”—to a whole new level. Many American Protestants, especially those swept up in the evangelical revivals that Joseph Smith describes in his personal history, came to believe that the Bible was the literal word of God—that “every direction contained in its pages was applicable to all men at all times”—and that the Bible was sufficiently legible that any person, regardless of his or her learning, was capable of discerning those directions and living his or her life accordingly in the confidence that he or she was “good with God,” so to speak. Many American Protestant traditions today maintain these positions or variations thereof, as some of you in this congregation may well know, whether through missionary encounters or as former or current devotees of those traditions.

Now I want to suggest that *one* of the reasons that American Protestants felt empowered to read the Bible as a text whose meanings were self-evident and whose words were absolutely binding is the way the biblical narrative typically works. Literary critics see in the most ancient portions of the Bible an especially powerful formal innovation—namely, a third-person omniscient narrative voice. Now please don’t tell the English professor that you’ve forgotten these terms from your English classes! You remember, right? Here’s a quick refresher on the off-chance you have forgotten. In a narrative written from a third-person point of view, the characters in the story are viewed entirely from without—referred to by the pronouns *he*, *she*, *they*. If the narrative point of view is, further, an omniscient one, then the narrator of the story has total access to the thoughts and feelings of all of the characters and, really, everything else about the narrative world. Such a narrative voice often sounds matter-of-fact and seems authoritative. For the reader, it can be easy to trust such a knowing voice that seems to float impersonally above the events—however dramatic—that are related. Take the first few verses of Genesis 1 as an example:

“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light; and there was light.”

These words—about nothing less than the creation of the world—come at us from nowhere. It is not stated by whom or

whence or why this information is relayed. And these words may be compelling in part precisely *because* they seem to come at us from nowhere, from something like the very formless void mentioned in these verses. One might even see an analogy between the way God is depicted as creating the world—by simply stating what he wishes to be—and the way the narration works here—bringing a coherent narrative world into being through the abrupt assertion of a no-nonsense impersonal point of view. The point is: Even though the subject matter is about as grandiose as one can imagine, the manner in which the events are narrated is so forceful and forthright as, perhaps, to foreclose our asking any questions about who, when, where, and why.

Now compare this to the first few verses of the Book of Mormon:

I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father; and having seen many afflictions in the course of my days, nevertheless, having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days; yea, having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God, therefore I make a record of my proceedings in my days.

What's different about the narrative voice here? In technical terms, this is a narrative written from a *first-person* rather than third-person point of view—we are confronted with Nephi's "I" right from the get-go; the pronouns "I" and "my" appear eight times in this single verse. The reader is placed inside Nephi's perspective rather than privileged to stand outside it with an omniscient narrator. Whereas in the Genesis passage any trace of the author or narrator is rigorously effaced, here we are bombarded with particulars about the individual—Nephi—who has written and/or narrated what we are reading. We know precisely where this story is coming from.

What do we do with this striking difference? What is different or should be different about reading a scripture written in a magisterial third-person perspective that strikes such an authoritative posture as to presuppose readerly confidence, consequently causing some to hear it as the literal word of God, as opposed to reading a scripture written from an unabashed first-person perspective that

both openly admits and also not-so-openly reveals its human limitations? At the time the Book of Mormon “came forth” in 1830, American Protestants were struggling with what Harvard historian David Holland—who also happens to be Elder Jeffrey R. Holland’s son—calls the problem of “revelatory particularity.” What does he mean by this term—revelatory particularity? Well, in the eighteenth century, as textual criticism of the Bible and historical understanding of the ancient near East became more advanced, some people began to realize what the Book of Mormon itself clearly sets out—that the Bible was composed and translated over long periods of time by many hands and that it was substantially transformed as a result. This view posed a real challenge to any naïve notion of the Bible as seamless word of God—it became clearer and clearer that particular people at particular times and places for particular reasons had written down ancient stories in the particular manner that they did. The question was: What happens to the status of divine revelation when it is itself revealed to issue from historically and culturally particular circumstances that inevitably produced certain blind spots?

For some, this realization became the basis for rejecting the Bible as the source of theological authority: if the Bible, the argument went, had the fingerprints of particular individuals and cultural groups all over it, then it seemed problematic to make it the first and last word about a god who ostensibly created and loved all people. Some of these people touted what they called *natural* rather than *revealed* religion as the basis of a sound faith—the better source of information about God’s character was “the book of nature” rather than one of many books of scripture; it was in the universal workings of natural law rather than the particular commandments enshrined by one cultural group that one could get the best idea about who God was and what he expected of his creatures. By Joseph Smith’s time, as I suggested before, many American Protestants tended to evade this problem of revelatory particularity by suggesting that the words of the Bible were the literal word of God, applicable in all times and places and accessible in its universal meaning to any right-minded person. These folks papered over the cracks the textual critics of the Bible

had noticed, in part by hewing to the slick surface created by that remarkable third-person narrative voice of the Bible that I described a moment ago. They happily succumbed to the power of that narrative voice.

So the Book of Mormon comes onto this scene of struggle with the problem of revelatory particularity, and what does it do? It not only confronts the problem of revelatory particularity; it fairly rubs the reader's nose in it. It gives us a series of first-person prophet-narrators—Nephi, Jacob, Enos, Jarom, Omni, etc.—who, on the one hand, self-consciously apologize for their “faults”—that is, admit their human fallibility—and, on the other, maintain their divine inspiration. How are we to approach such a scripture? And how does this scripture, which we regard as uniquely “written for our day,” instruct us as “latter-day saints” to interact with scripture in general?

The first thing to say is that the Book of Mormon discourages us from reading it—and any other text—as the literal word of God in the way that some American Protestants came to read—and still read—the Bible. For instance, the book of 1 Nephi, it is impressed upon us as readers, is not written by God but very much by Nephi, who reminds us at every turn that the words we are reading are *his* words, as inscribed by *his* own hand on plates *he himself* made. By foregrounding rather than downplaying the extent to which particular human beings mediate the transmission of the divine word, by going so far as to emphasize that the text contains “the mistakes of men,” as Mormon puts it, the Book of Mormon *asks us* to read it—and other scriptures—with what I might call *critical discernment*. That is to say, the Book of Mormon itself suggests that we cannot take it or any other text, scriptural or otherwise, purely at face value as “God’s own truth,” so to speak. The Book of Mormon underscores for us that what we are reading when we read scripture is the word of God “given unto [his] servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language,” to borrow the terms of D&C 1:24.

So what does this mean for how we think about scripture? Does such a view necessarily lessen the authority of scripture? Is it inherently irreligious to read scripture as *partial*—in both the

senses of that word as incomplete and biased? No, I hasten to say! *A literalist, deferential reading of scripture is not the only way to read scripture devotionally.* The most profound meanings, by definition, may not lie right at the surface in what the words themselves explicitly state. If scripture—as the Book of Mormon suggests—cannot be treated as a well of truth undefiled—as the literal word of God, unmediated by particular, fallible human beings—that does not mean it does not have saving truths to teach us. It simply means that our way of accessing those truths may not always be as straightforward or simple as we might want them to be. It means that rather than treat scripture as a repository of timeless truths just waiting there right on the page to be picked up, we might instead need to treat scripture as a wrestling partner with whom—and against whom—we grapple and so develop our spiritual strength. “Searching the scriptures” may not simply mean devising an elaborate system of cross-referencing that happily harmonizes the standard works as though they were but a single, self-reinforcing text, as I tended to think on my mission, but rather engaging the revelations to particular human beings the scriptures contain with our own and others’ revelations as particular human beings. The scriptures may not be meant to supply us with the easy certainties we crave as so-called “natural” men and women as much as to push us toward hard spiritual self-discovery.

Let me conclude with an example of how such a reading practice might proceed, one I think is apropos in light of the recent statement on “Race and the Priesthood” issued on the Church’s website, which I’d strongly encourage all of you to read if you haven’t already. I’ve already shown how Nephi never allows us as readers to forget for a moment that he is the one writing the words we are reading in 1 and 2 Nephi. What are the implications of this narrative fact for how Nephi and his descendants describe Laman and Lemuel and their descendants? I would draw your attention in particular to 2 Nephi chapter 5, which contains the following verses. First, verses 21 and 24:

And he [the Lord] caused the cursing to come upon them [Laman and Lemuel and their associates and progeny], yea, even a sore

cursing, because of their iniquity. For behold, they had hardened their hearts against him, that they had become like unto a flint; wherefore, as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightful, that they might not be enticing unto my people, the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them . . . And they did become an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety, and did seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey.

Now verses 11, 17, and 27:

And the Lord was with us; and we did prosper exceedingly; for we did sow seed, and we did reap again in abundance. And we began to raise flocks, and herds, and animals of every kind . . . And it came to pass that I, Nephi, did cause my people to be industrious and to labor with their hands . . . And it came to pass that we lived after the manner of happiness.

How are we to reconcile Nephi's quite cold-blooded relation of the curse of his brothers with his fulsome account of the blessing of what he pointedly calls "*my* people"? How are we to take the fact that the first-person plural pronoun "we" now emphatically excludes his brothers and nephews and nieces, etc.? Under a literalist, deferential reading, we have no other choice but to accept Nephi's account of things. As morally retrograde or politically suspect as it may seem to us for Nephi to espouse such blatant theological racism, we just have to say: I guess that's what the Lord in his wisdom saw fit to do, and maybe I don't understand it, but that's just how it is. What I, by contrast, want to submit for your consideration is that the Book of Mormon—by foregrounding the human mediation of scripture—invites us as readers to consider the possibility that Nephi's "faults" as a human being have in this case—quite literally—colored his account of events. After all, patently and quite pointedly, we don't have Laman and Lemuel's side of the story, now do we? The question I want to pose is: What if the spiritual "message," as it were, of these verses does not necessarily consist of the explicit pronouncement made by Nephi here—God cursed the Lamanites for their wickedness? Might it be possible, in light of

the Book of Mormon's particular narrative construction, that these verses instead or at least also provide an example of how even the seemingly best of us might be subject to the tendency of excluding others to the extent that we can't even see them as being like ourselves, that we banish them to the margins or cast them as villains in the stories we tell about ourselves?

That such a reading might be supported by the Book of Mormon, I conclude by drawing your attention to an interesting episode during Christ's visit to the Americas in 3 Nephi. In chapter 23, Christ asks another Nephi, a descendant of the original, to bring all their records for him to peruse. And he immediately notes a glaring absence: "Verily, I say unto you, I commanded my servant Samuel, the Lamanite, that he should testify unto this people, that at the day that the Father should glorify his name in me that there were many saints who should arise from the dead, and should appear unto many, and should minister unto them. And he said unto them: Was it not so? And his disciples answered him and said: Yea, Lord, Samuel did prophesy according to thy words, and they were all fulfilled. And Jesus said unto them: How be it that ye have not written this thing, that many saints did arise and appear unto many and did minister unto them?" (23:9–11).

How be it, indeed, that they did not write this thing? Is there laid bare here a reluctance on the part of the Nephite prophets to include in their narrative something they themselves recognize as true prophecy, because, perhaps, it came from a Lamanite who had excoriated the Nephites for their wickedness? What does it mean that the literal voice of God in the text singles out for distinction precisely the voice the Nephite narrative does *not*, at least not willingly, include—the prophetic voice of the Lamanite? It seems to me the Book of Mormon here makes a vital distinction between the voice of God and the voices of the Nephite narrators who claim inspiration from God. Implicit in this arrangement is the question of how capable the Nephite narrators are of faithfully transmitting the message of Lamanite exaltation that Jesus himself has just expounded in the preceding chapters. Is the "scripture," so to speak, in the Book of Mormon not entirely co-extensive with the *narrative* of the Book of Mormon? Does the Book of Mormon

at this point and others unravel its white Nephite narrative in order to reveal a god who has no patience for white supremacism in particular and simplistically takes things at face value in general? This—to me—deep and deeply relevant spiritual truth can be unlocked only if one is willing to accept the invitation the Book of Mormon itself extends: to read it and, by extension, all scripture in an earnestly interrogative spirit. Read boldly, I say; in my experience, the scriptures can take it. And they will take you to “an infinity of fulness.”

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.



Amy Jorgensen
An Apple A Day, Day 11 (2014)
Archival pigment prints, 5x5 inches

“Jorgensen herself repeated this concept in an interview, when she compared the images to the dank darkness of a prison cell. Thus, the collective imagery deconstructs ubiquitous depictions of apples as icons of health, happiness and optimism. The reference to a prison cell draws a likely comparison to sites like Guantanamo Bay and highlights the poor conditions and treatment of suspected terrorists.” —Esmé Thomas