"For All Things Must Fail": A Post-Structural Approach to the Book of Mormon

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Having been witnesses to the perpetual collapse of their buildings, their political systems, their churches—indeed of their entire civilization—the writers of the Book of Mormon might well have been peculiarly preoccupied with the collapse of structure, be it politically, institutionally, and even linguistically. In this paper, I argue that this preoccupation with structural collapse legitimizes a critical consideration of the way that language functions in the book, rendering the Book of Mormon particularly well-suited to a reading that employs the techniques of post-structural criticism. Let me be clear that when I suggest a post-structural approach to the Book of Mormon, I do not propose that the Book of Mormon is itself claiming to be a post-structural text; such a claim would of course be a hopeless anachronism, given the 1,600 years from Moroni to Derrida. Rather, what I suggest is that elements of contemporary post-structuralist thought may help to illuminate certain of the literary moves made in the Book of Mormon text. Specifically, I argue that the Book of Mormon's text participates in its own self-deconstruction, systematically undermining the

reader's confidence in the text while also engaging in what Derrida termed "freeplay" with words (i.e., their meaning shifts with context), all so as to ensure that faith is exercised in the referent, not the signifiers.

I must first risk summarizing the barest basics of structuralist and post-structuralist discourse. The body of thought that has come to be called "structuralism" originated in the early twentieth-century work of Ferdinand Saussure, who wrote that the relationship between the signifier and the referent is purely arbitrary—whether we call a tree "a tree," "un arbor," or "ein Baum," the word, or "signifier," does not itself somehow contain the essence of tree-ness. In Saussure's own words, "The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound image."[1] That is, it is only the concept of a tree, not the tree itself, that our minds encapsulate—there are no little trees growing in our brains when we hear the signifier "tree." In the 1960s, Jacques Derrida raised the stakes by stating not only that words have no intrinsic relation to the thing they represent, but also that words themselves have no fixed meaning, or "transcendental signifier," that can ground the rest of language: "The absence of the transcendental signifier extends the domain and the interplay of signification *ad infinitum*."[2] That is, because words can only be defined tautologically by other words with similarly non-fixed and slippery meanings, all words are inherently tautological and unreliable. Derrida's ideas help inform the discourse we generally (and provisionally) label as post-structuralism, since he posits that the structure of language ultimately collapses on itself. Every text, then, is inherently unstable, slippery, and in "freeplay," that is, open to re-signification through ever-shifting re-contextualization.

The early Christians understood language's slipperiness. Paul for example declared that "the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power" (1 Cor. 4:20), implying that words are mere representations, not purveyors, of the power they signify. No power is contained in words, just as no "tree-ness" is contained in the mere signifier "tree." One does not learn what salt tastes like from hearing the word "salt," but only from tasting salt. We can understand Paul's declaration, "For we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7) as a tautology: since we are unable to bypass the senses, we must

perforce exercise faith that there is an external reality with which our poor senses interact and then, lamely, communicate to our brains. Yet still we must rely on our senses and sensation, since they are all we have. We cannot escape the mediation of our senses. The Book of Mormon also describes faith in terms that depend on sensation. Alma, for example, describes the "seed of faith" as something that "will begin to *swell* within your breasts . . . you *feel* these swelling motions . . . it beginneth to *enlarge* my soul; yea, it beginneth to enlighten my understanding, yea, it beginneth to be *delicious* to me. . . . O then, is not this real?" (Alma 32:28, 35, emphasis added). Swelling, feeling, enlarging, deliciousness— Alma creates a constant appeal to the senses, for what else do we have but sensation to determine whether something is real? Paul calls the Holy Ghost "the unspeakable gift" for the simple reason that no mere sound-waves contain the referent. Consequently, our testimonies, such as they are, are not reliant on unreliable language for determining their veracity, but on feeling itself—just like everything else. If LDS testimony meetings often come off as clichéd and platitude-ridden, it's because the words we often use cannot hope to contain the experiences we wish to (and are unable to) communicate. Mormons often feel the inadequacy of words more keenly at the microphone than anywhere else.

Likewise, the near constant lament of the Book of Mormon's writers is that language is inherently inadequate and unreliable. Over and over, the Nephite writers assure us that their words cannot communicate even "a hundredth part" (3 Ne. 26:6; WoM 1:5; 3 Ne. 5:8; Jacob 3:13; Ether 15:33; Hel. 3:14) of their record. Repeatedly throughout the Book of Mormon, people hear a "voice and . . . understand not" (3 Nephi 11:4), are "baptized with fire, and . . . know it not" (3 Nephi 9:20) and "hear it not" (Moroni 2:3). Words cannot hope to communicate the referents they represent without a prior experience to reference. "O that I were an angel," exclaims Alma, "that I might go forth and speak with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth" (Alma 29:1) for his frustration is that shaking the earth is one thing his words can't do; when the angel shook the earth at the time of Alma's own conversion, the power derived from a source that accompanied his words but, was not part of them, for there is no intrinsic relationship be-

tween words and power. "Neither am I mighty in writing," cries Nephi, "for when a man speaketh by the power of the Holy Ghost the power of the Holy Ghost carrieth it unto the hearts of the children of men" (2 Nephi 33:1), implying that signifiers carved into plates do not in and of themselves intrinsically communicate the Spirit. Moroni himself likewise laments

> our weakness in writing; for Lord thou hast made us mighty in word by faith, but thou hast not made us mighty in writing; for thou hast made all this people that they could speak much, because of the Holy Ghost which thou hast given them; And thou hast made us that we could write but little, because of the awkwardness of our hands . . . Thou hast also made our words powerful and great, even that we cannot write them (Ether 12:23–25).

Moroni's lament about the inadequacy of writing, as compared to speech that is mediated between speaker and hearer by God's Spirit, recognizes implicitly that words as a collection of symbols on a page (or a metal plate) have only an arbitrary and incidental correspondence to the referent; words about God do not contain power to create a relationship with God, apart from the wordlessly direct influence of God's spirit that conveys meaning between speaker and hearer. Joseph Smith believed that the things God reveals to us "are revealed to us in the abstract . . . revealed to our spirits precisely as though we had no bodies at all,"[3] affirming that God's power is communicated wordlessly, outside verbal discourse. Moroni knew that merely writing about something powerful did not *make* the words themselves powerful by association.

But then, truth *shouldn't* be based on text; LDS missionaries regularly preach of the plethora of churches that have been established based on interpretations of the inherently unstable text of the Bible, such that even young Joseph Smith lost "all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible" (JS-H 1:12). Language fails because, as Mormon declares, "All things must fail" (Mor. 7:46), language included. Nephi celebrates and even embraces the failure of text, as when he writes, "we speak concerning the law that our children may know the *deadness* of the law; and they, by knowing the deadness of the law, may look forward unto that life which is in Christ, and know for what end the law was

given. And after the law is fulfilled in Christ, that they need not harden their hearts against him when the law ought to be done away" (2 Nephi 25:27, emphasis added). For the Nephite writers, words, laws, and language are already dead, and are not only expected to collapse, but are to be treated as though they already have. Nephi cares less about the law than he does about what the law points toward. Furthermore, it is not only the law that is dead; the words that express it are dead too. Abinadi for example accuses the priests of Noah of not having "the words of God . . . written in your hearts" (Mosiah 13:11); he acknowledges that they teach the Law of Moses and the Decalogue, but he also feels compelled to remind these priests that these words do not and cannot contain the salvation they signify. He also tells these priests that what they do to him "shall be as a type and a shadow of things to come" (Mosiah 13:10), for though his death is real, the written transmission of it points to another reality. The Book of Mormon is full of similar assertions that words can only point to, not contain or transmit, reality.

The Book of Mormon's attention to the limits of language brings to mind the way certain mid-twentieth-century writers played with a text's dependency on context for intelligibility. By placing quotations in new contexts, they radically re-contextualized the text in the process. One pertinent example is the Jorge Luis Borges short story "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," wherein the author reviews the work of a fictional Frenchman who rewrites Cervante's *Don Quixote* word-for-word, three centuries after the original. The reviewer prefers the Menard version to the Cervantes, saying "Menard's fragmentary *Quixote* is more subtle than Cervantes' . . . Cervantes' text and Menard's are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer."[4] Menard's *Quixote*, says the reviewer, shifts in meaning since it is now written from a modern, not a Renaissance, perspective. The exact same phrase in *Don Quixote*, "history, the mother of truth," is "a mere rhetorical praise" in Cervantes, but is an "astounding idea" in Menard, since Menard is informed by William James and other contemporary thinkers.[5]

In a similar mode of free-play, the Book of Mormon includes long passages from Isaiah, often word for word, but accompanied with the explicit instructions to "liken them unto yourselves" (1

Ne. 19:23), inviting the reader (as does Borges) to explore how meanings shift and read differently based upon time, place, reader, and context. Nephi and his followers read Isaiah differently than Lehi's contemporaries in Jerusalem could have: just as the identical text of *Quixote* reads differently when written by Menard instead of Cervantes, so also the very same words one prophet spoke shifted meanings entirely when hammered into brass by another, who understood Isaiah's words as prophecies of Christ. Those same words mean something else again when "likened" to modern readers, who look neither for the literal redemption of the tribes of Israel, nor the incarnation of Christ out of the stem of Jesse, but toward another kind of incarnation and redemption.

In 3 Nephi chapters 24–25, Christ himself quotes Malachi to the Nephites—that is, he quotes a prophet that he himself spoke to, thus calling into question the very category of authorship itself; as Roland Barthes writes,

> It is language which speaks, not the author . . . We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.[6]

No writers write in a vacuum, but are constantly interacting, copying, and conversing with all writers that come before and after them. The text has no single Author-God directing its meaning, any more than God himself does. When Christ quotes Malachi quoting him, the speaker is not Christ or Malachi alone, but language, that is, Barthe's "tissue of quotations" drawn from a variety of interrelating sources, sources that Christ and Malachi participate in, but do not originate. Indeed, the Book of Mormon is a collage of polyphonic voices all conversing with each other at once. Mormon's is the dominant voice, but the text also features other strong authorial voices, such as Nephi, Jacob, Benjamin, Zeniff, Alma, Helaman, Moroni, and even Christ himself, revealing a wide range of voices and personalities interacting with each other, speaking in the first, second, and third persons, likewise destabilizing the text by constantly keeping off-balance any con-

textual basis a reader might use to derive a single, authoritative meaning from the text. Since the text is no longer able to ground itself in a single meaning, all hope of settling any theological conviction based upon an appeal to text is out of the question, and the reader is left again to rely upon spirit, not signifiers.

The Book of Mormon itself is written in a collage of genres, such as sermons, prayers, coronation ceremonies (Mosiah 2–5), poetry (2 Nephi 5, Alma 29), epistolary, and Hebrew scripture. We might also term this collage what Derrida calls "bricolage, the necessity of borrowing one's concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined";[7] Mormon himself certainly borrows not just his concepts but also much of his text from a heritage which had been coherent, and then became quite literally ruined. Mormon is not a creative innovator or originator, no matter how strong his authorial and editorial voice may be, but according to Derrida, that is at it should be; Mormon is instead the "bricoleur," the one who rearranges pre-existing articles into new formations. This collage of voices and genres calls attention to how meaning changes depending on context, inviting the reader to consider the ever-shifting signification of meanings swarming around, pointing toward, while never touching, the referent.

The Derridean move of acknowledging that there is no fixed center elucidates another important feature of the Book of Mormon text. (To be clear, Derrida makes explicit that there is *always* a center, but whatever occupies the center constantly shifts.) He writes that "the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself,"[8] and that "the center is a function, not a being—a reality, but a function."[9] Since the center is a function instead of a being, any being or object can fulfill that function. Hence, though one may rightfully argue that Christ is always the center of the Book of Mormon (Mormon has placed him there), for Nephite civilization, the structure is constantly being reoccupied by riches, fine clothing, gold, silver, covetousness, murder, hunger for power, and "the vain things of the world" (Alma 39:14). If the center were immutable, then the prophets would not have to constantly risk their lives in preaching a recentering in Christ. Instead, the Nephite prophets fully understand that the structure's center will shift inexorably—Christ *can* be the center of one's society, or life, or even one's discourse, but though one may

argue that Christ *should* be, there is no guarantee that he *will* be. In fact, it is necessary that Christ should not be held at the center of the discursive universe of the Book of Mormon, because Christ's incarnation must be read by Lehi's family as yet to come, by the Nephites at Zarahemla as immediately present, and by Mormon's anticipated audience as having occurred. The center must move as successive linguistic and religious structures collapse and are reconstituted "according to our manner of speech" (Mormon 9:32) and "altered . . . according to the minds and circumstances of the people, in every generation" (Alma 11:4).

This constantly shifting center is suggested early in the book, with Lehi's declaration that "there must needs be an opposition in all things" (2 Nephi 2:11). He describes a productive tension between good and evil that enables agency. The rest of the book illustrates that such an oppositional structure is inherently unstable, and finds equilibrium only in righteousness centered in Christ's atonement. However, this equilibrium cannot become stasis—the great and last sacrifice must be made continually, because the possibility of righteousness implies the inevitability of sin. These tensions must remain lively and resist the kinds of reified categories that human beings are wont to create to give the illusion of stability and permanence: Nephite and Lamanite, rich and poor, hard-hearted and penitent, persecutor of Christians and missionary of Christ's gospel. In Derridean terms, these constructions are known as "false binaries," wherein two different sides are constructed in opposition to each other, with the implication that one side must be absolutely right, and therefore the other absolutely wrong.

The Book of Mormon is interested in deconstructing these binaries, thereby liberating us from the tyranny of a structure that has made itself more important than the reality it claims to represent. Various prophets constantly called the Nephites to repentance for this binary construction, from Jacob crying, "the Lamanites your brethren whom ye hate because of their filthiness . . . are more righteous than you" (Jacob 3:5) to Mormon lamenting, "notwithstanding this great abomination of the Lamanites, it doth not exceed that of our people" (Moroni 9:9). Furthermore, the fact that so many Nephites apostatized and defected to the Lamanites, while so many Lamanites converted en masse and

joined the Nephites, causes the entire false binary of Nephites/Lamanites to collapse, as thoroughly multi-ethnic squadrons battle each other throughout the war chapters in Alma. In fact, the Nephite/ Lamanite re-division in late 4 Nephi is along ideological, not ethnic lines. Thus, the easy apocalyptic binary established in 1 Nephi 12, wherein presumably-racial Lamanites are prophesied to wipe-out presumably-racial Nephites in genocidal war, is also surprisingly undermined. The final deconstruction of Nephite civilization is itself deconstructed. No matter how desperately we would like to impose a clean, easy binary on the Book of Mormon, the book itself won't allow it. The structures of the Book of Mormon perpetually self-deconstruct, as they must, in order for repentance and salvation to remain permanently possible.

Herein lies a key difference between much late modern and postmodern literature and the Book of Mormon. Since all structure must collapse and "all things must fail," much of this literature is written as though the structure has already collapsed, in much the same way that Mormon's editing is performed with a post-apocalyptic perspective (both the apocalypse of his own civilization, and the foreseen apocalypse of ours). Yet while this collapse is often occasion for despondency in much literature, in the Book of Mormon the collapse is salvific; every cause for despair in the former is a cause for rejoicing in the latter. For example, in the finale of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Aureliano finally reads the undecipherable book given by the gypsies at the novel's inception. As a final catastrophic storm destroys his town of Macondo, Aureliano realizes that the book he is reading describes the entire history of Macondo up to this final storm, ending with a description of Aureliano reading the book; that is, Aureliano is reading himself reading *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. It is an ending of great melancholy, for reality must collapse because the text that represents reality must likewise collapse.

The Book of Mormon also has a book unreadable until the end of the world; as the angel said to Nephi, "But the words which are sealed he shall not deliver, neither shall he deliver the book. For the book shall be sealed by the power of God, and the revelation which was sealed shall be kept in the book until the own due time of the Lord, that they may come forth; for behold, they re-

veal all things from the foundation of the world unto the end thereof" (2 Nephi 27:11). Nephi, as early as 1 Nephi 12, has already beheld the final destruction of his people, and both he and Mormon write as though their people are already dead—this apocalyptic melancholy is co-present throughout the entire Nephite narrative. Yet while Marquez despairs that all has been written down, for Nephi, this revelation is one of great promise and comfort. All has already been written, and what is written must collapse—yea, even this whole wicked world must collapse, and the mountains be made low, the valleys high, and all the elements melt with a fervent heat. But what is left then is not the words that represent, but the fullness of that truth which was (always partially and haltingly) represented. Along with Aureliano reading himself reading, we also read the Brother of Jared reading us when "all the inhabitants of the world" are revealed to him, but the effect is not one of final dissolution á la Marquez—quite the opposite, in fact.

For when Aureliano's words self-deconstruct, only emptiness is left. When the Book of Mormon is deconstructed, what is left is the mediation itself—specifically the Great Mediator, the "Word made flesh" (John 1:14). Christ is the word that mediates between God and man, just as words mediate between our sensual data and conceptualizations. The text collapses, but the great mediation remains, standing alone among the ruins of language as Moroni stands among the ruins of his people. The Book of Mormon's self-deconstruction results not in the destabilization but affirmation of meaning; the Nephite record does not mourn the inescapability of mediation, but celebrates and embraces the mediation.

Moroni writes, "whoso receiveth this record, and shall not condemn it because of the imperfections which are in it, the same shall know of greater things than these . . . were it possible, I would make all things known unto you" (Mormon 8:12). This text does not contain perfection; it falls short of the perfection it conceptualizes, as all words inevitably must. The Book of Mormon itself is un-interested in Biblical literalists—"if ye believe not in these words believe in Christ" (2 Nephi 33:10), cries Nephi, for what is most important to him is not the words themselves but the concepts that the words correspond to. The words, the signifiers, are

ultimately irrelevant, save that words alone are how we conceptualize much of reality. Moroni's promise in Moroni 10:3–5 is not that readers will know the truthfulness of the words on the page, but rather, that they will know what the words themselves point at—in this case, namely, "how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men" (Moroni 10:3). Hence, the record must remain imperfect, unstable, slippery, and self-deconstructive, to ensure that it continues to "point" toward the intended truth, and not be accused of possessing some essentialized truth that it cannot contain—to ensure that the text serves as a means to an end, and not an end unto itself. "For all things must fail," declares Mormon, this text not excluded, so that all that is left is precisely that which does *not* fail.

What's left, according to Mormon, is "charity—which never faileth" (Moroni 7:46), which is significant because charity, "the pure love of Christ," is characteristically relational in nature. Structuralism and post-structuralism alike are likewise concerned with not the words themselves, but the relationships *between* the words. It is through words' relationships with each other that context and meaning is derived—thus, it is in the empty absences between words that charity never faileth. Signifiers may be dependent upon their relationships with each other for their signification, and hence meaning is slippery; what is not slippery, however, is the fact that these relationships must exist in spite of words.

Once language collapses, it is only charitable relationships—between human beings reconciled to one another and to God by the mediating Word—that persist. In a sense, the Book of Mormon text is performative; for as this text repeatedly calls attention to the manner in which meaning ever shifts based on unstable context, it demonstrates that the relationships between the words themselves and between the words and us are the one sure constant in all these textual collapses. Since our relationships are all that are left us, it is paramount that our relationships be charitable. Moroni pleading with us to "not condemn [the text] because of the imperfections which are in it" is a plea to approach the text charitably—a hermeneutics that will hopefully transfer to our relationships with others and with our God, as well. If we ever do at last lay hold of the truth that the Book of Mormon points toward, namely the charity that allows us to become like and withstand the

presence of God (Moroni 7:48), it will be because this unique scriptural text has taught us to value charitable relationships above all the collapsing and self-deconstructing structures where we would instead place our faith.

Notes

1. Ferdinand Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 66.

2. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man,* edited by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 249.

3. Joseph Fielding Smith, ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 355.

4. Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," *Ficciones*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 37.

5. Borges, 38. Borges himself invokes William James in this story; he writes: "Menard, a contemporary of William James, does not define history as an inquiry into reality but as its origin. Historical truth, for him, is not what has happened; it is what we judge to have happened."

6. Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

7. Derrida, 255.

8. Derrida, 248.

9. Derrida, 271.