ON CARE: PERFORMATIVE THEOLOGY, MOSIAH, AND A GATHERED COMMUNITY

Jenny Webb

The question I am considering here is at its heart relational. What kind of relationship with scripture exists within performative theology? When we understand scripture as wisdom rather than history, what does this understanding do to that relationship? How is this relationship changed, shifted, or reforged in performative theology? Is there anything in performative theology that allows us to approach the work of scripture such that the work of messianic typology is foregrounded, and if so, how does this framing of the theological project revise and rewire our relationship with scripture on every level, from the theoretical to the pragmatic? In other words, what could we do, and how could we do it, in light of a serious commitment to a performative theology of scripture? And, last but certainly not intended to be least, is there anything particularly Mormon about this project thus conceived?[1]

1. My use of the term "Mormon" here is meant to reflect the broader cultural influence of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Restoration event from which it sprang. It is not meant to ignore the request from the Church that its official name be used but rather to acknowledge that the project I undertake here is provisional, unofficial, and work that—due to its focus on the Book of Mormon, which remains a book of scripture for multiple churches and congregations that trace their lineage back to Joseph Smith and the Restoration in one way or another—consciously operates within the broader space of "Mormonisms."

To gain a certain perspective on all these questions, I want to turn to one of the more convoluted sections of the Book of Mormon: the book of Mosiah. The book of Mosiah follows one of the most temporally jarring sections in all scripture: the Words of Mormon. Within the Words of Mormon, the authorial voice of Mormon$_2$ breaks in, rupturing the narrative expectations in place following Amaleki$_1$'s words at the end of Omni and collapsing the linear, temporal distance of the Lehite narrative. For the contemporary reader, Mormon$_2$ speaks as a voice that is simultaneously future—the future editor making his efforts at shaping scripture explicit—and past—the past prophetic voice speaking from a lineage and cultural context that, despite the connective tissue of covenant, in some ways feels utterly alien to our modern ears. Following the Words of Mormon, the book of Mosiah evidences the shock of Mormon$_2$'s interruption through literary means. The book of Mosiah exhibits a type of temporal rippling—a surging back and forth that continues to interrupt the expectation of linear history—that occurs as an ongoing witness to the aftereffects that result from Mormon$_2$'s unanticipated rupturing of the narrative. In the book of Mosiah, the narrative backtracks, returning from Mormon$_2$'s future to the King Benjamin referenced by Amaleki$_1$ back in Omni (Omni 1:23–25), moving through King Benjamin's discourse (Mosiah 1–6), through Mosiah$_2$'s coronation (Mosiah 6:3), and into Ammon's encounter with the subjugated King Limhi (Mosiah 7–8). The narrative is then interrupted and thrust back several generations into the past via the record of Zeniff (Mosiah 9–21:27), recounting the journey first alluded to by Amaleki$_1$ back in Omni (Omni 1:27–28) and then following the Zeniff-Noah$_3$-Limhi narrative (Mosiah 7–25) with its own internal excursions and explorations.

It is worth noting that another temporal ripple occurs within the Noah$_3$ portion of the Zeniff-Noah$_3$-Limhi narrative during Noah$_3$'s encounter with Abinadi. The trial of Abinadi begins as Noah$_3$'s priests question the prophet concerning the meaning of Isaiah 52:7–10; in

response, Abinadi in turn brings the text of the Law of Moses—initially Exodus 20:1–4, and then verses 4–17 of the same chapter though with several alterations—into the discussion. Abinadi then continues to return to the words of past prophets in his citation, discussion, and explicative likening of Isaiah 52–53 in Mosiah 14–15.[2] These references to external scriptural texts are not as temporally jarring as the switch from Amaleki$_1$ to Mormon$_2$ in the transition from Omni to the Words of Mormon, and I am not arguing that every quotation of a past prophet or scripture within the Book of Mormon narrative equates to a significant temporal disturbance. However, within the context of the temporally convoluted texture of the book of Mosiah, these quotations, and especially Abinadi's own explication and interweaving of the Isaianic texts in his own preaching in Mosiah 15–16, contribute to the overall sensation of the multiple temporal narrative disturbances taking place throughout the book of Mosiah.

When Zeniff's record finishes, the narrative returns to Limhi and Ammon, recounting their escape and return to Zarahemla and Mosiah$_2$ (Mosiah 21:28–22), who was last seen in Mosiah 7:2. The text appears to be heading toward a general sense of the narrative present and reconciliation as Limhi's people join with Mosiah$_2$'s people in Mosiah 22, but that narrative present is deferred again by another flashback to the Alma$_1$-Amulon narrative (Mosiah 23–24), which is a continuation of the Alma$_1$ narrative (Mosiah 17–18) that initially occurs within the Noah$_3$ portion (Mosiah 11–19) of the Zeniff-Noah$_3$-Limhi

2. For helpful discussions concerning "likening" as initially practiced by Nephi$_1$ as a specific process for reading and reworking Isaiah's words via the spirit of prophecy, see Joseph M. Spencer's excellent books *The Vision of All: Twenty-five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi's Record* (Salt Lake City: Kofford, 2016), 74–79; and *1st Nephi: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2020), 21–22. While Abinadi's approach to Isaiah is distinct from that of Nephi, it is important to consider the ways that Abinadi's own fluency within the Isaianic text may derive from the role Isaiah's words played in the initial Nephite culture due to Nephi's likening project.

narrative (Mosiah 7–25). Strikingly, Mosiah 23 contains an overt interruption by Mormon$_2$'s voice in verse 23,[3] such that this second flashback to the Alma$_1$-Amulon narrative is further temporally strained between narratively past events (Alma$_1$-Amulon's story) and future editorializing assessment (Mormon$_2$'s explanation and promise). Up until this point, Mormon$_2$'s explicit voice has appeared overtly twice within the book of Mosiah, each time providing a brief heading prior to the two flashbacks (the record of Zeniff [Mosiah 9] and the account of Alma$_1$'s people [Mosiah 23]) to alert the reader to the interruption. However, in Mosiah 23:23, Mormon$_2$'s editorial voice interrupts the narrative flow of the text through the use of the first person "I" in a manner that forces the reader to remember Mormon$_2$'s temporally future position as the redactive force and voice operating throughout the book of Mosiah. In other words, Mormon$_2$'s overt textual presence in Mosiah 23:23 contributes substantially to the aftershocks or temporal ripples that pervade the book of Mosiah following his initial narrative interruption in the Words of Mormon.[4] At last, however, the narrative settles somewhat with all participants gathered together

3. "For behold, I will show unto you that they were brought into bondage, and none could deliver them but the Lord their God, yea, even the God of Abraham and Isaac and of Jacob." All citations of the Book of Mormon text are taken from the *Maxwell Institute Study Edition*, edited by Grant Hardy (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2018).

4. Note that Mormon$_2$'s editorial presence can additionally be seen and felt in a number of indirect ways, ranging from the choices regarding which sources to utilize, which to include without redaction, and which to summarize, as well as the ways the compositional choices of redacted or summarized passages inherently reflect Mormon$_2$'s own editorial direction and overarching project. See, for example, Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 97–120; Grant Hardy, "Mormon as Editor," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, edited by John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo: FARMS, 1991), 15–28; and Thomas W. Mackay, "Mormon as Editor: A Study in Colophons, Headers, and Source Indicators," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 2 (1993): 90–109.

under Mosiah$_2$'s rule; the final few chapters of the book of Mosiah are relatively temporally and narratively stable, and the irruptive force of Mormon$_2$'s preceding interruption appears to have calmed.[5]

I think it is significant that the temporal and narrative rippling throughout the book of Mosiah is centered around the appearance, translation, and eventual sharing of textual records. The book of Mosiah is itself an explicitly redacted text—Mormon$_2$ has just memorably shown us his editorial hand in the Words of Mormon, and then we see that hand at work throughout the book of Mosiah. While we don't know how many of the cuts, transitions, and insertions are Mormon$_2$'s, we know that we are reading a text that has been worked, and it is clear that that text is comprised of several accounts from various perspectives and records.

Embedded in this narrative web, we find another mysterious text: a set of twenty-four gold plates, brought back to Limhi by a group of forty explorers who had been sent out to find the way back to Zarahemla. They failed to find Zarahemla, but they did encounter a ruined land, covered with the bones of men and beasts and buildings. In order to provide a witness that their description is true, they bring back metal armor, rusted swords, and the twenty-four golden plates.[6] However, the plates are undecipherable, and Limhi asks Ammon if he knows anyone able to interpret or translate the unreadable record: "And I say unto thee again: Knowest thou of any one that can translate? For I am desirous that these records should be translated into our language; for, perhaps,

5. Although the narrative proceeds in a temporally linear manner throughout these final chapters of Mosiah, the translation of the twenty-four plates (which will be discussed in further detail momentarily) referenced in Mosiah 28:10–19 does allude to the undetermined past of a destroyed people as well as their origin from the time of the Tower of Babel and further back to Adam, thus bringing the dynamic flux between past, present, and future (in the promise that the translated contents will be shared later on in the Book of Mormon [verse 19]) thematically back into the text.

6. See Mosiah 8:9–11.

they will give us a knowledge of a remnant of the people who have been destroyed, from whence these records came; or, perhaps, they will give us a knowledge of this very people who have been destroyed; and I am desirous to know the cause of their destruction" (Mosiah 8:12). Limhi calls himself "desirous"—he is filled with desire that the records be translated and understood, and for what appears to be very pragmatic reasons: overall, he wants to know the cause of such a catastrophic and total destruction. Ammon reassures Limhi that Mosiah has not only the capacity to produce such a translation but also the means—several interpreters that, with God's aid, allow an authorized person access to hidden items, including unreadable texts.[7] The divinely capacitated person able to make this translation is then identified as a seer, a combination of revelator and prophet whose knowledge is explicitly tied to the theme of temporal disturbance: they can know both the past and the future, the sum total of which comprises a whole able to be revealed, uncovered, unhidden, un-secreted—in other words, known.[8] Limhi rejoices to hear that the mystery in his possession can be revealed through God's prepared intervention in the world, and he derides the inferior knowledge of men, which is limited precisely because "they will not seek *wisdom*, neither do they desire that she should rule over them" (Mosiah 8:20; my emphasis).

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7. "Now Ammon said unto him, 'I can assuredly tell thee, O king, of a man that can translate the records; for he has wherewith that he can look, and translate all records that are of ancient date; and it is a gift from God. And the things are called interpreters, and no man can look in them except he be commanded, lest he should look for that he ought not and he should perish. And whosever is commanded to look in them, the same is called seer'" (Mosiah 8:13).

8. "But a seer can know things which are past, and also of things which are to come, and by them shall all things be revealed, or, rather, shall secret things be made manifest, and hidden things shall come to light, and things which are not known shall be made known by them, and also things shall be made known by them which otherwise could not be known" (Mosiah 8:17). See also verses 14–16.

A few key points to draw out from this particular story. First: Limhi is ostensibly interested in the plates for pragmatic reasons, most importantly the possibility that they may contain historical knowledge concerning the cause of the massive destruction encountered by his explorers. As the political leader of his people, Limhi is rightly concerned with the group's viability and survival, and his desire for knowledge and his anxiety in seeking out a translator are correctly understood in this context. However, the text exhibits a marked shift from the historical to the theological: Limhi's original concerns center around knowing the historical "cause" of the destruction, but by verse 19 he characterizes the plates' contents as containing a "great mystery" that will be revealed through the interpreters, which operate through divine power.[9] This shift in terminology points toward a shift from the historical to the theological, and Limhi's closing prayer of praise in the final verses of the chapter further develops the theological register, contrasting the "understandings . . . of men" (i.e., the realm of historical knowledge) with "wisdom," personified by Limhi as a ruling goddess.[10] It is important to note that the actual content of the twenty-four gold plates is not presumed to change in this shift. Rather, the content, once seen through the interpreters as material markers of God's power on earth, is received with a different sort of care: a desire for discrete historical knowledge changes into care for mystery and a desire for the rule of wisdom. What has changed, then,

9. "The king rejoiced exceedingly and gave thanks to God, saying, 'Doubtless a great mystery is contained within these plates, and these interpreters were doubtless prepared for the purpose of unfolding all such mysteries to the children of men'" (Mosiah 8:19).

10. "O how marvelous are the works of the Lord, and how long doth he suffer with his people; yea, and how blind and impenetrable are the understandings of the children of men; for they will not seek wisdom, neither do they desire that she should rule over them! Yea, they are as a wild flock which fleeth from the shepherd, and scattereth, and are driven, and are devoured by the beasts of the forest" (Mosiah 8:20–21).

is not the content but Limhi himself: his perspective on the plates and his relationship to them have shifted from one of hierarchical ownership, use, and appropriation to one of humility, gratitude, and witness. This change marks the performative force of the theological within the narrative:[11] the words shared by Ammon convey something in excess

11. My usage of the terms "performative" and "constative" is informed by the work developed by John L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962). In it, Austin posits a distinction between "constative" and "performative" utterances. A constative utterance conveys content that is either true or false and is measured by its truth-value. In a constative utterance, the gap between words and things remains intact: the word is not, itself, the thing it signifies but remains a referential sign. In contrast, in a performative utterance that gap collapses in that the word itself does or accomplishes the act it simultaneously refers to. Performative utterances are not descriptive (as are constative utterances) but instead active: a performative utterance changes something in the actual world. A performative utterance is therefore not true or false but rather successful or unsuccessful to one degree or another (Austin calls these conditions of success "felicity conditions"—a performative utterance is either "happy" [successful] or "unhappy" [unsuccessful].) Austin illustrates the performative in various ways, such as the phrase used by the priest performing a marriage: "I now pronounce you man and wife." It is in the act of actually saying those words that the marriage is pronounced, effected, and in force. The phrase is neither true nor false but either felicitous (if carried out by someone with the proper authority, in the proper circumstances, etc.) or infelicitous. After developing this initial distinction between the constative and the performative, Austin then probes, problematizes, and clarifies the construct until he ultimately develops a more nuanced approach. He argues that ultimately, the constative and the performative are *not* distinct categories or classes into which all utterances can be divided but instead are a bit closer to an aspect or dimension that is manifest in a specific, individual utterance. Thus, every utterance has something like both a performative and a constative dimension: it has meaning (content understood) as well as force (content accomplished). In this sense, the performative force of an utterance provides a measure of its effectiveness (its felicity/success) as it is understood via its specific discursive contexts. Distinct contexts may increase or decrease the felicity of an identical utterance, hence Austin's characterization of the performative

of their historical content, and while Limhi understands the historical content shared by Ammon—he understands that there is a man who is a seer and who has the interpreters through which he can translate the text—the effect of that content exhibits performative force, evidenced through Limhi's own change in register and rhetoric. Ammon's words convey constative content (there is a seer who has interpreters and can translate), but their performative force lies in the way those words actively witness God, and in doing so, call Limhi to change himself as he reworks his understanding of God's relationship to the world. Limhi's world has been reshaped and understood anew through the words Ammon shares: it is now a world in which God reveals mysteries to mankind and is praised.

Second: there is a physical component to this shift into the theological register, and it is both material and multiple. Ammon tells Limhi that he knows a man capable of producing the desired translation by means of some type of material objects, which are identified as interpreters. We know that the interpreters are used in some way in the process of seeing, we know that they are "things," and we know that their use must be directed by God (Mosiah 8:13). These material objects, which are handled and manipulated by a human being, are things that are hidden, either in time as the past or the future, or hidden in being—in the mode of their existence—i.e., through secrecy, inaccessibility,

force; for Austin, every utterance occurs within a field of forces that foregrounds its contexts and the way those contexts shape the utterance's specific felicity, thus locating the utterance within a virtual map of its possible/potential uses. This footnote is, of course, unable to do justice to Austin's project but hopefully helps to provide a brief orientation to the theoretical underpinnings of the terms I use here. For those interested in more details, Austin provides a concise orientation to his project in "Performative Utterances," *Philosophical Papers*, edited by J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 220–39; of course the aforementioned *How to Do Things with Words* gives even greater detail.

or unknowability. These hidden things "shall come to light," through which they will be known, comprehended, understood, seen, made visible, etc. (Mosiah 8:17). These interpreters act as the material means through which mystery is translated into knowledge. Thus translated, the once-mystery-now-knowledge witnesses the sealing of heaven and earth through that very act of translative permeability. By sealing, I mean to designate the way in which the things of heaven are brought into earth, and the things of earth are brought into heaven. Ammon characterizes the physical component of the interpreters' function as the material site for the divine—a material reality on earth that manifests and witnesses God's will and power while also translating that testimony into something that can be distributed, consumed, and even replicated on earth while maintaining its connection to the divine. The promise of textual translation made by Ammon to Limhi exhibits a performative force that that rewrites the physical and the material in terms of its already potentiated divinity, and the interpreters serve as the material instantiation of that promise.

Third: beyond this materiality, I want to especially pay attention to the interpreters' multiplicity. Ammon clearly identifies the interpreters as multiple—they are "thing*s*," not a thing, and "interpreter*s*," not an interpreter (Mosiah 8:13). Whatever their material composition, they are not a single, solitary item: they are multiple things that are used together in order to bring about translation. Now, the following line of thought is admittedly hypothetical and derives from a subjective personal experience, but I think it is important to consider the potential implications from having multiple things used as interpreters, especially when their use involves the eyes and sight in some way.[12] My question is: why was more than one interpreter involved in the process? Why not just a single stone? Can't God translate through some singular

12. We know from Mosiah 28:13 that these particular interpreters are described as two stones set into two bow rims, somewhat like glasses.

thing? My oldest daughter was born with a congenital eye defect that has left her in danger of losing her sight in her left eye. We have spent years doing daily eye therapy, patching, and having multiple surgeries all in order to preserve the sight in the affected eye. The result is that even looking through an incredibly powerful lens in her glasses, she can only achieve approximately 20/60 vision in her left eye. Why go through all this effort, especially when the result is not perfect vision? In essence, it is because we value perspective. Her sight, though not perfect, is better—truer—when she uses both eyes. Multiple interpreters may provide a similar sort of perspective. And, to push this hypothetical reading further, I would argue that multiple interpretations—from multiple people with multiple skills and multiple views—would again present a better—truer—perspective.

I have been using the text of Mosiah 8 to try to gain some sort of perspective on the type of relationship that exists between scripture and performative theology. In the background, though, remains the question of the ways in which performative theology may or may not exhibit some sort of inherent "Mormonness." In this text, I have highlighted an overarching context of non-linear narrative temporality, which makes the multiple authorial and editorial voices and perspectives involved in textual composition, transmission, and reception explicit. I have tried to bring into focus the way that texts, when they are inscribed within the theological register as "mystery" rather than the historical register as "fact," are potentiated as scripture and, as such, understood through wisdom's rule rather than history's measure. I have argued that this narrative exhibits a particular attention to the concept of materiality, and that this attention configures translation in terms of an uncovering or revealing that witnesses the ways in which heaven and earth are intermingled relationally, sealed up together. This reading suggests that the act of scriptural translation (including the individual translation accomplished in reading) can be viewed in terms of what it, in its material phenomena, actually does—its act of witnessing

the relationship between heaven and earth—rather than necessarily remaining only concerned with what the scripture itself indicates (i.e., its constative dimension). And finally, I have suggested a reading of the multiplicity of the interpreters themselves that positions that multiplicity as an argument for ongoing, open-ended readings from a variety of readers, all with the aim of producing a truer perspective, in which truer means *more* fully (but simultaneously *never* fully) realized rather than the last word.

I am trying to read Mosiah 8 in a way that looks closely at its constative content, paying attention to what it says and how it says it, and then looks again, and again, and again in order to try to peer into the way this particular text witnesses scripture as a material phenomenon, embedded in time and transmitted through physical means. In doing so, I am attempting to draw out the way in which this witnessing is both the end and the means of this text: the narrative relates the story of Limhi's shift from the historical to the theological register as effected by Ammon's witnessing words, and in doing so, the text simultaneously witnesses as scripture to us as readers, inviting us to reconsider our own material and temporal relationship with God—in other words, inviting us to reconsider our own repentance. The relationship between scripture and performative theology that I can discern through this process is one that ultimately centers on what I call care.

Performative theology is fundamentally grounded on a practice of careful reading and caring rereading. It commits to the scriptural text and honors that commitment by refusing to curtail scripture's ongoing, continuously potentiated capacity for connection and community. It is impossible to take up the theological task without a deep and abiding sense of care for the text being read. Note that care is not, at root, concerned with belief—the theologian does not need to have some sort of impermeable testimony of the divine inspiration behind the scriptural text in question, but she does need to care for it, and care deeply enough to seek the immanence of its performative force. She must

believe that these words are, in terms of their material and temporal effects, capable of changing a materially constituted and temporally situated world.

The theologian cares for scripture as a parent cares for a child. A parent does not dictate or prescribe what a child may or may not be or become. Instead, they accept the gift of the child's becoming. The child's very existence presents the parent with a daily mystery, an ongoing question, and the parent remains attentive. The child unfolds anew each day, different, changed by what has passed, always oriented toward an unmarked future, and the parent listens, and talks, and listens again. The parent cares for the child through cultivation and conversation, and that care is manifest in a relationship that cannot, constitutively, end.

I am trying to think through the question "Is there anything particularly Mormon about the project of performative theology?" I think at least a partial answer lies in this relationship between the theologian and scripture, which is a relationship grounded in a particular, and perhaps peculiar, care. To be clear, I am not claiming that it would be impossible to engage performative theology outside Mormonism—such a claim makes no sense to me, given Mormonism's insatiable appetite for truths. But I do think that there is something very Mormon surrounding performative theology's insistence on this specific type of care. The task that undergirds the project of performative theology—the careful reading and the caring rereading—is a task that is at heart temporally irruptive in that it refuses closure. The commitment in this care is a commitment that in some sense mimics the contours of covenant: ongoing, open, without end. In other words, care is concerned with the promise and project of gathering. Care configured in this way strikes me as Mormon but does not bind me to Mormonism in any essential way. Instead, the commitment to the text manifested as care in performative theology is a commitment to rereading, and as such also an ongoing commitment to community. To reread a text in

openness is to acknowledge one's own inherent incompleteness as a reader. A true commitment to rereading is a commitment to not only reread as oneself but to also invite and listen to others as they engage the text through their own rereadings. In this sense, care in performative theology constructs community.

In performative theology, care delineates a gathered community. To be gathered, the voice of Christ tells the people mourning the destruction following his death, is to be sheltered: "how oft have I gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings" (3 Nephi 10:4). This shelter—a mother hen's outstretched wing—is inadequate, provisional, and temporary. It cannot force the chicks to stay with the mother, and while it may deflect some dangers, it cannot provide comprehensive protection against or a sealing off from the outside world. To be gathered—to be sheltered by a fragile wing, an extension of a maternal body seeking children—is to remain attuned to the ways feathers and air work together in their mutually unsubstantial natures to create a force that repeatedly reaches out, seeking the unaware, covering the wandering, and sheltering the absorbed. To be gathered is to look up and still not see what is coming, for one only sees the familiar arc of a mother's wing. To be gathered is to turn and, surprised, recognize the familial nature of those whose lives have been haphazardly swept up with our own before we manage to leave once again.

A gathered community is a community created by the kind of care that keeps on gathering despite the constitutive inadequacy of the shelter and the only partial awareness of the participants. Such care is relentless and ongoing. The care of gathering is a care undeterred by the logical futility of the project. This care—the care of the gathering hen—both motivates and manifests the creation of community within the ongoing commitments of performative theology. And it is in this community—a community of caring rereaders committed to the open potential of the scriptural text—that I see a core kernel of Mormonism

within the project of performative theology. Performative theology is Mormon, then, in the sense that it arises from the kind of care that gathers communities—gathers Zions—through the messy imperfection of an ongoing, unflagging hope.

JENNY WEBB {jennywebb37@gmail.com} is a doctoral student in philosophy and religion at Bangor University, where she studies charismatic bodies in a comparative context. She is a past president of Mormon Scholars in the Humanities and also serves on the executive board for the Latter-day Saint Theology Seminar (previously called Mormon Theology Seminar).