

# JACOB'S TEMPLE SERMON AS REINTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE AND RETHINKING OF SEXUAL ETHICS

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Someone turning to the Book of Mormon to defend their church's traditional teachings on sexuality would likely consult the sermon given by the Nephite prophet Jacob in the second chapter of his eponymous book. Indeed, LDS and RLDS figures have often referred to Jacob 2 when making arguments about sexual ethics.<sup>1</sup> For example, LDS apostle Mark E. Petersen quoted from this chapter in a 1969 address condemning the sexual revolution of that decade.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, Jacob's condemnation of polygamy was a favorite resource for twentieth-century RLDS critics of their church's policies (and, with Doctrine and Covenants 150, scripture) allowing polygamous men from the Global South to be baptized

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1. I regretfully use the acronym "LDS" when referencing people, teachings, and beliefs associated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Although I am typically inclined to use the preferred adjective "Latter-day Saint," this essay also mentions the RLDS Church (the term I will use when referring to that tradition before 2001) and Community of Christ (the term I will use when referring to that tradition after 2001). Because members of this tradition have also referred to themselves as "Latter Day Saints," and because the capitalization and punctuation differences between the two terms are slight, I feel that "LDS" provides more clarity.

2. Mark E. Petersen, "The Dangers of the So-Called Sex Revolution," in *Conference Report* (April 1969), 62–66, accessed January 10, 2023, [https://scriptures.byu.edu/#0cf0228:t694\\$25858:c0cf0228](https://scriptures.byu.edu/#0cf0228:t694$25858:c0cf0228).

so long as they committed to take no more wives.<sup>3</sup> In both cases, Jacob 2 served as a prooftext that resisted a liberalization of sexual ethics.

Yet careful readings of Jacob's temple sermon suggest that its sexual ethic is more nuanced than a generic call to chastity (or even a simple condemnation of non-monogamous relationships). Perhaps most notably, a number of writers have found feminist themes in Jacob's sermon. Fatimah Salleh and Margaret Olsen Hemming describe Jacob's sermon as containing "some of the most overtly feminist messages of the Book of Mormon."<sup>4</sup> Carol Lynn Pearson points to the polygamous husbands of this passage as one piece of evidence (among several) of an "anti-female bias evident among the Nephites" that can be understood as "one of the numerous causes of their downfall."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Deidre Nicole Green interprets "Jacob's references to women's chastity" as a reference "to women's sexual agency," and Kimberly Berkey and Joseph Spencer describe the sermon as a "relatively straightforward condemnation of certain elements of Nephite patriarchy."<sup>6</sup> These authors invite us to see

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3. Matthew Bolton, *Apostle of the Poor: The Life and Work of Missionary and Humanitarian Charles D. Neff* (John Whitmer Books, 2005), 69. For more on polygamy and Section 150, see also Mark A. Scherer, *The Journey of a People: The Era of Worldwide Community, 1946 to 2016* (Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2016); David J. Howlett, "Why Denominations Can Climb Hills: RLDS Conversions in Highland Tribal India and Midwestern America, 1964–2000," *Church History* 89, no. 3 (2020): 633–58.

4. Fatimah Salleh and Margaret Olsen Hemming, *The Book of Mormon for the Least of These: 1 Nephi—Words of Mormon* (By Common Consent Press, 2020), 111.

5. Carol Lynn Pearson, "Could Feminism Have Saved the Nephites?," in *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings*, ed. Joanna Brooks, Rachel Hunt Steenblik, and Hannah Wheelwright (Oxford University Press, 2015), 223.

6. Deidre Nicole Green, *Jacob: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020), 88; 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), 305.



Angela Ellsworth, *Lady Ties for a Line Dance* (2011),  
braids of linen, thread, brass, and artificial hair,  
8' x 7'9" (courtesy of Angela Ellsworth  
and the Phoenix Art Museum)

Jacob's sexual ethic less as a self-evident list of sexual prohibitions and more as the natural result of some deeper theological commitment (in this case, gender equality).<sup>7</sup>

My objective in this article is to add to these readings an argument that Jacob's sexual ethic is also a clear departure from teachings found in the scriptures available to the Nephites. That is, it is not only the result of more foundational values but also a reinterpretation of previous teachings in light of those values. This reinterpretation allows Jacob to reject an established sexual ethic that is clearly present in scripture but no longer acceptable for the harm that it causes among his people. Once understood in these terms, the temple sermon is better read not as a proof-text for existing teachings on sexuality but as an invitation for individuals and institutions that accept the Book of Mormon to identify deeper theological values and reinterpret previous sexual ethics, no matter how anchored in precedent those ethics may seem.

Because the reading of scripture is an unavoidably subjective act, I begin this essay with a description of the assumptions and perspectives I bring to interpreting the Book of Mormon. This also sets the stage for the next section, where I will describe Jacob's approach to scripture and argue that it is key to understanding the sexual ethic he establishes during his temple sermon. Then, I will address the temple sermon itself, demonstrating how Jacob there reinterprets scripture and follows his father in rethinking the sexual ethic of the Nephite religion. Finally, I will consider ways in which Jacob's example might be relevant for Book of Mormon readers today.

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7. For more thorough reviews of studies of gender in Jacob (and the rest of the Book of Mormon), see Joseph M. Spencer, "Scripture and Gender," in *The Routledge Handbook of Mormonism and Gender*, ed. Amy Hoyt and Taylor G. Petrey (Routledge, 2020); 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.

## My Approach to Scripture

I write from the perspective of someone who long practiced in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints but who now practices in Community of Christ. As a result of my personal religious history, I am most familiar with (and remain sympathetic to) LDS approaches to the Book of Mormon. Furthermore, due to demographic differences and ecclesiastical evolution, there has quite simply been more writing on the Book of Mormon from LDS perspectives than from RLDS/Community of Christ perspectives, especially in recent years. While I do not claim to have read all scholarship on the Book of Mormon, my thinking is largely shaped by LDS writers—if not institutional perspectives. Indeed, my personal theology is presently closer to Community of Christ than it is to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and this also shapes how I read all scripture, including the Book of Mormon. In recognition of my present affiliation, I use the lightly modernized *Revised Authorized Version* of the Book of Mormon—first published by the RLDS Church in 1966—as the source for quotes and verse references (though I also include LDS verse references for broader accessibility).

This denominational history also affects the way in which I frame my conclusions in this article. My argument—that Jacob's temple sermon invites Book of Mormon readers to reinterpret scripture and rethink sexual ethics—can obviously be read in the context of how the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints understands LGBTQ+ identities and treats LGBTQ+ members. Furthermore, although I am no longer practicing in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I continue to claim membership in the Mormon community and remain, therefore, personally invested in how that church's teachings and policies affect that community. However, this reading of Jacob's temple sermon also has implications for *any* denomination that accepts the Book of Mormon as scripture, including the one in which I currently practice. In that context, foregrounding a critique of a church I no

longer attend might be seen as unfair. Rather than inadvertently wade into sectarian debate, I will focus on advancing my reading of Jacob's temple sermon and some possible implications, refraining from advocacy for any changes in any denomination.

On a more analytical level, I write with the assumption that the characters in the Book of Mormon have consistent personalities and motivations. This is not to argue for the historicity of the Book of Mormon or even that we should bracket questions about historicity; indeed, I confess that I am skeptical of the historicity of the Book of Mormon—and much of the Bible. Nonetheless, I believe—like Bruce Lindgren—that the Book of Mormon “has the capacity to illuminate and communicate the gospel.”<sup>8</sup> More to the point I am making here, I am convinced by the writing of several authors that the Book of Mormon has important, valuable lessons to teach when one treats its characters as real people and approaches the text from a narrative lens.<sup>9</sup>

I also assume in this article that except where otherwise indicated in the Book of Mormon text, the portions of the Hebrew Bible implied to be on the brass plates read the same as the equivalent portions of our bibles today. This is, admittedly, a tricky assumption. For one, academic scholarship places the ultimate redaction of the Hebrew Bible after Lehi's purported exodus from Jerusalem. More pressingly, given my interpretive framework, the Book of Mormon narrative not only describes the brass plates as written in (reformed?) Egyptian rather than Hebrew (Mosiah 1:6; LDS Mosiah 1:4) but also suggests that the “original” biblical text may differ in important ways from what we have

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8. A. Bruce Lindgren, “Sign or Scripture: Approaches to the Book of Mormon,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 19, no. 1 (1986): 69–75.

9. See, for example, Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon* (Oxford University Press, 2010); and Jared Hickman, “Learning to Read with the Book of Mormon,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 48, no. 1 (2015): 169–77.

today. Thus, it is possible to imagine that teachings and commandments on sexuality present in the brass plates are different than those in our version of the Hebrew Bible, contrary to my assumptions. From this perspective, these differences would allow for resolving any tension between the two texts.

However, I suggest that resolving tensions within scripture is not necessarily desirable. Indeed, some scholars of the Book of Mormon have shown what we can learn from being attentive to tensions within that volume of scripture alone.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, whatever the actual differences between the brass plates and the Hebrew Bible, it is the latter text that the modern reader must bring into conversation with the Book of Mormon. Rather than use the possibilities offered by the brass plates to explain away what makes us uncomfortable in other scripture, I suggest that it is more productive to assume similarity except where difference is clearly indicated—and to face any resulting discomfort head on.<sup>11</sup>

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10. Consider Hardy's description (in *Understanding the Book of Mormon*) of competing explanations for the destruction of Ammonihah. See also Spencer's discussion of differences between Nephi and Jacob's approach to Isaiah in Joseph M. Spencer, *A Word in Season: Isaiah's Reception in the Book of Mormon* (University of Illinois Press, 2023); and Joseph M. Spencer, "Learning to Read Isaiah with Jacob," in *Jacob: Faith and Great Anxiety*, ed. Avram R. Shannon (Religious Studies Center, 2024).

11. Of course, this assumption is also personally convenient, as the main thesis of this article would be much weaker without it. However, I also suggest that a broader danger in appealing to possible differences in the brass plates is that the Book of Mormon actually has relatively little to say about the scope or nature of those differences. Given these vast possibilities and sparse details, it is tempting for appeals to the brass plates to be self-serving, asserting a possible difference for the sake of a desired conclusion and despite scant evidence. While a narrative approach to Book of Mormon interpretation should acknowledge (and perhaps even explore) the possibility of difference, it should do so carefully and, I argue, conservatively.

## Jacob's Reinterpretive Approach to Scripture

Just as I bring my own perspectives and assumptions to my interpretation of the Book of Mormon, Jacob seems to bring an intentional perspective to his treatment of scripture. Importantly, Jacob appears to share this perspective with his older brother Nephi, one of the most prominent narrators in the Book of Mormon.<sup>12</sup> This perspective emphasizes reinterpreting scripture and therefore lays the groundwork for the reinterpretation of sexual ethics that I will argue is present in his temple sermon. To help us better understand this perspective—and demonstrate that it is a key theme in his ministry—I consider Jacob's treatment of scripture in his first recorded sermon to the Nephites (II Nephi 5–7; LDS 2 Nephi 6–10) and his debate with Sherem, his final recorded act of public ministry (Jacob 5; LDS Jacob 7).

### *Jacob's First Recorded Sermon*

Readers of the Book of Mormon are first introduced to the themes of Jacob's ministry in the record kept by his older brother. Indeed, as noted in Grant Hardy's *Annotated Book of Mormon*, Jacob begins both this sermon and his temple sermon by voicing concerns about “anxiety” and the “welfare of . . . souls” (II Nephi 5:5–6; LDS 2 Nephi 6:3; Jacob 2:3; LDS Jacob 2:3).<sup>13</sup> This already suggests a certain consistency in Jacob's ministry throughout the Book of Mormon. As I will demonstrate in this section and the next, this consistency also includes a willingness to reinterpret distant scripture for his immediate audience. Indeed,

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12. For more discussion of the brothers' influence on each other, see Joseph M. Spencer, “Introduction,” in *Christ and Antichrist: Reading Jacob 7*, ed. Adam S. Miller and Joseph M. Spencer (Maxwell Institute Publications, 2018), 3–6; and Joseph M. Spencer, *The Anatomy of Book of Mormon Theology*, vol. 1 (Greg Kofford Books, 2021). Note, however, that Nephi and Jacob are not identical in their approaches; see Grant Hardy, ed., *The Annotated Book of Mormon* (Oxford University Press, 2023); Spencer, *Word in Season*; Spencer, “Learning to Read Isaiah.”

13. Hardy, *Annotated Book of Mormon*.

early in this first sermon, Jacob borrows a phrase more closely associated with his brother to explain to his audience that the Book of Isaiah “may be likened unto you” (II Nephi 5:14; LDS 2 Nephi 6:5).<sup>14</sup> Jacob’s reliance on Isaiah clearly echoes Nephi’s same reliance on these texts; more importantly for my purposes, Jacob joins Nephi in what Hardy describes as “providing creative interpretations of Isaiah’s words.”<sup>15</sup>

Yet Jacob’s willingness to reinterpret scripture can be more than a midrash-like reinterpretation of Isaiah. Let us consider, for example, II Nephi 6:59 (LDS 2 Nephi 9:28), where Jacob condemns the “learned” who “think they are wise” and therefore “hearken not to the counsel of God . . . supposing they know of themselves.” At least in LDS circles, this verse is popularly understood as an elevation of the word of God over human learning and could therefore seem to support a scriptural literalism that resists reinterpretation. However, paying close attention to context lends additional insight into the meaning of this verse—and suggests a reading that instead criticizes inflexible understanding of scripture. Jacob’s condemnation of the learned is situated within a series of ten “woe” statements pronounced between verses 56 and 72 (LDS 9:27–38).<sup>16</sup> The repetition in these statements suggests that *they* provide the primary structure of Jacob’s comments. If this is the case, any other remarks within this passage are better understood not as standalone observations but rather as *extensions* of preceding “woe” statements. In this case, Jacob’s comments on the “learned” follow a critique of “him

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14. See Spencer, *Word in Season*, for a detailed treatment of Nephi and Jacob’s “likening.”

15. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 65. See also Spencer, “Learning to Read Isaiah,” for an argument that Jacob’s interest in Isaiah (and its reinterpretation) may differ from Nephi’s in important ways.

16. See Hardy, *Annotated Book of Mormon*; and Grant Hardy, ed., *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ*, Maxwell Institute study ed. (Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2018).

that has the law given, that has all the commandments of God, like us, and that transgresses them” (II Nephi 6:56; LDS 2 Nephi 9:27).

Thus, reading this single verse within the broader context suggests that Jacob is not simply following a condemnation of disobedience with criticism of worldly knowledge. Rather, because both observations occur within a single unit of the broader structure, we are perhaps meant to understand the “learned” mentioned in the elaboration *as* those who have “the law given” to them in the “woe” statement. In this reading, “the counsel of God” would be understood as in opposition to *previously given law* (and not academic argument). Thus, Jacob seems to be speaking to those who are so confident in their understanding of scripture that they fail to “hearken” to God asking them to see things differently (indeed, I will shortly demonstrate how Jacob’s challenger Sherem fits this description). Likewise, Jacob’s concession that “to be learned is good, if they hearken to the counsels of God” (II Nephi 6:61; 2 Nephi 9:29) seems to encourage a deep understanding of established scripture *so long as* one remains open to further expressions of God’s will—even those that might challenge previous understandings. Just as Jacob’s reinterpretation of Isaiah echoes his older brother’s, this reading of Jacob’s sermon would be consistent with Nephi’s later admonition that latter-day believers must be open to new scripture (see II Nephi 12; LDS 2 Nephi 29). Indeed, Nephi’s comments echo language from both Jacob’s sermon and the two prophets’ extensive quotations from Isaiah, further emphasizing how important the reinterpretation of scripture is in their ministries.<sup>17</sup>

### Jacob’s Debate with Sherem

The perspective on scripture that Jacob lays out early in his ministry is also present in one of the final events that he records. In Jacob 5 (LDS

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17. For examples of this intertextuality, see Hardy, *Book of Mormon*; and Spencer, *Word in Season*.

Jacob 7), a man named Sherem emerges to challenge the prophet; in doing so, he embodies the abstract, hypothetical figure whom Jacob had criticized years before. Indeed, Jacob repeats the word “learned” to describe Sherem (Jacob 5:6; LDS Jacob 7:4). In keeping with the reading I previously proposed, this is not a reference to a secular disregard for scripture but rather a deep, if rigid, familiarity with holy text. Indeed, as an ardent defender of the Law of Moses, Sherem also mirrors Jacob’s description of “him who has the law given” (II Nephi 6:56; LDS 2 Nephi 9:27). Where Jacob and Sherem disagree is with the relationship of that law to a future Christ. For Sherem, the scriptures have nothing to say about Jesus; for Jacob, “none of the prophets have written, nor prophesied, save they have spoken concerning this Christ” (Jacob 5:19; LDS Jacob 7:11).

It is true that Christians have read Jesus into the Hebrew Bible for as long as there have been Christians. Nonetheless, it is important—both for my argument here and for avoiding anti-Jewish practice in Christianity—to establish that Jacob’s insistence on this point is most responsibly understood as a willingness to reinterpret scripture in light of new revelation.<sup>18</sup> To take but one important example, Matthew’s insistence that the miraculous conception of Christ was foretold in Isaiah is only possible because the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible widely used by early Christians, uses a word that can be understood as “virgin.”<sup>19</sup> By contrast, the original Hebrew text more accurately speaks of a “young woman [who] is [already] with child” (Isaiah 7:7, NRSV) rather than of any future virgin. This is but one

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18. Indeed, despite Jacob’s emphasis on scripture, revelation seems to be the greater source of his faith in Christ. He hints at this in Jacob 5:20 (LDS 7:12), and earlier in his account (Jacob 5:7–8; LDS Jacob 7:5), it is clearly revelation (rather than the supposed clarity of the scriptures) that protects his conviction from being “shaken” by Sherem.

19. For an accessible, respectful treatment of other examples, see Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Bible With and Without Jesus: How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently* (HarperOne, 2020).

example of how “the language and theology of the New Testament writers are indebted far more to the Septuagint than to the Hebrew Bible.”<sup>20</sup> There is, of course, no way to know whether the “Egyptian” version of Isaiah on the brass plates would more closely resemble the Hebrew original or the Greek translation, but Jacob’s Christ-centered reading of Isaiah is likely as tenuous as that of the New Testament authors.

Of course, this does not mean that there is no value in reading Isaiah or any other scripture through the lens of Christ. Jacob’s treatment of Sherem becomes harsh if we accept that his evaluation of scripture is based on personal conviction rather than objective analysis.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, we must acknowledge that an insistence on reading Christ into the Hebrew Bible has helped fuel horrific anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic acts and attitudes. Nonetheless, Jacob’s reinterpretation of scripture through a Christian lens can still be instructive for us. For example, in Doctrine and Covenants 163:7b–c, members of Community of Christ are counseled that “God’s nature, as revealed in Jesus Christ and affirmed by the Holy Spirit, provides the ultimate standard by which any portion of scripture should be interpreted and applied. It is not pleasing to God when any passage of scripture is used to diminish or oppress races, genders, or classes of human beings.” Community of Christ’s official Statement on Scripture likewise teaches that “scripture’s authority is derived from the model of Christ, who came to be a servant (Mark 10:45). Therefore, the authority of scripture is not the authority to oppress, control, or dominate.”<sup>22</sup> Although much depends on how

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20. Timothy Michael Law, *When God Spoke Greek: The Septuagint and the Making of the Christian Bible* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 1.

21. Other authors have also commented on ways in which Jacob may have overreached. Some of these comments can be found in Adam S. Miller and Joseph M. Spencer, eds., *Christ and Antichrist: Reading Jacob 7* (Maxwell Institute Publications, 2018).

22. Community of Christ, *Sharing in Community of Christ: Exploring Identity, Mission, Message, and Beliefs, Fourth Edition* (Herald Publishing House, 2018), 64.

one understands Christ, there are ways in which deliberately reading Christ into the text may be productive; in fact, this approach to reading scripture through a Christian lens explicitly invites us to push back against the original text in careful, considerate ways.

### Jacob's Temple Sermon

Having demonstrated that Jacob repeatedly shows interest in reinterpreting scripture, I now turn my attention to how, in his temple sermon, he applies this interest to the subject of sexual ethics among the Nephites. Because Jacob later reveals that he is drawing from similar teachings of Lehi, other readers might understand this sermon differently—for example, as Jacob's *reinforcing* established revelation rather than *introducing* a new understanding of scripture. I favor the latter understanding for two reasons. First, while Lehi may have established precedent for the temple sermon, Nephi makes no indication that this was a priority of *his* ministry (a point to which I will return in more detail later). This puts Jacob in the position of reintroducing this sexual ethic. Indeed, he only acknowledges his father's teachings after establishing the foundation of his own; furthermore, he seems to expand what his father had previously taught.<sup>23</sup> Second, Jacob himself initially frames his concern as a question of scriptural interpretation. Although he references the "grosser crimes" (Jacob 2:31; LDS Jacob 2:23) of his audience, he does not even take the time to explain what those crimes are before announcing: "Thus says the Lord, 'This people begin to wax in iniquity; they understand not the scriptures'" (Jacob 2:32; LDS Jacob 2:23). Although Jacob transitions to a discussion of sexual ethics, it is noteworthy that he begins this discussion by warning against misreading scripture. Indeed, Salleh and Olsen Hemming describe Jacob

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23. On the subject of Jacob's addition, see Joseph M. Spencer, *1st Nephi: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020), 101.

as concerned that “the Nephites are manipulating scripture to excuse their own sinful behavior.”<sup>24</sup>

However, while I am sympathetic to Salleh and Olsen Hemming’s underlying point, I am not sure that the Nephites *are* manipulating scripture—at least, not in the sense of misrepresenting its contents. In the sections that follow, I offer another reading of Jacob’s treatment of scripture and sexual ethics: First, I will describe how his reading of scripture does not seem to hold up to scrutiny. Second, I will argue that although scripture does not support Jacob, he draws on a specific value commitment to establish a new sexual ethic better suited for his context. Both sections further demonstrate the reinterpretation of scripture described earlier in this article as characteristic of Jacob’s ministry. In a final section, I will discuss the possibility that Jacob is breaking from not only scripture but also his older brother’s prophetic precedent.

### *Jacob Gets Scripture Wrong*

As Jacob continues his temple sermon, he reports God’s condemnation of the Nephites’ “seek[ing] to excuse themselves in committing whoredoms because of the things which were written concerning David and Solomon his son” (Jacob 2:32; LDS Jacob 2:23). In short, as becomes clear later in the passage, Nephite men have begun (or are at least considering) taking additional wives and concubines and are turning to biblical precedent to justify their decision. According to Jacob—citing the voice of God—David and Solomon’s decisions were “abominable” (Jacob 2:33; LDS Jacob 2:24). This, combined with God-through-Jacob’s assertion that the Nephite men are misunderstanding the scriptures implies that Nephite men have no scriptural

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24. Salleh and Olsen Hemming, *Book of Mormon for the Least of These*, 110.

precedent to turn to.<sup>25</sup> However, while the Nephite men in this story are clearly in the wrong, it is *not* clear that this precedent is as absent as Jacob suggests. Indeed, Wilda Gafney writes that after Lamech takes two wives in Genesis 4:19, “Lamech-style partnership (polygamy), rather than Eve/Adam-style monogamy, becomes normative.”<sup>26</sup> At best, Gafney continues, God is silent about polygamy. Thus, despite Jacob’s insistence that God condemns the Nephite men’s interpretation of scripture, commands monogamy (at least as a rule), and sees David and Solomon’s polygamy as sinful, there is not much scriptural evidence for his claims.

In fact, while Jacob describes Nephite advocates for polygamy as referencing David and Solomon in particular, there are far more compelling passages that they could have invoked to make their case. Just after Moses receives (one version of) the Ten Commandments,

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25. These verses could conceivably also be read as a rejection of previous scriptural precedent in favor of new revelation (rather than an insistence that no such precedent exists). This reading would arguably provide a more useful lesson for modern readers of the Book of Mormon, since it is unproductive to insist that scripture does not say what it clearly says. However, as I will describe in the rest of this section, Jacob does not fully engage with the scriptural precedent for polygamy in the Hebrew Bible, making it difficult to determine which route he is taking here. Because I understand Jacob to be imposing a not-originally-present Christian message onto the Hebrew Bible in his debate with Sherem, I argue that he is doing something similar (if converse) here. However, because rejection of scripture is part of reinterpretation of scripture, I find this alternate reading equally compelling.

26. Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2017). Critical readers of the Book of Mormon have drawn attention to biblical tension with Jacob’s comments; see, for example, Robert F. Smith, “Textual Criticism of the Book of Mormon,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research*, ed. John W. Welch (Deseret Book Company, 1992). Similar observations are alluded to—but not specified—in Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon* (Maxwell Institute, 2014), 980.

God's next conversation with him is to establish laws that govern—not forbid!—slavery (see Exodus 21:1–11). Implicit in these laws is divine permission for a man to purchase a woman as a slave to whom he has sexual access—and to purchase additional women if, as described by Robert Alter, “he finds anything about [the first] that disinclines him to keep her as a sexual partner.”<sup>27</sup> Although Jacob quotes God as declaring that the Nephite men “shall not lead away captive the daughters of my people” (Jacob 2:42; LDS Jacob 2:33), there are no explicit references in Jacob 2 to Nephite advocacy for sex slavery.<sup>28</sup> And yet, modern readers of the Bible—like Jacob—must wrestle with the horrific truth that there is clear scriptural precedent for this; if Nephite men are asking for “mere” polygamy, they are asking for far less than what scripture allows men to do in the name of satisfying their sexual desires.

In short, Jacob's suggestion that the scriptures are on his side when he preaches monogamy does not seem to hold up to even a cursory review of what the Hebrew Bible has to say about polygamy. Rather, sexual laws in Exodus 21 alone clearly allow for a man to have multiple sexual partners—not to mention exercise ownership over those partners. Of course, I am not arguing that Jacob ought to be deferential to these laws! Rather, I believe that his failure to fully engage the conflict between scriptural precedent and his teaching does his audience (whether present at the temple or reading his sermon today) the disservice of papering over the contradictions in scripture that all believers must recognize and respond to.

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27. Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, vol. 1, *The Five Books of Moses* (W. W. Norton, 2019), 301.

28. That said, see Spencer, *1st Nephi*, 102 on “kidnapping” and “forced marriage” as later Nephite developments that result from failure to establish gender equality among Lehi's immediate descendants.

### *Jacob Defies Scripture*

If Jacob does not fully explore the relationship between the scriptures and the sexual ethic that he promotes, he is more straightforward in articulating a value commitment that he brings into conversation with scripture. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this is in keeping with how Christian sexual ethics are typically developed.<sup>29</sup> Jacob Caldwell, writing in the context of American Christians' debates about homosexuality late in the first decade of the twenty-first century, points to a conflict between appeals to *scripture* by conservative churches and appeals to *values* by more progressive churches.<sup>30</sup> While readers' interpretations of scripture can be influenced when they *unconsciously* "import a set of assumptions," other readers more *deliberately* read their values into the text.<sup>31</sup> For example, Lisa Sowle Cahill—herself an established feminist ethicist—describes how Catholic feminist Margaret Farley has deliberately invoked "concepts like moral freedom, common good, and social justice" (among other commitments) to establish her positions on sexual ethics.<sup>32</sup> Argentine theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid has been

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29. In the rest of this paragraph, I emphasize the interplay between scripture and specific moral values. For a more thorough exploration of the sources brought to Christian sexual ethics, see Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Sexuality and Christian Ethics: How to Proceed," in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, ed. James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow (Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

30. Jacob Caldwell, "The Viability of Christian Same-Sex Unions: Why Scripturally Normed Faith Communities Must Support Homosexual Relationships," *Theology & Sexuality* 16, no. 1 (2010): 59–76.

31. Diana M. Swancutt, "Sexing the Pauline Body of Christ: Scriptural Sex in the Context of the American Christian Culture War," in *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline*, ed. Virginia Burrus and Catherine Keller (Fordham University Press, 2006), 66.

32. Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Feminist Theology and Sexual Ethics," in *Just and True Love: Feminism and the Frontiers of Theological Ethics*, ed. Maura A. Ryan and Brian Linnane (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

particularly radical in her insistence on valuing the sexual experiences of marginalized populations in the ethics that she has argued for.<sup>33</sup>

Each of these examples helps illustrate the approach Jacob is taking here, even if his methods for developing sexual ethics are not explicitly stated—or, as I will return to later, his results very elaborate. In the rest of this section, I will describe Jacob's reinterpretation of scripture as driven by a commitment to the value of *minimizing harm*.<sup>34</sup> In this case, I suggest that Jacob is motivated to reinterpret a certain sexual ethic present in the Hebrew Bible because of the harm caused by its application within his community. Countering the Nephite men who claim to have scripture on their side, Jacob describes the “sorrow,” “mourning” (Jacob 2:40; LDS Jacob 2:31), “cries” (Jacob 2:41; LDS Jacob 2:32), “broken . . . hearts,” and “lost . . . confidence” (Jacob 2:46; LDS Jacob 2:35)—all indications of harm—of the Nephite women and children who have suffered the burden of their husbands and fathers' application of scripture. Jacob's value commitment provides a compelling criterion for when scripture should be reinterpreted; presaging the standard set in Doctrine and Covenants 163, Jacob refuses to allow his audience to “diminish or oppress” others, even when scripture seemingly grants them permission to do so.

In fact, as Salleh and Olsen Hemming have noted, Jacob interprets the Lehite exodus from Jerusalem in “overtly feminist” terms that are

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33. Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (Routledge, 2000); Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (Routledge, 2003). Cahill, “Sexuality and Christian Ethics,” more generally discusses the role of descriptive accounts of human sexuality in developing ethics.

34. This may be unsurprising, given that principles of beneficence (minimizing harm and maximizing benefit) are common in many kinds of ethical framework. However, I also note that harm is a recurring theme in Farley's writing on sexual ethics. For examples, see Cahill, “Feminist Theology and Sexual Ethics”; Margaret Farley, “Sexual Ethics,” in *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, 3rd ed., ed. Stephen G. Post (Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), 4:2418–31; Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (Continuum, 2006).

particularly attentive to harm caused to women.<sup>35</sup> Jacob's references to "sorrow" and "mourning" are inclusive of Nephite women but first reference "the daughters of [God's] people in the land of Jerusalem" (Jacob 2:40; LDS Jacob 2:31)—where "Judah's kings . . . led the way in reducing women to objects of sexual possession and economic status"—and only then mistreated women "in all the lands of [God's] people" (Jacob 2:40; LDS Jacob 2:31).<sup>36</sup> While the latter phrase acknowledges that "damaging marital relationships occur globally," Jacob's references to Jerusalem—and to God's leading Lehi's family away (see Jacob 2:34; LDS Jacob 2:25, Jacob 2:41; LDS Jacob 2:32)—particularly frame this event in terms of freeing women from harm imposed on them within a broader religious culture and its sexual ethic.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Jacob describes this exodus as God leading "the fair daughters of this people" out of Jerusalem (Jacob 2:42; LDS Jacob 2:32). According to Jacob's account, it is not that "God led Nephi and Lehi out of Jerusalem and the women followed" but rather that "God hears [women's] cries and leads them with revelation"—even if that revelation conflicts with scripture (or how men read it).<sup>38</sup>

### *Does Jacob Defy Prophets?*

Jacob's account of the Lehiite exodus is remarkable for how it stands in tension with his brother Nephi's telling of the same story. Although Nephi is elsewhere eager to critique the people of Jerusalem (e.g., II Nephi 11; LDS 2 Nephi 25), he never accuses them of imposing the sexual harm that Jacob mentions in his own critiques. Furthermore, as I have previously mentioned, Jacob's explanation that "commandments [against polygamy] were given to our father Lehi" (Jacob 2:44; LDS Jacob 2:34) would reasonably come as a surprise to a reader of the

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35. Salleh and Olsen Hemming, *Book of Mormon for the Least of These*, 111.

36. Spencer, *Ist Nephi*, 101.

37. Green, *Jacob*, 88.

38. Salleh and Olsen Hemming, *Book of Mormon for the Least of These*, 111.

Book of Mormon, given that Nephi says nothing about this.<sup>39</sup> Because we have already seen that Jacob is fond of reinterpretation, we may be tempted to assume that Jacob is reading into his family's history feminist messages that were not originally present. Yet, Spencer has suggested that "there's reason to think" the Book of Mormon's problematic treatment of gender "begins in 1 Nephi" with the eponymous prophet (and uses Jacob as a counterexample).<sup>40</sup> For all the evidence of overlap between the ministries of Jacob and Nephi, this is one point where the brothers seem to differ.

Although there is no way to definitively explain this difference, Hardy offers two observations about Nephi that inform a possible reading I will present here. First, based on a number of clues, including Jacob's ambiguous statement that Nephi "anointed a man to be [his successor as] king" (Jacob 1:9; LDS Jacob 1:9), Hardy suggests the possibility that although "Nephi had children and descendants . . . perhaps he only had daughters."<sup>41</sup> Nephi seems to have been anticipating his eventual kingship since before his marriage (e.g., 1 Nephi 1:94; LDS 1 Nephi 4:29); did he express concern during his father's lifetime that his wife was only producing daughters when he could only imagine a son as heir? I suggest the possibility that Nephi was a sort of Henry VIII figure, one who never considered divorce or execution but who shared with the English monarch the belief that another wife might be the answer to his problems.<sup>42</sup>

While speculative, this reading is reinforced by Hardy's suggestion that Nephi as narrator is less than forthcoming about awkward

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39. Spencer—see *1st Nephi*, 104—asks whether this omission is significant, though he does not draw the conclusion that I do here.

40. Spencer, *1st Nephi*, 102.

41. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 48.

42. I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers of this article for pointing out that this reading would also lend a different understanding to Jacob's emphasis on "seed" (Jacob 2:39; LDS Jacob 2:30) in his infamous carve out for the possibility that God could command polygamy.

interactions with his father. Most notably, Lehi has nothing to say to Nephi after his violent encounter with Laban, and Nephi seems to be the only man of his generation whose blessing is not recorded before the patriarch's death.<sup>43</sup> In both cases, Hardy compellingly argues that Nephi may have wanted to preserve his own reputation by skipping over his father's criticism of him. Is this why Nephi does not record Lehi's commandment against polygamy? After all, if Laman or Lemuel had been would-be polygamists, it is difficult to imagine Nephi missing the opportunity to further criticize his brothers. Yet, Jacob 2:55 (LDS Jacob 3:6) clarifies that Lamanite society is monogamous;<sup>44</sup> indeed, much of the rhetorical force of this part of Jacob's temple sermon is that for all the Lamanites' supposed wickedness, they get this commandment right.<sup>45</sup> In contrast, Nephi's failure to record Lehi's commandment (or to frame his family's exodus from Jerusalem in the same terms as his brother) suggests a different set of rhetorical goals—one that, consistent with Hardy's observations, avoids bringing up old shames.

Thinking of Nephi in this way could provide additional context to the temple sermon. If the revered king were known to question whether polygamy was really all that bad, it would be unsurprising that his followers might be eager to revive the practice. Jacob's exasperation that

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43. See Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 17–20, 50–51.

44. When referencing these verses, it is worth noting that the Community of Christ RAV does not correct an error originally introduced in the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon that rendered “our father” in the printer's manuscript (which frames Lehi as introducing the commandment against polygamy) as “our fathers” (which mistakenly implies an older, wider prohibition). Royal Skousen notes that this is a convenient error in RLDS editions, given the church's traditional hostility toward polygamy; he also raises the question of whether the error's perpetuation was ever a deliberate editorial choice, given the evidence of other RLDS textual corrections based on the printer's manuscript. See Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants*, 980.

45. Berkey and Spencer, “Great Cause to Mourn”; Green, *Jacob*; Spencer, *1st Nephi*.

his audience has forgotten Lehi's commandment could conceal a deeper frustration with his brother for muddying the waters on this point. At the very least, for all the similarities between Jacob and Nephi, Jacob is emphasizing themes in his ministry that his brother does not seem to have prioritized; if, more dramatically, Nephi had sympathies toward polygamy, Jacob finds himself in the unenviable position of defying not only scripture but also his immediate predecessor as prophet.<sup>46</sup>

### Implications of Jacob's Sexual Ethic for Book of Mormon Readers

Up to this point, my purpose in this essay has been to argue that the sexual ethic that Jacob presents in his temple sermon is an act of scriptural reinterpretation. In the previous section, I demonstrated that despite Jacob's implications, his sexual ethic is not supported by what the Hebrew Bible has to say on the subject. I also showed how Jacob's commitment to a particular moral value led him to reject scriptural precedent and (re)establish a less harmful sexual ethic.<sup>47</sup>

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46. Although Jacob's defense of Nephite women is in many ways laudable, I note here that it should not be spared from critical attention. Spencer (in *1st Nephi* and *Anatomy of Book of Mormon Theology*) argues for reading two instances of "female resistance" (*1st Nephi*, 107) in Nephi's narration as type scenes, contrasting Sariah's ability to resolve her complaint to Lehi with Nephi and Laman's appropriation of the complaints voiced by women of their generation. The Nephite women's complaints about polygamy could conceivably be a third scene following this trajectory, one where the narrator does not even allow them to voice their own complaint (at least, in his narrative) before intervening. See also Lynn Matthews Anderson's observation that Jacob's defense of the Nephite women uses language implying female weakness: Lynn Matthews Anderson, "Toward a Feminist Interpretation of Latter-day Scripture," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27, no. 2 (1994): 185–203.

47. Note, however, that Jacob does not outright reject prophets or scriptures as sources of authority. He clearly invokes Lehi's teaching in his sermon, and his suggestion that scripture supports his stance, while mistaken, can still be seen as an awkward recognition of the importance of scripture.

In this section, I will consider how the specific value identified by Jacob—*minimizing harm*—could serve as an example for readers of the Book of Mormon considering sexual ethics. However, as I have argued above, Jacob is not merely articulating an abstract moral value: He is also bringing it into conversation with scripture and even using it as a lens for reinterpreting scripture. In some ways, this may be the more important lesson from Jacob's temple sermon, and I will therefore focus on possible reconsiderations of sexual ethics that would involve challenging scriptural or prophetic precedent.

It is important to acknowledge that Jacob's example, while useful, is incomplete. In one thorough treatment of Christian sexual ethics, Farley uses harm avoidance as a starting point but quickly specifies that it is insufficient on its own, arguing for the importance of additional values (free consent, mutuality, equality, commitment, fruitfulness, and social justice).<sup>48</sup> Because Jacob's ethic is built around a single value, it is not difficult to imagine more complex situations where it would be insufficient for answering pressing questions about sexual behavior.<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, that Jacob's thinking overlaps with Farley's richer framework suggests that it also has potential as a starting point.

In the following sections, I will briefly describe some opportunities for institutions and individuals who accept the Book of Mormon to apply Jacob's example. I expect that my brief exploration is as incomplete as Jacob's sexual ethic—that there are other ways that his example could be applied. As I noted earlier, I will keep this description largely hypothetical and intentionally refrain from advocating for specific

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48. Farley, *Just Love*.

49. That said, requiring any argument about sexual ethics (or related reading of scripture) to have universal application may be an unreasonable expectation. For example, Swancutt, in "Sexing the Pauline Body of Christ," provides a reading of Paul that productively challenges Christian assumptions about sexual ethics, but she also argues that it should not provide a universal standard. Likewise, although Farley's *Just Love* is a book-length treatment much more thorough than Jacob's sermon, she also emphasizes its incompleteness.

teachings or policies within specific denominations. Nonetheless, I believe in Lindgren's invitation to "ask questions and listen to [the Book of Mormon's] responses," and I believe that Jacob's responses are particularly worth listening to in the context of sexual ethics.<sup>50</sup>

### *Rethinking the Importance of Legal Marriage*

To begin, I will consider an ethic that insists that any sexual behavior outside of a legal marriage is inherently immoral. There are several ways in which people might violate this ethic, ranging from two strangers having a one-night stand to common-law spouses whose immigration status prevents them from being legally married in their country of residence. Many Book of Mormon readers have drawn on some kind of scriptural or prophetic precedent (some clearer than others) to justify a declaration that all these behaviors are unethical. However, this example demonstrates how Jacob's avoidance of harm is helpful for determining when and how to consider reinterpreting scriptural and prophetic precedent. A carefully developed sexual ethic drawing from Jacob's example could still discourage casual sexual relationships where emotional commitment and, therefore, emotional harm are less salient factors. Yet the same ethic might still determine that it is permissible to allow for clearly committed but not legally binding relationships whose prevention or dissolution in the name of obedience would cause greater harm. Indeed, while demonstrating the importance of bringing values into conversation with scripture, this example also suggests the insufficiency of Jacob's single value on its own. Beyond the question of harm, the possibility that a sexual ethic might treat differently a one-night stand and a common-law marriage necessarily asks about the importance of an underlying principle of commitment (as articulated, for example, in Farley's framework). However, this principle is not explicitly articulated by Jacob in his temple sermon.

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50. Lindgren, "Sign or Scripture," 74. Of course, Lindgren also acknowledges that "we will find ourselves arguing with the book's answers much of the time" (75).

### *Rethinking LGBTQ+ Relationships and Identities*

Perhaps the most compelling contemporary application of Jacob's temple sermon in this way is with respect to LGBTQ+ identities and relationships. Most readers of the Book of Mormon espouse a sexual ethic that excludes as illegitimate any romantic or sexual relationship that is not between people of different sexes who respectively conform to certain culturally approved expressions of gender. While some readers might downplay the harm experienced by queer individuals (including their co-religionists) as a result of this sexual ethic, it seems to me that this harm is well documented and, therefore, undeniable. Other readers might apologetically acknowledge this harm but insist that prophetic and scriptural teaching must nevertheless be unfailingly adhered to in developing a sexual ethic.<sup>51</sup> Yet, according to the reading I have proposed here, the lesson of Jacob's temple sermon seems to be the opposite: It was the harm experienced by Nephite women that caused Jacob to (re)introduce a sexual ethic that diminished that harm—even if it meant defying scriptural and prophetic precedent.

### *Rethinking an Insistence on Monogamy*

One interesting consequence of separating the deeper value informing Jacob's sexual ethic from the surface-level commandment he presents is the way that the former can be read *against* the latter. That is, if Jacob's insistence on monogamy is the natural application of *minimizing harm* to that particular context, there remains the possibility that the same value could be applied in a different context to reinterpret Jacob's surface-level insistence on monogamy. To be clear: Polygamy as practiced

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51. It is important to note that the biblical prooftexts invoked to condemn LGBTQ+ identities and behaviors represent ancient conceptions of gender, sexuality, and other cultural norms and are therefore not the explicit condemnations that some modern Christians hope them to be; Swancutt, "Sexing the Pauline Body of Christ," and Caldwell, "Viability of Christian Same-Sex Unions," provide some examples, but the limited scope of this paper prevents a more thorough review of the rich literature on this subject.

by the Nephite men in Jacob 2 and by other men in various Restoration contexts has clearly caused harm and may therefore be judged as unethical despite scriptural or prophetic justification (indeed, I have described this as central to Jacob's argument). Yet a deeper reading of Jacob 2 requires Book of Mormon readers to consider the harm that a context-blind insistence on monogamy could potentially cause within relationships and families that do not conform to this teaching. Furthermore, this deeper reading even leaves open the possibility that a non-monogamous relationship that does not cause harm could be recognized as ethical despite Jacob's emphasis on monogamy. As previously noted, Jacob's sexual ethic is incomplete—if it is possible to distinguish acceptable non-monogamous relationships from unacceptable ones, it would presumably be necessary to establish other values first. Yet if Jacob's argument is, indeed, based on an underlying value rather than a straightforward commandment, his sexual ethic is perhaps not as universally insistent on monogamy as has traditionally been assumed.

### Conclusion

In a 2003 address to the Mormon History Association, Grant McMurray—then serving as Community of Christ's prophet-president—warned Book of Mormon readers against “replacing a stifling biblical fundamentalism . . . with one of our own only somewhat expanded variety.”<sup>52</sup> McMurray's point was that individuals and denominations who accept Restoration scripture's radical challenging of the established Christian canon miss the point if they themselves are unwilling to challenge the teachings of those same Restoration scriptures. In this article, I have hoped to demonstrate that a similar teaching is found within the Book of Mormon itself. Jacob does not describe his temple sermon as an act

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52. W. Grant McMurray, “A ‘Goodly Heritage’ in a Time of Transformation: History and Identity in the Community of Christ,” *Journal of Mormon History* 30, no. 1 (2004): 72.

of reinterpretation—I wonder if he is himself too uncomfortable with the idea to do so. Nonetheless, as I have argued, Jacob's teachings at the Nephite temple can be understood as a deliberate act of reinterpretation and as one element of a broader pattern of reinterpretation throughout his ministry.

Jacob's lesson on reinterpreting scripture is particularly important as a model for rethinking sexual ethics. Many contemporary readers of the Book of Mormon—and even more readers of the Bible—appeal to a purportedly straightforward and consistent scriptural precedent to uphold a “traditional” sexual ethic, even if that ethic can be demonstrated to cause harm. Jacob invites us to see things differently; indeed, few of the Book of Mormon or Bible readers who argue for that “traditional” ethic would disagree with Jacob's rejection of the Hebrew Bible's permissiveness in terms of polygamy and sex slavery. Understanding that this rejection *is* a reinterpretation invites us to further follow Jacob's example by engaging in value-driven reading of scripture and rethinking of sexual ethic for the contexts that we live and worship in. Perhaps more than anything, it is Jacob's sensitivity to the harm experienced by his people that ought to capture the attention of Book of Mormon readers. He gives us prophetic permission to prioritize that sensitivity above tradition and thereby opens the door for us to practice our discipleship in new ways.

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