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A More Perfect Priority?

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Abstract: Review of “The Priority of Mosiah: A Prelude to Book of Mormon Exegesis” (1993), by Brent Lee Metcalfe.



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Brent Lee Metcalfe, "The Priority of Mosiah: A Prelude to Book of Mormon Exegesis." Pp. 395–444.

A More Perfect Priority?

Reviewed by Matthew Roper

In his recent essay, "The Priority of Mosiah: A Prelude to Book of Mormon Exegesis," Brent Lee Metcalfe examines historical and textual evidence relating to the dictation sequence of the Book of Mormon and its bearing upon its authorship. However, Metcalfe's chief interest is not so much to establish the priority of the book of Mosiah in the translation sequence of the Book of Mormon, a theory which few writers doubt today, but to show that the Book of Mormon narrative displays certain anomalies which can best be explained by viewing Joseph Smith not as translator of an ancient scriptural text, but as a modern author of a fictional nineteenth-century narrative. Thus Metcalfe is arguing not so much for the priority of Mosiah in the dictation sequence, but for a priority of naturalistic assumptions in approaching the Book of Mormon text. Since Royal Skousen has already addressed issues relating to the original and printer's manuscripts to the Book of Mormon discussed by Metcalfe in the first part of his essay,¹ I will limit my discussion here to the purported anomalies in the Book of Mormon narrative, which Metcalfe claims support his naturalistic paradigm of the translation sequence.

Knowledge of Christ's Birth

Metcalfe argues that the Nephite prophets in the first translation sequence (Mosiah–3 Nephi 10) are ignorant of the earlier prophecies of Lehi and other prophets regarding the date of Christ's birth. "Alma, Benjamin, and their audiences did not know what Lehi, Nephi, an angel, anonymous Old World prophets, and their sacred literature had known with certainty: that Jesus would be born 600 years after the Lehites departed for

¹ See the review by Royal Skousen, in this volume, pages 122–46.

the Americas" (p. 416). Aside from the fact that this is largely an argument from silence, there are several reasons why I find this argument unpersuasive.

Metcalfé cites a passage from King Benjamin's speech: " 'The time cometh, and is not far distant . . . [that the Lord] shall come down from heaven . . . and shall dwell in a tabernacle of clay' (Mosiah 3:5)." Metcalfé finds this comment "surprising since the scriptures Benjamin possessed presumably told him this would not occur for over 120 years" (p. 416). He assumes that if Benjamin had prophetic knowledge of the time of Christ's birth he should have mentioned this fact in his speech. But why should he? We have only five chapters of Benjamin's words, anyway. This is a very poor sample from which to determine the extent of Benjamin's scriptural knowledge. Metcalfé continues, "Alma speaks of Jesus' advent in similar terms: 'the kingdom of heaven is soon at hand' (Alma 5:28, 50; [a. 83 B.C.]); 'the time is not far distant' (7:7); 'not many days hence' (9:26; [a. 82 B.C.]); and 'the day of salvation draweth nigh' (13:21). . . . Mormon also shares this ambiguity, describing Alma's contemporaries as '[h]olding forth things which must shortly come' (16:19 [speaking of a period a. 78 B.C.])" (p. 416 n.25). While Metcalfé argues that these terms are inappropriate for the periods in question, each of them seems perfectly reasonable given the context in which they appear in the Book of Mormon narrative. Eighty-three years, 78 years and even 124 years are a relatively short period of time from the perspective of prophecy. For example, in the New Testament, Jesus tells John, "Behold, I come quickly" (Revelation 22:12), and the Revelator introduces his vision with the statement that it contains things "which must shortly come to pass" (Revelation 1:1); "which must be hereafter" (Revelation 4:1), whose "time is at hand" (Revelation 1:3). Similar passages in the Book of Mormon are equally ambiguous and simply do not require the narrow interpretation upon which Metcalfé seems to insist. How soon is "soon"? How distant is "not far distant" from the perspective of prophecy? Book of Mormon prophets use the word "soon" in a variety of ways. "Soon" can mean "days" (Alma 57:8), or about three years (Mosiah 1:9), but it can also be used to denote longer periods of time (Jacob 5:29, 37, 71). Alma considers an eschatological day of judgment to be "soon at hand" (Alma 5:28). Likewise, Zenos prophesies allegorically that "the time [of judgment] draweth near" (Jacob 5:29), "the

end draweth nigh” (Jacob 5:47, 62), “nigh at hand” (Jacob 5:71), and “the season speedily cometh” (Jacob 5:71). There is also some ambiguity in the terms *time* and *day* in the Book of Mormon text. For instance, Alma prophesies to his son Helaman concerning the future destruction of the Nephites, saying, “And when that great day cometh, behold the time very soon cometh” (Alma 45:13). Obviously, Alma’s prophetic “day” does not have to refer to a regular day of twenty-four hours, but can also refer to a longer, more ambiguous time period.

The Time of Christ’s Coming

Metcalf argues that Alma appears ignorant of the 600-year prophecy since he hopes that the Lord’s coming might be in his day and says regarding that event, “we know not how soon” (Alma 13:25).² But Alma is not speaking of Jesus’ birth—of which he already knows—but of Jesus’ coming among the Nephites in their own land. In fact, Alma says nothing about Christ’s birth in this passage, but speaks of the Lord’s “coming in his glory.” An interesting phrase. On the small plates, Nephi had foretold that, at some unspecified time “after Christ shall have risen from the dead,” he would show himself unto the Nephites, “and the words which he shall speak unto you shall be the law which ye shall do” (2 Nephi 26:1). Contrary to Metcalfe, Alma 13 is consistent with Nephi’s earlier prophecy on the small plates. Alma states that angels had already begun the work of

² Perhaps Metcalfe (and others) take the 600-year prophecy with more precision than it may have been intended to convey. The statements of Lehi (1 Nephi 10:4) and Nephi (1 Nephi 19:8; 2 Nephi 25:19) might well mean precisely 600 years. However, a century is a good round number. I can intelligibly say that Heber J. Grant, died “a century” after Joseph Smith, even though the relevant dates are more precisely 1844 and 1945. And I probably have somewhat more leeway than that, especially when we are talking about *six* centuries. Did the prophecy mean exactly 600 years? How about 599? 605? Or even 590? 550? Alma₂ was probably fairly young between 100 and 92 B.C. If he could have lived until, say, 32 B.C., he would be well within the range of reasonable interpretation for six centuries. But he would also be quite old. This might explain his somewhat wistful hope that Christ might come—though probably not in his own time. I would like to thank Daniel Peterson for sharing this observation. As I explain below, however, the scriptures cited by Metcalfe refer not to Christ’s birth, but rather to the time of his coming among the Nephites in the New World following his resurrection.

preparing the Nephites to receive Christ's teachings at the anticipated time of his visit among them.

For behold, angels are declaring it unto many at this time *in our land*; and this is for the purpose of preparing the hearts of the children of men to receive his word at the time of *his coming in his glory* [that is, among the Nephites]. And now we only wait to hear the joyful news declared unto us by the mouth of angels, of *his coming [that is, among the Nephites in their own land]*; for the time cometh, we know not how soon. Would to God that it might be in my day; but let it be sooner or later, in it I will rejoice. (Alma 13:24–25)

The prophecies on the small plates of Nephi would have told of the date of Christ's birth, but would not have told the date of his death or exactly how long after the resurrection Christ would appear to the Nephites. It is clearly that great day which Alma longs to see. He and others were preparing the hearts of the people of their land to receive Christ's word when he came among them, just as Nephi promised they would need to do. Christ would come among them, Alma says, "that the words of our fathers may be fulfilled, according to that which they have spoken concerning him, which was according to the spirit of prophecy which was in them" (Alma 13:24; cf. Alma 5:50–52). Obviously Alma is familiar with the prophecies which speak of his coming among the Nephites. Alma taught his son Corianton, somewhere around 73 B.C., that they were "called to declare these glad tidings unto *this people*, to prepare *their* minds . . . that *they* might prepare the minds of *their children* to hear the word at the time of his coming" among them (Alma 39:16). Alma wants to prepare the people in his land, so that they will prepare their children for Christ's coming among them. So Alma appears to know that Christ will not come in his lifetime, but in the lifetime of at least some of the rising generation, information which, it is reasonable to assume, he learned from the records in his possession. So when Mormon states a few years earlier, "And many of the people did inquire concerning the place where the Son of God should come; and they were taught [why not by Alma who would already have known from the scriptures in his possession?] that he would appear unto them after his resurrection; and this the people did hear with joy and gladness" (Alma 16:20). Thus, it seems likely that this was not a new revelation,

as Metcalfe asserts, but that the new converts learned this information from Alma, who was the keeper of the records on the small plates.

But Metcalfe does raise a significant point: Why would Benjamin and Alma not speak more specifically of the date of Christ's birth and Lehi's 600-year prophecy in their public discourses in the land of Zarahemla? The most likely explanation may be that this information was considered a mystery, reserved for the faithful.³ Nephite prophets often concealed certain scriptural information from the public at various times in their history, for diverse reasons (Alma 37:27–29; 45:9; 3 Nephi 28:25; Ether 4:1). I would suggest that Samuel's prophecy was considered significant and unique because it was the first public disclosure of the date of Christ's birth among the people of Zarahemla and not because the information was new. The largely negative reaction of the people (Helaman 16:6–23; 3 Nephi 1:4–10) is reason enough for the prophets to have concealed the information so long.

Christ's Name

Metcalfe claims that "originally the revelation of 'Christ' to Jacob [in 2 Nephi 10:3] was redundant, since 'Jesus Christ had already been revealed to Nephi [1 Nephi 12:18]" (p. 430). Yet, contrary to Metcalfe, Jacob never claimed that his information on Christ's name was unique, merely that an angel had reaffirmed that this was his name. Nephi, who inserted these teachings into his record on the small plates, explained that he quoted from his brother Jacob's writings not because they were unique but because they offered another witness that his own teachings and revelations were true. Thus, Nephi says, "And my brother, Jacob, also has seen him [Christ]; wherefore I will send their [Jacob and Isaiah's] words forth unto my children to prove unto

³ In his discourse to the people of Ammonihah, Alma explains to Zeezrom, "It is given unto many to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God; nevertheless they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart only according to the heed and diligence which they give unto him. And therefore, he that will harden his heart, the same receiveth the lesser portion of the word; and he that will not harden his heart to him is given the greater portion of the word, until it is given unto him to know the mysteries of God until he know them in full. And they that will harden their hearts, to them is given the lesser portion of the word until they know nothing concerning his mysteries" (Alma 12:9–11).

them that *my words are true*" (2 Nephi 11:3). Likewise it would be incorrect to say that King Benjamin's discourse "was to disclose the Messiah's 'name' for the first time" (p. 430 n. 44). Benjamin makes no claim that the name "Christ" is new; he only states that because of the people's faithfulness and diligence he would confer that name upon them as a people—which is something quite different.

Baptism in the Book of Mormon

Metcalfe argues that Book of Mormon teachings on baptism evolve along the lines one would expect in his naturalistic model (p. 418–22). He reasons that Jesus' appearance in 3 Nephi 11 introduces a "Christocentric" baptism into the translation sequence, while previous baptisms in Mosiah–3 Nephi 10 were merely done "unto repentance" (p. 419).⁴ But Metcalfe's distinction between two kinds of baptism is more contrived than real. First, he has only focused on two elements of baptism, while ignoring other elements that are clearly consistent throughout the translation sequence, artificially exaggerating the supposed distinction. Second, and more importantly, baptisms throughout the Book of Mormon are consistently associated with both repentance and faith in Christ's redemption. Metcalfe's dogmatic insistence on two distinct baptisms, one penitent and another Christocentric, is implausible from a textual standpoint since early references to baptism in the Book of Mormon are no less penitent than later references.⁵ In fact, the only reason people repent and are baptized in the Book of Mormon is because they believe that Christ will redeem them.

Metcalfe also reasons that baptisms done after the first sequence (from 3 Nephi 11–Words of Mormon) are performed in Christ's name—"an idea virtually absent from Mosiah

⁴ Metcalfe's comparison of the baptism of John the Baptist with that of Alma is superficial since among the Nephites the Holy Ghost was given (Mosiah 18:10).

⁵ References to being baptized unto repentance occur in the early revelations as well (D&C 35:5; 107:20). Metcalfe's theory would have Joseph waffling from penitent baptism (Mosiah 1–3 Nephi 10) to Christocentric baptism (3 Nephi 11–Words of Mormon) back to penitent baptism in the Doctrine and Covenants. One can argue that Joseph eventually decided upon a combination between the two, but it is much easier to believe that baptism was always understood to be both penitent and centered on Christ.

through 3 Nephi 10" (p. 419). Yet this is incorrect, since Alma states that he "baptized" those who believed in Christ "in the name of the Lord" (Mosiah 18:10). This is a significant point since later baptisms in the land of Zarahemla are said to be done after the manner of Alma's baptism at the waters of Mormon (Mosiah 25:18). Metcalfe, aware of the difficulty that this passage poses for his argument, simply passes over it, noting only that "Alma's use of the phrase is misplaced since his subsequent baptisms are performed in no one's name" (p. 420). In other words, Metcalfe assumes that baptism in the Lord's "name" can only refer to the words spoken in a baptismal prayer. But this assumption is unjustified since the text uses this phrase to refer to baptism done by Christ's authority and not to the words of a prayer. For example, in 3 Nephi, when Christ gave Nephi and others power to baptize in his name (3 Nephi 11:21-22), he revealed the actual words to be used by the administrator of baptism among the Nephites: "And now these are the words which ye shall say, calling them by name, saying: Having authority given me of Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost" (3 Nephi 11:25). Jesus then repeated the command that the people must repent and "be baptized in my name," referring specifically to the instructions that he has just given (3 Nephi 11:37). So, apparently, Book of Mormon references to baptism "in the name of" the Lord do not refer to words of a baptismal prayer, but to the fact that baptism is performed by Christ's authority.⁶

Thus, when Alma speaks of baptism "in the name of the Lord" (Mosiah 18:10), believers, contrary to Metcalfe, really are baptized in Christ's name since they believe in Christ's redemption and since Alma has authority from God to baptize (Mosiah 18:17; Alma 5:3). In fact, Alma's group was called the "church of Christ" for the very reason that they were "baptized by the

⁶ The early revelations likewise specify the words said during baptism (D&C 20:73), yet they continue to speak of being baptized in the Lord's name (D&C 20:25; 18:22, 41; 49:1, 13; 76:51; 84:74), as does the book of Moses (compare Moses 6:52; 7:11; 8:24). Metcalfe incorrectly attributes 2 Nephi 31:21 to the words of a baptismal prayer, when it in fact says no such thing. Nephi, like Jesus, merely speaks of his source of authority for the doctrine. While Moses 6:52 indicates that baptism was done "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost" in Enoch's day, there is nothing in the standard works which claims that all baptisms before the time of Christ or under the Law of Moses had to be so administered.

power and authority of God” (Mosiah 18:17). Those who were baptized “in the name of the Lord” also became members of the “church of Christ” (Mosiah 18:16–17; 25:18), and “whosoever were desirous to take upon them the name of Christ, or of God, they did join the churches of God” (Mosiah 25:23). A little later, Christ confirms this principle when he tells Alma,

Blessed art thou, Alma, and blessed are they who were baptized in the waters of Mormon. . . . Yea, blessed is this people who are willing to bear my name; for in my name shall they be called; and they are mine. . . . For behold, this is my church; whosoever is baptized shall be baptized unto repentance. And whomsoever ye receive [unto baptism] shall believe in my name; and him will I freely forgive. For it is I that taketh upon me the sins of the world; for it is I that hath created them; and it is I that granteth unto him that believeth unto the end a place at my right hand. (Mosiah 26:15, 18, 22–23)

Those to be baptized are taught about Christ’s redemption (Mosiah 18:7), they believe in Christ (Mosiah 18:7), they repent because of Christ (Mosiah 18:1–2, 7), they are baptized in his name (Mosiah 18:10), they covenant to serve God or keep his commandments, and are thereafter members of his Church (Mosiah 18:8, 17). How could the Christocentric nature and focus of baptism in Mosiah 1–3 Nephi 10 be more explicit?

Churches and Denominations

Metcalf next claims that the usage of the term *church* develops along the lines of his naturalistic model.

The first reference to “church” in Mormon’s abridgement occurs in conjunction with Alma’s baptizing (Mosiah 18:17; cf. Mosiah 23:16; 29:47; 3 Nephi 5:12). From here through the beginning of 3 Nephi, the terms “church” and “churches” refer to the single religion of God and its local congregations. When the glorified Jesus appears, he preaches a developed antidenominationalism and clarifies the relationship between true Christianity and infidel imitations (3 Nephi 27:2). After Christ’s sermon the terms “church” and “churches” describe non-Christian or apostate

denominations as well as Christian denominations. The application of the terms to either Christian or apostate churches not only predominates in the sections written after Christ's coming but also in the replacement text in 1 Nephi and 2 Nephi (p. 422).

I believe that Metcalfe's argument here is based upon a superficial reading of the Book of Mormon text, which suggests, in fact, that the character of religious entities is far more complex.

The Book of Mormon alludes to numerous elements throughout the translation sequence which were obviously religious in nature. Idolatry was considered a serious threat to Nephite faith throughout Book of Mormon history. Jacob warns against it (2 Nephi 9:37), Enos mentions it in passing (Enos 1:20), and it continued to be a threat to the spirituality of the Church during the time of the judges (Alma 1:32; 31:1; 50:21; Helaman 6:31) and even after the time of Christ (Mormon 4:14, 21). During the reign of Mosiah₂, we are told that "there were many of the rising generation that could not understand the words of King Benjamin . . . and they did not believe in the tradition of their fathers." This group rejected the doctrine of resurrection and did not believe in the coming of Christ. "And they would not be baptized, neither would they join the Church. And they were a separate people *as to their faith*" (Mosiah 26:1-4). Alma₂, who was numbered among these unbelievers, "became a very wicked and *idolatrous* man. And he was a man of many words, and did speak much flattery to the people; therefore he led many of the people to do after the manner of his iniquities" (Mosiah 27:8). I would agree with John Sorenson that these references describe "not just one personality but a distinct tradition of beliefs and rites."⁷ In addition to idolatry, Mormon also describes certain unspecified practices which he designates as sorcery (Alma 1:32; Mormon 1:19) and "witchcrafts and magics" (Mormon 1:19), as well as what could be interpreted as ritual prostitution (Alma 1:32; 39:3-5).⁸ Why shouldn't such religious entities with their adherents be described as a kind of "church"?

⁷ John L. Sorenson, "The 'Mulekites,'" *BYU Studies* 30/3 (1990): 18.

⁸ Hugh Nibley, "The Book of Mormon: Forty Years After," in *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, vol. 8 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1989), 542.

Oddly, Metcalfe dismisses the case of the order of Nehors, which is clearly described as a “church.” However, that case deserves closer attention than he has given it. During the first year of Alma’s reign, Nehor established “a church after the manner of his preaching” (Alma 1:6). When Alma speaks of the “Holy Order of God” to the people of Ammonihah, he would seem to be contrasting God’s priesthood with that of the order of Nehor. After the death of Nehor, his apostate rival “church” continued to grow. The death of its founder “did not put an end to the spreading of priestcraft throughout the land [not necessarily of a strictly Nehorian variety]; for there were *many* who loved the vain things of the world, and they went forth preaching false doctrines; and this for the sake of riches and honor. . . . They pretended to preach according to their belief” (Alma 1:16–17). Mormon contrasts the practices of these groups to those of the Church of God: “And thus they [the members of God’s Church] did prosper and become far more wealthy than those who did not belong to *their* church. For those who did not belong to *their* church did indulge themselves in sorceries, and in idolatry or idleness, and in babblings, and in envyings and strife; wearing costly apparel; being lifted up in the pride of their own eyes; persecuting, lying, thieving, robbing, committing whoredoms, and murdering, and all manner of wickedness” (Alma 1:31–32).

Like the Nehors, the Zoramites build their own synagogues or places of worship (Alma 31:12–13; 32:1–3, 5, 9, 12; 33:2) and they have their own priests and teachers (Alma 35:5). Yet they are a distinct religious group from the Nehors. In contrast to the Nehors the Zoramites teach a doctrine of election and a kind of separatism (Alma 31:15–18), while the Nehors teach a kind of universal salvation (Alma 1:4; 21:6). The Zoramite leader Zoram, according to Alma, “was leading the hearts of the people to bow down to dumb idols” (Alma 31:1), which strongly suggests a set of rituals and ordinances which rivals the Nephites’ religious system, which they directly oppose. Since we already know that the Nehors were organized into a church and since the Zoramites display all the same external forms, why can’t we consider the Zoramite system, like that of the Nehors, to be a kind of “church”?

The tension between counterreligious systems in Nephite Book of Mormon culture is quite clearly shown in the account of the Zoramite war in which the Nephites were forced to fight the

Lamanites led by Nehorite Amalekites and Zoramites. Mormon indicates that the Nephites understood the war to be a conflict between religious systems as well as political ideologies. "The design of the Nephites," according to Mormon, was to "preserve their rights and their privileges, yea and also their liberty, that they might worship God according to their desires" (Alma 43:9). The Nephites were fighting, among other things, for "*their rites of worship and their church*" (Alma 43:45). When we remember that most of the Lamanite captains were professing Nehors and religious Zoramites, many of whom had apostatized from the Nephite church, Moroni's speech to them is all the more pointed:

But now, ye behold that the Lord is with us; and ye behold that he has delivered you into our hands. And now I would that ye should understand that this is done unto us because of our religion and our faith in Christ. And now ye see that ye cannot destroy this our faith. Now ye see that this is the *true faith of God*; yea, ye see that God will support, and keep, and preserve us, so long as we are faithful unto him, and unto our faith, and our religion; and never will the Lord suffer that we shall be destroyed except we should fall into transgression and deny our faith. And now, Zerahemnah, I command you, in the name of that all-powerful God, who has strengthened our arms that we have gained power over you, by *our* faith, and by *our* rites of worship, and by *our* church, . . . and by the maintenance of the sacred word of God, to which we owe all our happiness . . . that ye deliver up your weapons of war. (Alma 44:3–6)

In this speech, Moroni seems to be contrasting the merits of religious systems. Thus, although not explicitly designated as such, the Zoramite religious system, with its adherents, could also reasonably be understood as a "church."

In addition to the undercurrent of idolatry and sorcery among the Nehors and the Zoramites, the text also speaks of Nephite missionaries preaching to those who had built "temples," "sanctuaries," and "synagogues, which were built after the manner of the Jews" (Alma 16:13), yet who were apparently not of the Church of Christ. "And as many as would hear their words, unto them they did impart the word of God" (Alma 16:14). Thus, when Jesus speaks of churches in the Nephite past which had been "called in the name of a man" such as Nehor or Zoram,

or in “Moses’ name,” he is not introducing some new “antidenominationalism” that “clarifies the relationship between true Christianity and infidel imitations” (p. 422), as Metcalfe claims. Historical parallels were already familiar to Nephite memory, since there were non-Christian and apostate “churches” long before the ministry of Christ.

From Three Witnesses to Many

Metcalfe argues that early scriptures on the mission of the three witnesses support his naturalistic “Mosian priority” theory since they indicate, to him, an obvious development from three witnesses who would see the plates (originally including Joseph Smith), to three witnesses in addition to Joseph Smith, to three witnesses plus Joseph Smith and an additional “few,” to finally “many witnesses” (pp. 423–25). Metcalfe finds these passages contradictory from the standpoint of the Book of Mormon, but an understandable development if Joseph Smith is viewed as its author.

Metcalfe implies that this would contradict the Prophet’s March 1829 revelation that only three, including Joseph Smith, would see the plates: “yea & the testimony of three of my servants shall go forth with my word unto this Generation yea three shall know of a surety that these things are true for I will give them power that they may behold & view these things as they are & to none else will I grant this power among this generation.” Metcalfe argues that the three witnesses in this revelation refer to “only three people, implicitly including Smith, [who] would see the plates” (p. 423). But this interpretation is unlikely since Joseph Smith already knew “of a surety” that the Book of Mormon was true, having already seen and handled the plates, the interpreters, and other artifacts and having frequently conversed with heavenly messengers regarding them. The future tense makes clear that the unidentified three have yet to be chosen and given “power that they may behold & view these things as they are.” Thus, contrary to Metcalfe, the text of the 1829 revelation implicitly *excludes* Joseph Smith from the three future witnesses since he already had received that testimony, while the Lord’s promise is yet future.

Metcalfe also argues that Book of Mormon scriptures on the witnesses contradict the 1829 revelation which states that “three and none else” would see the plates” (p. 424). But the revelation

does not say that no others will see the plates, but that the Lord would not grant others "this power": "I will give them power that they may Behold & view these things as they are & to none else will I grant *this* power among this generation" (emphasis added). What power is that? Obviously, the Lord is not speaking of merely seeing the plates, but of the fact that they will be viewed and shown "by the power of God." This suggests something unique. While there are other accounts of some early Latter-day Saints who saw angels and even the plates in vision,⁹ no other men were granted the opportunity to send forth the testimony that the plates were shown "by the power of God" with the Book of Mormon in this generation. This was the unique privilege of Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, and David Whitmer, whose testimonies appear in every copy of that book. Moreover, the term *these things* is ambiguous enough to suggest more than just the plates of the Book of Mormon. The revelation previously speaks of the "things" which the Lord had entrusted to Joseph's care and "the things which have been spoken of," which could plausibly refer not only to the plates, but the other Nephite artifacts as well. This interpretation is supported by the testimonies of the Three Witnesses themselves who were not only shown the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated, but also the brass plates, the twenty-four plates of Ether's record, the sword of Laban, and the Liahona. Just as the Lord said, *that* testimony remains unprecedented in this dispensation.

Metcalf also argues that Book of Mormon passages on the witnesses seem to contradict each other. However, the examples he cites can be easily reconciled. Apparent inconsistencies between Ether 5:2–4 and 2 Nephi 27:12–14 also turn out to be nonexistent upon a closer reading of the text. Metcalf complains that Moroni only alludes to Joseph Smith and three other witnesses (Ether 5:2–4), while Nephi alludes to Joseph Smith, three witnesses, and many other witnesses (2 Nephi 27:12–14). However, Moroni makes a significant distinction between those who are shown the plates by the Prophet ("ye may show the plates"; Ether 5:2) and the three who are shown things "by the power of God" (Ether 5:3–4). Moroni states, "And behold, ye [Joseph Smith] may be privileged that ye may show the plates

⁹ See, for example, my "Comments on the Book of Mormon Witnesses: A Response to Jerald and Sandra Tanner," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/2 (Fall 1993): 165–72.

unto those who shall assist to bring forth this work” (Ether 5:2). These individuals are apparently distinct from the three who would be shown the plates “by the power of God” (Ether 5:3). Nephi mentions that, in addition to the three who would be shown the plates by the power of God, there would be an unspecified number (“a few”; 2 Nephi 27:13), who would also be permitted to see the plates. Nephi’s “few” parallels Moroni’s words concerning “those who shall assist to bring forth this work.” This would appear to fit the case of the Eight Witnesses to the Book of Mormon and the other incidental witnesses who saw or handled the plates. Moreover, Nephi does not state that there would be “many witnesses” of the plates as Metcalfe claims, but only “*as many witnesses as seemeth him good*” (2 Nephi 2:14; i.e., from among those few who assist to bring forth the work; Ether 5:2). Since the revelation for section 5 does not prohibit others from seeing the plates and since Ether 5:2 and 2 Nephi 27:12–14 allow for additional witnesses as well, the apparent inconsistency requiring Metcalfe’s naturalistic explanation is resolved.

Malachi

Like other critics in the past, Metcalfe discusses similarities between several phrases used by Nephi and Malachi 4:1–2. Metcalfe states, “Curiously, the first book of the Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi, attributes this passage from Malachi to an unnamed prophet. . . . Nephi’s explicit references to ‘the prophet’s’ insights from Malachi 4:1 contradict Christ’s assertion that he was delivering to Nephites previously inaccessible writings” (p. 426). In my view, however, this conclusion is ill founded. When Jesus speaks of other scriptures which they previously did not have he could easily refer to the prophecies of Samuel the Lamanite (3 Nephi 23:9–12) and to other parts of Malachi’s prophecy such as the coming of the Lord’s messenger (3 Nephi 24:1–5), an important discussion of tithes and offerings (3 Nephi 24:8–12), and the promise of Elijah’s coming (3 Nephi 25:5–6). Obviously Jesus was referring to these teachings and not merely the phrases used by earlier prophets. Some ideas found in Malachi 4:1–2 can also be found in other Old Testament passages, such as the idea that the wicked would be devoured as stubble: “Thy wrath which consumed them as stubble” (Exodus 15:7); “The fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth

the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness" (Isaiah 5:24); "Ye shall conceive chaff, ye shall bring forth stubble: your breath, as fire, shall devour you. . . . As thorns cut up shall they be burned in the fire" (Isaiah 33:11–12); "Behold they shall be as stubble; the fire shall burn them" (Isaiah 47:14); "They shall be devoured as stubble fully dry" (Nahum 1:10); "Like the noise of a flame of fire that devoureth the stubble" (Joel 2:5); "And the house of Jacob shall be a fire, and the house of Joseph a flame, and the house of Esau for stubble, and they shall kindle in them, and devour them; and there shall not be any remaining" (Obadiah 1:18). Amos speaks of the wicked rulers in Zion who "eat the lambs out of the flock, and the calves out of the midst of the stall" (Amos 6:4), although the metaphor is used in a negative sense. These passages clearly suggest that at least some of the ideas and language found in Malachi 4:1–2 were common prophetic language long before Malachi's prophecies were recorded.

The only passages in Malachi which bear any similarity to Nephi's prophecy are Malachi 4:1–2: "For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch. But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves in the stall" (Malachi 4:1–2). In the Book of Mormon Nephi quotes the brass plates, "For behold, saith the prophet, . . . the day soon cometh that all the proud and they that do wickedly shall be as stubble; and the day cometh that they must be burned" (1 Nephi 22:15), "must be consumed as stubble" (1 Nephi 22:23); "Wherefore, all those who are proud, and that do wickedly, the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of Hosts, for they shall be stubble" (2 Nephi 26:4); "they shall be as stubble, and the day that cometh shall consume them, saith the Lord of Hosts" (2 Nephi 26:6). Nephi also speaks of the Only Begotten rising from the dead "with healing in his wings" (2 Nephi 25:13) and of the Nephites being healed by the "Son of righteousness" (2 Nephi 26:9). Yet in all of these passages there are some differences as well. Critics of the Book of Mormon have assumed because there are obvious parallels between some of Nephi's words and those found in Malachi 4:1–2, that this part of the text was simply borrowed from Malachi. But even from the standpoint of textual

criticism similarity—even close similarity—between two texts does not necessarily mean that one is directly dependent upon the other. For example, scholars have long been aware of the close similarity between Isaiah 2:1–3 and Micah 4:1–4, which are much longer and far closer to each other than Nephi is to Malachi 4:1–2. Neither Isaiah nor Micah explain where the saying comes from. W. Eugene March notes, “There is much debate about the historical setting of this famous passage and its almost identical parallel in Isaiah 2:2–4. The slight differences between the two suggest that neither is related directly to the other; both are dependent on some other tradition.”¹⁰ According to James Luther Mays, “the question about the source and date of the original saying continues to be a matter of dispute. Some attribute it to Isaiah ben Amoz, some to Micah; others conclude that the saying is an independent oracle which has been incorporated in both books in the process of their formation. The last opinion seems to be the one that is most probably correct.”¹¹ A growing number of writers in fact believe that the passage was “‘common property’ without copyright, used by different authors” and recognize the very real possibility that both Isaiah and Micah “could have taken it from an earlier anonymous author.”¹²

This is very instructive. In the case of Isaiah and Micah, neither text suggests a source for the prophecy in question, while the Book of Mormon text clearly indicates that Nephi is utilizing the records on the brass plates (1 Nephi 19:22–23; 22:30). If biblical scholars can argue, on the basis of subtle differences in the two passages, that both Isaiah and Micah are dependent upon an older oracle, why is it unreasonable from the standpoint of the Book of Mormon text to suggest that both Nephi and Malachi are partially dependent upon older texts, some of which were on the brass plates?

In summary, Metcalfe, in my view, has failed to demonstrate the need for a naturalistic priority. Each of the supposed anomalies seems to be based upon either a superficial reading of the text or questionable assumptions and can, for the most part, be

¹⁰ W. Eugene March, “Micah,” in James L. Mays, ed., *Harper's Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 733.

¹¹ James L. Mays, *Micah: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 95.

¹² Juan Alfaro, *Justice and Loyalty: A Commentary on the Book of Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 47.

reconciled within the context of the Book of Mormon's own claims.