

A Collection of Insights Flowing from The Book of Mormon

By
A. Keith Thompson

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Introduction

When I was seven years old, shortly after my parents' baptism, two missionary sisters who were fellowshipping them, gave me a personal copy of the Book of Mormon, a scripture marking guide and a red pencil to engage me in this additional testament of the work and mission of Jesus Christ. I remember that my scripture marking was not very good, and I did not finish marking all the scriptures listed in their guide, but my lifelong study of this Book had begun.

By the time I departed on my mission, largely thanks to my early morning seminary teachers, I had read the Book of Mormon four times and received a number of personal revelations by which I knew it was true. What was strange when I began to teach investigators as a full time missionary, was that even though I knew the Book of Mormon was the word of God and had been accurately translated by the gift and power of God, I did not know in the same way that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God for at the time of that realisation, I had not received a separate revelation of that truth. My quest to receive that additional revelation taught me a lot about the revelatory process, because for some reason, God made me work for a separate revelation that Joseph Smith was indeed a prophet of God. When it came about 15 months into my missionary service, it was undeniable, clear and separate. The logical connection between what Emma Smith called 'the divine authenticity' of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's calling as a prophet, did not prove the latter truth to me no matter how reasonable or logical the connection was. But that latter revelation has been spiritually sustaining to me ever since. For example, when well-meaning friends suggested in the 1990s that Joseph Smith had fallen from his prophetic calling because of sins in Kirtland between 1834 and 1837, I could not accept their assertions because God had revealed to me that Joseph Smith was still His prophet in 1977.

However, I had no desire to write about things I had learned by study and revelation till much later when I was working internationally and

was sometimes holed up in hotel rooms in foreign countries on Sundays. After my mission, I had begun a process of voracious reading of both apologetic material written by faithful leaders, academics and interested lay members as well as the hostile criticisms to which some of them responded. But I always had more questions than any of those authors could answer, and I found that my extra questions were pregnant with further revelation. That is, if I asked, sought, and knocked long enough, the Father would reveal answers to most of my questions through the Holy Ghost. So, during those years of extended overseas travel for work, to keep my Sundays sacred, I eschewed my temporal work and began recording the answers I had received, not just in the volumes of my journal, but in a form where I could share them with others.

Some of those answers are collected here. I have grouped them in three themed parts. They do not follow a chronological sequence. That is, the themes that guide the sequence in this book are not the order in which I wrote them. I have chosen the themes in this book to assist readers. I do not expect all readers to read the book as a novel, from beginning to end. I expect some dipping and hopefully, some returning. There is material I have carefully documented and which I think I can prove beyond the balance of probability. But there is other material, which is speculative where, the level of proof is less than probable. In those cases, I have tried to make out what the Anglo branch of my legal profession would call a *prima facie* case.

These are the themes you can see in the Table of Contents with some comment on my reasons for the grouping. First, **Old World Origins**. Nibley, Welch and Sorenson are the most prolific and famous in this space. They have identified much that will convince readers who are willing to consider the evidence objectively as jurors are required to do in a courtroom. Most of us are never required to sit down and come to the objective verdicts expected of those twelve democratically representative men and women. While some juries do make mistakes, we persist with juries because they have an uncanny knack of coming to the right answer, even now in the face of intentional media misinformation campaigns. I believe that if each of us were forced by the law to sit down and consider

the evidence Nibley, Welch, Sorenson and others have provided, they would conclude that the case for the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon had been made out on the balance of probabilities. Most of us are not forced to sit down and make that objective assessment. We can pick and choose what we believe....and belief is a choice. What I have tried to do here is make a modest addition to the scholarly work that tends to prove some of the assumptions we have to make when we choose to believe that the Book of Mormon is another testament of Christ, and that it is a faithful record. The first proof space in which I have written revolves around the use of the words 'synagogue' and 'sanctuary' in the Book of Mormon. Some contemporary scholarship suggests that synagogal practice did not evolve in Judaism until during or after the Babylonian captivity. I have always doubted that, because I thought the Israelites had worship practices after they left Egypt (and yes, I still believe there was an Egyptian captivity and exodus despite scholarship asserting the contrary), and after they dispersed following their entry into their promised land under Joshua. But as I mention in chapter one, even more questions distilled in my mind when I was standing on the shore of the Sea of Galilee in 2010 not far from the remains of a synagogue in Capernaum adjacent to Peter's house. For example, how could the Book of Mormon use the word synagogue to describe some of the places where the Nephites and Lamanites worshipped if there were no synagogues in Judah when Lehi left with his family around 600 BC?

Questions about the contents of the Brass Plates increased as I learned more about Julius Wellhausen's Documentary Hypothesis in the late 19th century. Though I made some errors in early drafts of the first publication that flowed from those questions (the Documentary Hypothesis relates more to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible than those that come later), my primary question and tentative conclusions were undisturbed by those errors. That question was, does scholarship since the Book of Mormon was published enable us to work out any more about the contents of the Brass Plates than the Book of Mormon authors and editors mention in passing? And the answer is yes, but that answer introduces us to questions about the nature of the Brass Plates, the Book of Mormon, and the Gold Plates (including the sealed portion)

as a record of the tribe of Joseph in what now reasonably presents as a Mannassite scribal tradition.¹

My chapter about Sherem responds to the insights Nibley, Welch and Sorenson have provided into the Book of Mormon's Old World context. To be blunt, the Sherem that is revealed in Jacob 6 seemed far too focused on Pharisaic Judaism to me to have been, as others postulated, a Jaredite trader or other local American.² And "Apostate Religion" flowed from Jack Welch's observation to me, that my 'Sherem thesis' had implications for later Zoramite religious practices including during Alma₂'s mission of reclamation more than 400 years later.³ Pondering those later Zoramite religious practices also connected with my earlier work on the Israelite synagogue in ancient America⁴ and the insights of Chris Conkling⁵ and Val Larsen⁶ into Nephite/Mulekite politics at the time of the transition from the Nephite monarchy to a judicial republic under Mosiah₂ and Alma₂ in the first century BC.

Part two entitled **Doctrinal Insights** is a little eclectic. That is because so many other scholars have participated in this space and because the Book of Mormon is so rich in detailing the reach of the atonement. However, there have still been some places where I felt I could make a unique contribution. The first, about the doctrine of resurrection in the Book of Mormon responds to Alma₂'s record of his doctrinal discussions

¹ See for example, Noel Reynolds, "The Brass Plates Version of Genesis", *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 34 (2020) 63-96; "Lehi and Nephi as Trained Manassite Scribes", *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 50 (2022) 161-216, and "Modern Near Eastern Archaeology and the Brass Plates", *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 52 (2022) 111-144.

² See for example, Kevin Christensen, "The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament", *The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship*, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, FARMS Review, 16/2, 2004, 56, 86-88.

³ Jack also graciously referred to my Sherem article in John W. Welch, *Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press and The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2008), 108-109, fn 6.

⁴ Refer chapter I of this book.

⁵ J. Christopher Conkling, "Alma's Enemies: The Case of the Lamanites, Amlicites and the Mysterious Amalekites," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, 14/1 (2005): 108-117, 130-132.

⁶ Val Larsen, "In His Footsteps: Ammon₁ and Ammon₂," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, 3 (2013) 85-113.

with his son Corianton from chapters 39 to 42 of the book of Alma in the Book of Mormon. I have been impressed by Alma₂'s candour in expressing some things as his opinion (e.g. Alma 40:20-21), others as matters where he had received personal revelation (e.g. Alma 40:3, 9-14; 41:1-8) and still others as mysteries (e.g. Alma 12:10-11; 40:3, 5). But I have also been impressed with the thought that he pondered a great deal on the doctrine of resurrection that his father learned from Abinadi⁷ and that he wrote before there had been any resurrection and without knowledge of many additional things that were revealed in Doctrine and Covenants 76. The revelations that Alma₂ received about the doctrine of resurrection also respond to Book of Mormon teaching about the literal way our Heavenly Father responds if we ask, seek and knock with inspired questions, real intent and a sincere heart.⁸ Both the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants therefore affirm that the canon of scripture is not closed, but that individuals may receive 'further light and knowledge' for their personal edification if they will ask with sufficient faith and the Father is willing to reveal it.

The foreordination chapter was written after a number of discussions with my friend and mentor, the late Elder Rulon G. Craven of the Seventy. We had the privilege of travelling together on a number of occasions and when we did, we always discussed the doctrines of the kingdom. One of those doctrines was the doctrine of foreordination and what Alma 13 means. We both agreed that there was a significant difference between the idea of predestination as sometimes taught in mainstream Christianity and foreordination as taught in the Church. But Elder Craven was fascinated to learn that I understood Alma 13:3,4 differently that he did. So I wrote it down for him and published it later with *Interpreter* for good measure.⁹ Though he affirmed that he would still teach that those who received the Priesthood were individually foreordained to the offices that came to him, he did not reject my idea that Alma₂ had taught that the principle

⁷ For example, Mosiah 18:2; 26:2.

⁸ See for example, 3 Nephi 14:7-11 and Moroni 10:3-5.

⁹ A. Keith Thompson, "Were We Foreordained to the Priesthood, or Was the Standard of Worthiness Foreordained? Alma 13 Reconsidered", *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 21 (2016) 249-274; see also chapter six of this book.

of worthiness had itself been foreordained as the principle upon which any male who came to earth would be ordained to priesthood office. As readers will see, I do not disagree that many were also foreordained to specific Priesthood offices, but I do not believe that teaching is licensed by Alma₂'s teaching in Alma 13. It comes from elsewhere and particularly from the teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Chapter 7 is controversial because it affirms that the Saviour taught that there will come a time when many of the latter-day Gentiles through whose instrumentality the Restoration was rolled out, will fall away from the covenant path. It is more popular and uplifting to point out that this need not be so because those who stay on the covenant path will participate with the Josephite children of Lehi in building the New Jerusalem and receive their exaltation in spite of earth and hell. But the risen Christ did not mince His thrice repeated words during His three days of ministry at Bountiful circa AD 34. His audience did not include latter-day Gentiles. He spoke to the faithful descendants of Lehi and promised them that despite the fact that their seed would be scattered and smitten by the latter-day Gentiles on the American continent, a righteous remnant of their posterity would rise and build the New Jerusalem using the wealth of the destroyed Gentiles to do so. Just as Abinadi's prophecies of doom were unpopular in King Noah's court (they suggested that true prophets always said uplifting things so that their feet were 'beautiful upon the mountains'),¹⁰ so prophecies and interpretations of prophecies that are not pleasing to the ears of Gentiles in and out of the Church in the last days do not get a lot of airtime.

Finally in part two, I have made some comments about the obligation of believers to obey the law of the land. As I explain in the foreword to chapter eight, the ideas in this chapter were seeded in a second-year elective class I took in Law School after my mission in 1978. After reading some of what Thomas Aquinas wrote about natural law in his *Summa Theologica* in the 13th century and what Herbert Hart wrote about positivism in his *Concept of Law* in 1962,¹¹ I was surprised to find

¹⁰ Mosiah 12:9-24 (21-24).

¹¹ HLA Hart, *The Concept of Law*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961).

more positivism than natural law in the Book of Mormon. I thought then and still think now that what Alma₂ and the Apostle Paul have said about our duty to obey valid law has implications for those who seek to live lives of faith in the winding-up days of the 21st century. I do not think that Mosiah₂ and Alma₂ would agree that we can pick and choose the laws we obey on conscience grounds. But more on that within.

Part three entitled **Mysteries Waiting to be Unfolded** is even more eclectic than part two. There are so many other things about the Book of Mormon and doctrines which form part of the Plan of Salvation that are mysterious to me. But these three are some I have pondered about and upon which I feel qualified to venture an opinion as Alma₂ might have said.¹² First, the peoples of the Pacific. I may have travelled more kilometres in the Pacific Islands than any other human being, airline pilots not excepted. And while I have not been to Wallis and Futuna or Niue, the number of visits I have made to Papeete, Tongatapu, Apia, Savaii, Pagopago, Honiara, Port Vila, and Port Jackson among many other places, for business reasons, more than make up for what might have been in Wallis, Futuna and Niue. Suffice to say that I came to the point in those travels where I became fairly confident in identifying where modern Pacific peoples now located elsewhere in the world came from because of their appearance. The texture of their hair, their stature and the shape of their faces were contributing factors in that confidence. But I admit, in the case of the Eastern Polynesians (Hawaiians, Tahitians, Cook Islanders, and Maori) that I was never sure until they opened their mouths, and I could hear the language they spoke and their accent. My first interest was kindled long before I ever left my native New Zealand. I read my grandfather's copy of Thor Heyerdahl's *Kon Tiki Expedition* as a teenager and then other books he wrote that I borrowed from public libraries. Those included *Fatu Hiva*, *Hiva Oa*, *Aku-Aku* and finally his academic tome, *American Indians in the Pacific*. I knew that contemporary anthropologists did not like him. In part I am sure that was because he stole their limelight and some of their potential research funding. But my interest did not just take me to many of the islands of the Pacific.

¹² Alma 40:20-21.

I visited personally with some of the most famous anthropologists of the generation before mine. Ben Finney in Hawaii, Kerry Howe and Geoffrey Irwin in Auckland and Patrick Kirch at Berkeley near San Francisco. We talked quite candidly about diffusion theory and the waves of colonisation which must have been in the Pacific. While all of those scholars conceded that there were pre-Columbian contacts between the peoples of the Pacific and the native tribes of Central and South America, they all tributed the Polynesian seafarers for that intrepid contact and would not concede Heyerdahl's thesis of contact the other way, even though as I say in the chapter, 85% of Heyerdahl's propositions remain un rebutted. Sadly, though I visited the museum named in Heyerdahl's honour in Oslo, Norway, I never met him though one of my Pacific friends had that privilege.

Chapter ten, "The Three Wise Men" may have the most interesting beginning of all. I had instructed Senior Counsel, Philip Taylor to defend Church interests in a case about religious confession privilege in Orange, New South Wales in 1999. As we drove to and from that court, we discussed a variety of gospel topics and he ventured his thought that the Three Wise Men of Matthew's gospel may very well have been Nephi₂, Lehi₄ and Samuel₂ from the books of Helaman and 3 Nephi in the Book of Mormon. To suggest that I was sceptical is an understatement. Not only had that thought not occurred to me, but the idea of the journey that would have been involved seemed impossible. But my respect for Philip's intellect (not only was he appointed Senior Counsel a lot younger than most, but he also won the Australian National University Medal for the most outstanding student of that institution at a precociously young age even after serving his mission in Western Australia) forced me to consider further. Along that study journey I found Philip was not the only latter-day Saint scholar to ponder the possibility. But no reputable Church aligned journal would publish my piece or anyone else's.¹³ My rejection letter (I only tried to publish once before now) included this statement from one of the blind reviewers (not completely blind; the reviewer knew my name):

¹³ Jeffrey D. Holt, *From the East, A Book of Mormon Perspective on the Three Wise Men* (Sandy, Utah: Sounds of Zion, 2002) was effectively self-published.

Theories of the various authors' that [Thompson] adumbrates are just that: wild speculation. Speculation built upon speculation built upon speculation. The authors whom he cites not only stretch evidence (to put it mildly), but they cite scriptures to say what in fact they do not say (e.g., a rather carved up, non-contextual interpretation of Isaiah 60; making Helaman 3:29-30 a part of a "patriarchal blessing" in Helaman 5). There are unfounded assertions (e.g., none of the writings of Micah being on the brass plates -- I would argue just the opposite!).

My sense is that despite earlier denials in this rejection, this reviewer and others did not want to be party to the mockery that might follow publication in this journal from mainstream Christianity – for example, that ‘the Mormons are now claiming the three wise men as their own’.¹⁴ I believe I have since shown it is unlikely that the writings of Micah were on the brass plates.¹⁵ Since writing this chapter, I have read other scholars who while not supportive of this Three Wise Men thesis, have documented extensive shipping contacts in the relevant era between Meso-America and the Chinese cities where the Silk Road began.¹⁶ I have also learned that the Silk Road was well policed by the Chinese emperors through the entire period between 100 BC and 100 AD for sound self-interested economic reasons.¹⁷ But I have preferred to leave

¹⁴ Some of Steven L. Olsen's comments in "Peter's Tears" (*Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 6 (2013) 23-30) seem apt here. Peter appears to have denied Christ to bystanders to avoid being called as a witness who might have enabled the conviction of Christ on a charge of blasphemy. To avoid giving that testimony, Peter equivocated at best or lied. He regretted that lapse in his judgment and never calculated the odds or counted the cost again, when deciding whether to do right or not. Thereafter, he was simply honest and forthright (see for example Acts 2:14-27; 3:1-7, 12-26; 4:5-21) and there were some miraculous deliverances (Acts 5:17-23; 12:1-11). Acknowledging that there is reason for the view for believing that Nephi₂, Lehi₄ and Samuel₂ may have gone in search of him, may attract criticism or even mockery, but so do most testimonies of miracles. There is thus reason, that like Peter, Latter-day Saints need to identify the miraculous hand of God in the scriptures and in their lives – especially in journals about faith and scholarship.

¹⁵ See chapter 2 of this book.

¹⁶ See for example, Robert Heine-Geldern, "Heyerdahl's Hypothesis of Polynesian Origins: A Criticism", *The Geographical Journal* 116 (1950) (4/6) 183-192.

¹⁷ See for example, "Silk Road" *New World Encyclopedia* 4 November 2008 <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=Silk_Road&oldid=844594>.

this chapter as I originally wrote it because it is faithful to the original thought of Philip Taylor who opened my eyes to the possibilities. I also relish the idea that if these three were the Three Wise Men, they will have made a record of this journey of homage by a New World First Presidency to a new-born king in the Old World, and there will be plenty more written about that when it eventually comes forth in the own due time of the Lord.¹⁸

Which brings me to chapter eleven – about intertextuality in the Book of Mormon. The existence of biblical quotations and allusions throughout the Book of Mormon has been grist to the mill for those who denigrate this sacred book. More so with the New Testament allusions since the Book of Mormon narrative of the Brass Plates story said to include a lot of Old Testament scripture, potentially answers many criticisms of the Old Testament quotations and allusions. But the New Testament material is different. Save for the fact of Christ's visit which can explain the Sermon on the Mount and the inclusion of other things He taught subsequently, there is no direct suggestion that Christ's beloved apostle John or the apostle Paul visited anyone after they died, let alone beforehand. Certainly, Hugh Nibley and Matt Roper had pointed out that the material allegedly from John and Paul may not have been original with them;¹⁹ that John and Paul may have themselves been alluding to older source material otherwise available to the Book of Mormon prophets from the Brass Plates or elsewhere. But there are other possibilities. Those include that there may have been visits by New Testament apostles to the Book of Mormon prophets including Mormon and Moroni. The number of visits by angels to the Prophet Joseph Smith which faithful members of the Church accept, make it unnatural to wholly exclude those miraculous possibilities. But there are other equally miraculous but reasonable possibilities that should be recognised since we have been taught that our God is an unchanging God

¹⁸ Compare Ether 4:4-7.

¹⁹ Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989) 215 and Matthew Roper, "Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Covering up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon*", *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1991) Vol 3, No 1, 171-187.

of miracles. These include that the Early Modern Language in which the Book of Mormon translation²⁰ was provided to Joseph Smith may be a consequence of the presence of an Early Modern English speaker in the translation process, and perhaps even one intimately familiar with and even responsible for the New Testament words in the King James Bible. I discuss some of those candidates in chapter eleven, but as I concede these are wild speculations which would not impress the blind reviewer mentioned above.

In this book, my primary purpose is to open the minds of readers to possibilities. I believe in the virtue of faith. I know from Paul and others that it is impossible to please God without it.²¹ So my purpose is to sow some of the seeds of which Alma₂ wrote.²² Some will read for the purpose of scholarship and even criticism. Even these I would remind of the eternal efficacy of the principles Moroni taught in the final chapter of the Book of Mormon. Ponder with an open mind considering possibilities. Know that you too can ask God and trust that He can answer – and that Moroni says He will answer if you can muster the sincere heart and real intent (separate heart qualities) that Moroni says are preconditions to God’s answers.²³ But I also suggest you avoid the mockery which Moroni feared in some Book of Mormon readers. That heart quality is unbecoming even of those who aspire to objective scholarship.²⁴

Note: Earlier versions of chapters One through Six and Nine were published by *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*. These chapters are reprinted here with the permission of the author with minor edits.

²⁰ See all of Stanford Carmack’s articles about Book of Mormon grammar at “Stanford Carmack”, *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* < <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/author/stanfordc/?journal> >.

²¹ Hebrews 11:6.

²² Alma 32.

²³ Moroni 10:3-5.

²⁴ Ether 12:23-41.

Part One

Old World Origins

Chapter One

Nephite Insights into Israelite Worship Practices before the Babylonian Captivity

General historical consensus holds that synagogues originated before the destruction of the Second Temple in AD 70, and therefore probably originated during the Babylonian captivity. The suggestion that synagogues may have originated during the exodus in Philo and Josephus was discredited by some historians in the 17th century, yet the Book of Mormon speaks of synagogues, sanctuaries, and places of worship in a manner which suggests that Lehi and his party brought some form of synagogal worship with them when they left Jerusalem around 600 BC. This chapter revisits the most up to date scholarship regarding the origin of the synagogue and suggests that the Book of Mormon record provides ample reason to look for the origins of the synagogue much earlier than has become the academic custom.

Introduction

In his seminal historiographical review of American culture, David Hackett Fischer has observed that emigrants are often more loyal to the folkways of their motherland than those left behind.¹ By retaining their old speech ways, their building ways, their family ways, their marriage ways, their gender ways, their sex ways, their child-rearing ways, their naming ways, their age ways, their death ways, their religious ways, and so forth,² those striking out in a new world retain their identity and

¹ D. H. Fischer, *Albion's Seed* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). Brian Barry has also observed 'that diasporas are liable to be culturally conservative, clinging to ways of behaving that have been abandoned in their countries of origin,' Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 57.

² Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 8–9.

sense of wellbeing in part through loyalty to their home country culture. Indeed, Fischer suggests that ‘the four large waves of English-speaking immigrants’³ who came to ‘the present area of the United States . . . from 1629 to 1775’⁴ in many respects preserved their cultural folkways more faithfully than those left behind. Certainly, their cultures were also changed,⁵ but in what became the United States, speech patterns,⁶ intellectual obsessions,⁷ and varieties of religious belief⁸ ‘persisted . . . long after they had been forgotten in the mother country’⁹ and ‘long after England had moved beyond them.’¹⁰

Can Fischer’s new approach to historical research assist our understanding of Israelite worship practices before the Babylonian captivity? The questions about when synagogal worship began in Judaism are legend. Is it possible that the Nephite record can shed light upon that vexed question because the Nephites more faithfully preserved pre-exilic worship practices than did the captives in Babylon whose circumstances forced them to adapt more quickly and completely? Fischer says he has sought ‘a new answer to an old problem about the relationship between the past and the present.’¹¹ ‘[E]very period of the past, when understood in its own terms, is immediate to the present.’¹² His effort was to write a cultural history that braided together pure historical narrative and the cultural values and individual purposes which drove events in the past.¹³ Fischer is modest, but essentially he suggests that cultural historiography is what Thomas Kuhn and Michael Foucault might have called a thought revolution.¹⁴ It requires a paradigm shift to splice all manner of culture into traditional historical narrative.

³ Ibid 6.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid 262–63.

⁶ Ibid 259–60.

⁷ Ibid 803.

⁸ Ibid 117.

⁹ Ibid 803.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid x.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid xi.

¹⁴ Ibid vii.

But the resulting picture is much more faithful to the reality than were the simpler purely narrative approaches to history in the past.

Origins of the synagogue

General historical consensus acknowledges that synagogues originated before the destruction of the Second Temple in AD 70 and therefore during the Babylonian captivity when faithful Jews could no longer worship at their Temple in Jerusalem.¹⁵ However, archaeological remains of synagogues have been found in Egypt dating to the 3rd century BC and near Jericho during the Hasmonean era in the 1st century BC which means that it is possible that synagogues have a much earlier origin in Israelite history.

During the last decade, Don Binder¹⁶ and Anders Runesson¹⁷ have collected and summarised the many theories which have been advanced to explain the origin of the synagogue. They agree that some of the older theories propose much earlier origins than are considered by recent theorists, but that is because most of the recent research has focused on the evolution of the later synagogue's unique Torah-reading liturgy.

Runesson opines that the Torah-reading liturgy was a product of the Persian colonial period,¹⁸ and that the Persian approach to stability in

¹⁵ See for example, *Academon*, 13 March 2005, "Origins of the Synagogue", <<http://www.academon.com/Essay-Origins-of-the-Synagogue/56613>> where it is stated:

One tradition dates the origin of the synagogue to the Babylonian exile of the 6th century B.C., assuming that the returnees brought back the basic structure that was to be developed by the 1st century A.D. "into a well-defined institution around which Jewish religious, intellectual, and communal life was to be centered from this earliest period into the present" (Synagogue Pp). Others believe that the synagogue originated after the Hasmonean revolt, 167–164 B.C., as a Pharisaic alternative to the Temple cult (Synagogue Pp).

Runesson, Binder, and Olsson attribute the idea that the institution of the synagogue 'had its beginnings in the Babylonian exile as a replacement for the lost temple cult' to Sigonius in the 16th century (Anders Runesson, Donald D. Binder, and Birger Olsson, *The Ancient Synagogue from its Origins to 200 C.E.* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 6.

¹⁶ Donald D. Binder, *Into the Temple Courts: The Place of the Synagogues in the Second Temple Period* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature), 1999.

¹⁷ Anders Runesson, *The Origins of the Synagogue: A Socio-Historical Study* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell 2001).

¹⁸ *Ibid* 261–95.

conquered provinces was to use or resurrect institutions that had been destroyed or suppressed by their Babylonian predecessors and to promote their new colonial legal system through those institutions.¹⁹ The existing Jewish custom of reading the law simply needed to be enhanced to achieve Persian purposes²⁰ but gradually hardened into a formal institution in the hands of the Rabbis. This understanding also explains why Cyrus famously allowed Ezra and Nehemiah to return from Babylon to Israel and rebuild the Temple²¹ and, eventually, Jerusalem's city walls.²² But it is arguable that this theory does not adequately recognise the idea which originated in the 19th century that Josiah's earlier reforms to centralise sacrificial worship in Jerusalem in the late 7th century were ultimately successful and account for the abolition of sacrifice outside Jerusalem in what remained of Joshua's Israel.²³

Binder's focus, following and developing Levine's theory, has been to show that the synagogue grew out of the Jewish practice of conducting all business at the city gates.²⁴ Synagogues were public buildings that developed when city-gate architecture changed and as the cities and villages of Israel became affluent enough to afford the construction of monumental buildings.

There are many other theories of synagogue origins, but nearly all those which are the subject of current research are focused on identifying where the distinctive rabbinic liturgies practised in the later synagogue came from.²⁵ There are enduring conundrums surrounding whether

¹⁹ Ibid 264–65, 271.

²⁰ Ibid 274–75.

²¹ Ibid 271.

²² Ibid 278 where Runesson notes that although Artaxerxes initially stopped the reconstruction of the city walls, when he later wished to strengthen this province against an Egyptian rebellion, he 'authoris[ed] the fortification of the city and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.'

²³ Ibid 99–109 where Runesson explains this theory but does not believe that Josiah's reforms were successful (109, 260).

²⁴ Binder, *Into the Temple Courts*, 204–26. Binder and Levine are not alone in proposing this theory. Runesson notes three other scholars of the same mind (Low, Silber, and Hoenig: Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, 89.

²⁵ Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, 193–96.

synagogues ever included sacrifice in their rituals, and if they did, when and why that ceased;²⁶ whether synagogues were extensions of the Jerusalem temple or whether they were created by groups who opposed efforts to centralise sacrificial worship; whether *proseuchai* or prayer houses included sacrificial liturgies, whether they are properly seen as synagogues or whether they are an entirely different institution; and how and when the high places which were historically used for sacrificial worship were used after the construction of the First Temple and whether they resumed their functions after the First Temple was destroyed.

Deuteronomic redaction

Synagogue origins research is complicated by the work of the so-called Deuteronomic redactors. Beginning in the 19th century, Old Testament scholars have considered that the Old Testament books of Deuteronomy through Kings that have come down to us in the King James Bible and other translations, are not in original form. That insight is not new to Latter-day Saints who have always been taught that many plain and precious parts have been taken away from the Bible (1 Nephi 13:28) and accordingly that we only believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly (Articles of Faith 8). But the scholarship surrounding Deuteronomic redaction has become quite explicit. The most benign version of ‘the redaction theory’ holds that the original chronicles now covered by our books of Deuteronomy through Kings, are simply the result of earlier abridgment. Some theorists suggest there has been more than one abridgment. But most redaction theorists are agreed that the abridgments were not completely benign. That is, those who did the abridgments had agendas beyond providing posterity with a faithful historical record.

The Book of Mormon certainly contributes to this discussion since it is clear that the Nephites sought to comply with the Mosaic law including the offering of sacrifices, until Christ taught them that He had fulfilled that law including its requirement of sacrifices (3 Nephi 9:17–22). The

²⁶ Ibid 436–55.

Book of Mormon also records that synagogues were built by the Nephites (Alma 16:13), the Lamanites (Alma 26:29), the Zoramites (Alma 31:12) and the Amalekites (Alma 21:4, 6), meaning perhaps that there were at least three different ways in which one civilisation of people in Ancient America tried to live the law of Moses. It is also noteworthy that Lehi built an altar and offered sacrifice three days into his journey south from Jerusalem around 600 BC (1 Nephi 2:7); and that he again offered sacrifice after his sons returned successfully from their expedition to recover the Brass Plates (1 Nephi 5:9), and when they returned to Lehi's camp with Ishmael's family (1 Nephi 7:22). That raises interesting questions about the reasons for his departure within 40 years after Josiah's reforms that are generally recognised to have outlawed sacrifice other than at the Temple in Jerusalem.²⁷

If there was no contact between the Old and New Worlds after Lehi left Jerusalem so that the Book of Mormon provides a 'time capsule' view of the synagogue in 600 BC, is there sufficient material in the Book of Mormon to enable us to identify the synagogue practice that Lehi and his party brought with them? Did the merger of the Nephite and Mulekite civilisations under Mosiah₁ around 150 BC change the previous synagogue practice of either group? Did the likely 12–15-year gap between the Nephite and Mulekite departures from Jerusalem, or the fact that the Nephites had records and the Mulekites did not, make any difference to their worship practices? Were the worship practices of the two groups the same, since Lehi may have purposely distanced himself from the orthodoxy of Zedekiah's court which likely came with Mulek's group? Or did other differences evolve during the 400 plus years which passed before the two groups merged in the New World? Is the distinction between temples, sanctuaries, and synagogues in the Nephite record a distinction which has any reference points in the older theories about the origin of the synagogue? And is the apparent prohibition on sacrifice in synagogues a practice that is respected in

²⁷ For further discussion of some of the reasons why Lehi may have been required to leave Jerusalem, see John W. Welch, David Rolf Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely, eds., *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem* (Provo, UT: BYU and FARMS, 2004).

the Nephite practice? If so, since we know from Benjamin's valedictory conference that the Nephites practised sacrifice at their temples (Mosiah 2:3), were there other places where sacrifices were performed by the Nephites or did they follow Josiah's orthodoxy and proscribe sacrifice elsewhere? Did the Nephites ever ritually read from their Torah-equivalent scriptures, or is the absence of this ritual among them proof that Torah-reading liturgies did evolve later as Runesson and others have proposed?

Pre-exilic theories about the origins of the synagogue

Both Binder and Runesson acknowledge that there are theories that attribute the creation of the synagogue to Moses. Binder does little more than note this attribution in Philo and Josephus and infers that these Mosaic attributions are either the result of their undiscerning acceptance of authority claimed by the Deuteronomic redactors²⁸ or anachronistic attribution of ancient authority to the synagogal practice which Philo and Josephus observed in their own day.²⁹ But Runesson goes a lot farther and notes from source the reasons why some writers have found synagogal origins in patriarchal times.³⁰ He acknowledges the reasons why earlier theorists considered that synagogues may have grown out of the *beit ha-midrash*, the *beit ha-knesset*, the colleges or academies, or even the schools of the prophets to which Biesenthal refers.³¹ He also notes, despite all the redactive theory which swirls around the book of Deuteronomy, that 'Moses was indissolubly connected to the reading of the Torah'³² meaning that this understanding was not so much redactive as axiomatic. However, he then says that since Vitranga³³ refuted 'the Moses theory' in the 17th century, no one has tried to resurrect it.

²⁸ Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, 240.

²⁹ Binder, *Into the Temple Courts*, 209.

³⁰ Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, 77, where Runesson notes from Leydekker and Biesenthal that Abraham's daughter-in-law went to a place or building to seek answers to her prayers.

³¹ Ibid 74–77.

³² Ibid 78.

³³ Campegius Vitringa Sr, *De Synagoga Vetere Libri Tres* (Francker, 1685; 2d ed. 1696).

Vitringa argued that the Tabernacle of the Congregation could not be a precursor to the synagogue because it was not set apart for either instruction or prayer;³⁴ Moses did not use that space when he needed answers to his prayers to solve practical problems;³⁵ the house of Israel could only worship in one place in Moses' time;³⁶ Abraham was similarly restricted to the one place of worship (Genesis 12:7; 13:4) where the Lord had appeared unto him; Jacob only ever prayed and sacrificed at Bethel (Genesis 28:16; 35:1–7);³⁷ and that David and Solomon similarly only ever worshipped at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite which was later developed as the site of the First Temple.³⁸

Other reasons he cited include the lack of a single precept or injunction to public prayer in the first five books of Moses;³⁹ the confinement of Levitical duties to the tabernacle and sacrifices there;⁴⁰ and the requirement to read the law every seven years rather than weekly on the Sabbath day.⁴¹

But all of these arguments have been discredited in more recent scholarship. For example, Vitringa's assertion that the Tabernacle of the Congregation was never used for gathering is now discredited by the very definition of the word *synagogue* which meant 'a gathering of people' or 'a congregation'. Binder points out that *syn* plus *ago* meant 'bring together' so that synagogue meant 'a bringing together', or less awkwardly, 'a gathering'.⁴²

While it is evident that the children of Israel could not all be contained within even the outer court, this space was provided so that representatives

³⁴ Vitringa, *De Synagoga Vetere*, 27.

³⁵ Ibid 27–28.

³⁶ Vitringa insisted that a 'one place for worship' interpretation was the only conclusion that could be drawn when Exodus 20:24 and Deuteronomy 12:13, 14 were considered together.

³⁷ Ibid 28–29.

³⁸ Ibid 29.

³⁹ Ibid 30.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid 31.

⁴² Binder, *Into the Temple Courts*, 92.

of the camp as a whole could witness the sacred ordinances performed on the altar, and so that they could witness the priests as they entered both the Holy Place and, once a year, the Holy of Holies, to perform their sacred intercessory duties. The dimensions of the outer court stand in contrast to the smaller dimensions of both the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies within the tent which were completely encompassed by the outer court. While Vitranga is right that we do not have tangible evidence of how the Tabernacle of the Congregation was used in the time of Moses, that is also true in respect of 'the Holy Place' and 'the Holy of Holies', yet we believe we know how these parts of the 'Tent in the Desert' were used, though this usage is not set out in any detail in the Pentateuch.⁴³ Most scholars also accept that prayer accompanied every sacrifice in every Jewish mind from the earliest of times.⁴⁴ The congregation looked on and prayed while the priest performed the sacrifices and burnt the offerings. The smoke from those offerings ascended and was always a symbol of the prayers of the congregation.

Nor does it require archaeological evidence or excessive assumption and inference to work out that the reason Israel was instructed to build the portable Tabernacle, which they took with them after they left Sinai, was so that they could worship in sacred space wherever they went.

Vitranga's dismissal of origins for the synagogue in the time of Moses is unjustified. While we can understand scholarly disinterest in such early origins when the search is only for the origin of the weekly Torah reading practice, the existence of synagogues and worship sanctuaries in the Book of Mormon, which must date back to pre-exilic times, means that there must have been synagogues and sanctuaries in Israel much earlier than most synagogue origins scholars have considered. This chapter will now reconsider the case for earlier synagogal practice by reference to the seminal work of Roland de Vaux and the Old Testament itself—despite the problems which arise in getting an accurate picture of

⁴³ For example, the dimensions of the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies appear to confirm LDS understanding that the latter was only ever used by one occupant per year on the Day of Atonement.

⁴⁴ For example, De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (Grand Rapids: MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 457–59.

pre-exilic Israelite worship practice because of the likely propaganda of the Deuteronomic redactors. Since the Book of Mormon account makes a distinction between Temples, Synagogues, and Sanctuaries which must have originated in pre-exilic times, a review of the existing scholarship on pre-exilic worship practices is additionally useful since it may yield reciprocal understanding of the differences between these three different types of religious buildings—both among the descendants of Lehi and Mulek on the American continent, and in ancient Israel before both Lehi and Mulek departed Jerusalem.

Roland de Vaux on early Israelite worship practices

De Vaux documents and discusses early Israelite sanctuaries at Shechem, Bethel, Mambre, and Beersheba and concludes that all these sanctuaries were eventually condemned, not because worship was centralised,⁴⁵ but because the worship at these places had been corrupted, possibly by syncretism.⁴⁶ De Vaux used the word *syncretism* to describe the corruption of authentic Israelite worship practices by admixture and change under the influence of the different local worship practices which were encountered in the various places Israel settled when she entered Palestine. De Vaux explained that various prophets⁴⁷ and authorities⁴⁸ considered that pagan practices had contaminated pure Israelite worship at these sanctuaries and so they disavowed them. He notes that the construction of the Israelite desert sanctuary likely followed Arab desert practice where their sacred objects were always packed up last and protected within a tent while camped.⁴⁹ However, from the entry into the Promised Land onward, an ‘anxiety to connect the new worship with the old’⁵⁰ inspired Joshua to protect the Ark of the

⁴⁵ Ibid 293.

⁴⁶ Ibid 322.

⁴⁷ For example, by Amos at Amos 3:14; 4:4; 5:5 (De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 293–94) and Hosea at Hosea 9:15.

⁴⁸ For example, by Hezekiah (De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 288 citing 2 Kings 18:4) and Josiah (De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 287 citing 2 Kings 23:19).

⁴⁹ De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 296.

⁵⁰ Ibid 297.

Covenant with a building at Shiloh⁵¹ and David to similarly protect it with a tent when he brought it to Jerusalem, before Solomon also built a Temple to protect it.⁵²

Though ‘places of worship whose foundation was attributed to the Patriarchs are scarcely mentioned in the Bible once Israel is settled in Canaan . . . other sanctuaries are brought to the fore.’⁵³ Though the location of Gilgal is now disputed, it lies somewhere between the Jordan and Jericho, and was initially ‘marked by a circle of stones from which it took its name.’⁵⁴ At Gilgal, Joshua met ‘the captain of the Lord’s host’ (Joshua 5:15), and like Moses at Sinai, was told to remove his shoes because he stood on holy ground. Samuel went there as well as to Bethel and Mizpeh to judge Israel.⁵⁵ It was at Gilgal that Samuel proclaimed Saul king (1 Samuel 11:15); Gilgal is where Samuel killed Agag the Amalekite king (1 Samuel 15:12–33); and it is also where Saul was rejected as king (1 Samuel 13:7–15). Gilgal is similarly the place where Judah came to meet David when he returned from Transjordan (2 Samuel 19:16, 41).

Shiloh and Bethel have already been mentioned, but de Vaux says there were also sanctuaries at Mizpeh, Gibeon, Ophra, and Dan.⁵⁶ However, de Vaux says that it is David’s installation of the Ark at Jerusalem which changed the focus of common worship forever. Jerusalem was David’s ‘own personal conquest, and did not belong to the territory of any of the Twelve Tribes.’⁵⁷ Not only was this place sacred from Abrahamic times, but David there restored the Ark, set up an altar,⁵⁸ and thus made Jerusalem ‘heir to the sanctuary of Shiloh and to the Tent in the desert.’⁵⁹

⁵¹ Ibid citing 1 Samuel 1:7, 9; 3:15. It is noted from these early chapters in 1 Samuel that the building which housed the Ark of the Covenant is called variously a Temple and “the House of the Lord.” This is the house where Samuel came to live with Eli, the priest.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid 302.

⁵⁴ Ibid 303, citing Joshua 4:20.

⁵⁵ Ibid 303, n.55, citing 1 Samuel 7:16.

⁵⁶ Ibid 304–308.

⁵⁷ Ibid 309.

⁵⁸ Ibid 309.

⁵⁹ Ibid 309.

Jerusalem became the focal point of [Israel's]... history of salvation. . . [It] became the Holy City, and its religious significance was destined to eclipse its political importance . . . [for] as a religious centre it would survive the break-up of David's empire, and even the total destruction of national independence.⁶⁰

But there was also some admixture here. For David did all this as king and not by virtue of any ancestry which made him a priest. Though he accepted the counsel of Nathan the prophet that he should not build the new Temple he had planned (2 Samuel 7:1–17), and though Nathan cursed him for his adultery with Bathsheba without recorded consequence (2 Samuel 12:1–12), no one questioned David's authority to do religious things and even to minister as a priest, despite the fact that Samuel clearly withheld similar authority from Saul. David thus demonstrated to all his heirs and successors, the power available to the Israelite king if he could control religious and political authority at the same time. It is submitted that this innovation by king David was the premise for future efforts to centralise worship. Such centralisation was seen as essential if any future king was to resume the political power David had demonstrated and consolidated.

However, de Vaux, like Runesson, holds that the various efforts to centralise worship were never fully effective. Runesson has said that

the cult centralization [under Josiah] was a limited phenomenon and in any case did not last beyond Josiah's death . . . as was also the case with the cult centralization of Hezekiah . . . [meaning] that the high places were in use when the exiles returned.⁶¹

De Vaux is more detailed and disagrees with Runesson. He credits Josiah with an idea which 'triumphed in the end.'⁶² He wrote:

⁶⁰ Ibid 309.

⁶¹ Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, 109.

⁶² De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 337.

Two kings of Judah tried to make Jerusalem's Temple not merely the central sanctuary of the nation, but the only sanctuary in which public cult could be performed. . . . [Hezekiah] had learnt a lesson from the destruction of the Northern Kingdom, and wanted to strengthen and unite the nation by a return to traditional ways; the centralisation of the cult at Jerusalem, under his eyes, was one element of this policy . . . [but] the work of [Hezekiah] . . . died with him, and his immediate successor, Manasseh, re-established the high places. . . .

To secure the centralisation of Yahwistic cult, Josia[h] recalled to Jerusalem all the Priests in Judah "from Geba to Beersheba" and suppressed the local sanctuaries, i.e. the "high places." . . . The reform covered the territory of the former Northern kingdom, too: the sanctuary at Bethel was certainly dismantled. . . The conclusion of the reform was celebrated by a solemn Passover, attended by the entire nation, at Jerusalem; it was a natural consequence of the centralisation of worship. This was the Passover of the year 621. Unfortunately, the reform was quickly compromised: after the death of Josia[h] at Megiddo in 609, the country once again fell under foreign domination, first Egyptian, then Babylonian. The old errors returned syncretism in the Temple, foreign cults, and a new lease of life for the country sanctuaries . . . historical circumstances seemed to have put an end to the reforms of Josia[h]. But his ideas triumphed in the end, for the community which returned from exile never had any sanctuary in Judah except the rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem. The reason was that the reform was based on a written law which survived longer than the men who opposed it: it was the Book of Deuteronomy.⁶³

Both de Vaux and Runesson agree that there was local worship in sanctuaries before the centralisation efforts of both Hezekiah and Josiah. Josiah's redaction of the law in the book of Deuteronomy changed the practice in the future, but worship in Israel before the exile was local in

⁶³ Ibid 336–37.

character. The Deuteronomic redaction may well be responsible for the impression which the Pentateuch leaves that there was no local worship in Israel before or after the exile. But it is still possible to glean some evidence of local worship in what remains of those first five books of scripture which have come down to us in the Judeo-Christian Bible.

Injunctions to worship from Moses in the residual Pentateuch

The Mosaic injunctions to worship in the Christian Bible that are most relevant to this chapter are those made in prospect of their entry into the promised land without Moses. Both Moses and Joshua contemplated Israel's division into different and widely spread lands of inheritance.

The primary reason why it is reasonable to expect regular weekly worship in Israel, even after she entered the Promised land, is the second commandment received at Sinai:

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it. (KJV Exodus 20:8–11)

It is hard to imagine that Israel would have ceased to live this law after she entered the Promised Land even though the Tabernacle would be remote from many of the tribes. Vitranga, of course, denied that Israel worshipped at the Desert Temple or elsewhere,⁶⁴ but others disagree. When discussing the theories as to when the synagogue originated, de Vaux has noted that synagogues may have resulted from

⁶⁴ Runesson, *Origins of the Synagogue*, 26–27, where he interprets the Sabbath observance law as prohibiting the children of Israel from leaving their homes to worship in public or do anything else.