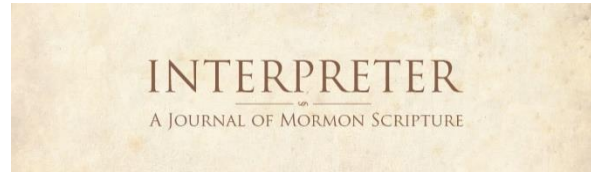




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## Perhaps Close can Count in More than Horseshoes

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## Perhaps Close can Count in More than Horseshoes

Brant A. Gardner

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**Brant A. Gardner**

Review of Gerald E. Smith, *Schooling the Prophet: How the Book of Mormon Influenced Joseph Smith and the Early Restoration* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2015). pp 305. \$19.95.

Abstract: *Schooling the Prophet provides a good survey of many early Latter-day Saint doctrines. It suggests that there is a causal link between the Book of Mormon and those doctrines. Sometimes it makes the case; many times it is close but doesn't quite support the thesis of the book.*

*Schooling the Prophet* proposes that early Latter-day Saint doctrine and some practices can be traced to themes in the Book of Mormon. Gerald Smith's chapters look at specific sets of religious doctrines or practices which he describes and then ties to the Book of Mormon:

- Influences on Doctrine and Theology
- Sacred Rituals, Symbols, and Narratives of Sacrament, Baptism, and Zion
- Influences on the Temple of the Early Restoration
- Priesthood Restorations, Origins, and Influences

There is an introductory chapter, which lays out his thesis that the Book of Mormon was influential in the development of the topics developed in the above-listed chapters, and a concluding chapter on "The Meaning of the Book of Mormon in the Early Restoration."

The chapters on doctrine or practice are well documented and provide a very nice introduction to early Mormon theology and ritual. For those descriptions, the book is very useful and informative. However,

the theme of the book is not that early Saints had theology and ritual but that the development of the theology and rituals was dependent upon, or seeded by, the Book of Mormon.

In his conclusion, he suggests: “[Joseph] Smith’s relationship with the book — indeed, his vital reliance upon Book of Mormon forms and observances for religious development — recommends a more nuanced consideration of the book itself, not merely as a religious text but as a repository of ancient religious conventions such as institutions, theologies, rites, ordinances, and rituals” (207–8). That would certainly open new avenues of thought about the Book of Mormon. It flows from his defining “thesis that the Book of Mormon had a profound formative influence on Joseph Smith’s doctrinal and institutional development during the nascent days of the nineteenth-century Mormon restoration” (3).

There are times when Gerald Smith is unquestionably correct that the Book of Mormon impacted the development of theology and practice in the Restoration. Well-known is that as Joseph and Oliver worked on the translation of the Book of Mormon, they were inspired to pray about baptism. That question, rooted in the Book of Mormon, directly led to both the beginning of baptism as a rite in the early restoration and to the initiation of current baptismal theology. Smith recognizes and discusses that important tie to the Book of Mormon (107). The representation of baptism by immersion and the words of the baptismal prayer can be directly traced to the Book of Mormon (see 3 Nephi 11:22–26, cited on p. 108).

Gerald Smith also suggests another time when the Book of Mormon may have led to revelation for the early church. He suggests that a close examination of the chronology of the translation of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s revelations on Zion and the New Jerusalem indicate a probable correlation. That is, that the presence of those themes in the part of the Book of Mormon that they were translating led directly to the revelations on those topics (122–3).

Both of these examples clearly support Gerald Smith’s thesis that the Book of Mormon influenced the development of ritual and doctrine. Unfortunately, many of his other examples are not nearly as clear in connecting the Book of Mormon as instrumental and influential in the development of theology and ritual. G. Smith notes that the Book of Mormon deals with a plan of salvation, and, of course, Joseph Smith developed a theology of eternal salvation and exaltation. While the Book of Mormon certainly speaks of a plan of redemption (Jacob 6:8;

Alma 12:25–33, 17:16, 18:39, 22:13, 34:31, 39:15, 42:11–13), it is also certain that this is not unique to the Book of Mormon. It is present in the Book of Mormon but also in other Christian religions. The unique Mormon adaptations came later. What G. Smith can say is that it is present in the Book of Mormon but not necessarily that it was influential.

For those who read the Book of Mormon as a purely modern construction, Joseph's Christianity could easily have influenced the Book of Mormon rather than the Book of Mormon influencing Joseph. For those who believe that the Book of Mormon is a translated ancient text, the vocabulary of Christianity may more plausibly be traced to Joseph than the language of antiquity — again arguing that Joseph's Christianity influenced the Book of Mormon rather than having the Book of Mormon be foundational to Joseph's Christianity.

G. Smith attempts to link LDS temple theology to the Book of Mormon. He sees King Benjamin's declaration that "Christ, the Lord God Omnipotent *may seal you his, that you may be brought to Heaven, that ye may have everlasting salvation and eternal life,* (Mosiah 5:15)," as foundational to later LDS sealing theology. That the word *seal* is there is unquestionable. Whether there is any conceptual link between King Benjamin's intent and later LDS theology is more than questionable.

Too many of the examples of suggested influence show only that one can find concepts in the Book of Mormon if one looks for them. That is very different from the suggestion that the Book of Mormon was influential. Too many examples begin with the later theology and then find some word or kernel of an idea that is in the Book of Mormon. Finding them by searching backwards is not an indication that the presence of those words or concepts in the Book of Mormon were influential in the development of LDS theology and ritual.

G. Smith is certainly correct that there are times when the Book of Mormon was influential, and his suggestion of the timing of the Zion and New Jerusalem revelations is one I had not seen before. His discussions of the doctrines are certainly useful, but the overall thesis of the foundational importance of the Book of Mormon for ritual and theology is not as well demonstrated as it would need to be for him to support that thesis. This is not to say there isn't a lot of very good information in the text. There clearly is. The objection is that the book is designed to support a particular thesis, and while it does other things well, it does not really demonstrate that thesis.

**Brant A. Gardner** (MA, State University of New York Albany) is the author of *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* and *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon*, both published through Greg Kofford Books. He has contributed articles to *Estudios de Cultura Nahuatl* and *Symbol and Meaning Beyond the Closed Community*. He has presented papers at the *FairMormon* conference as well as at *Sunstone*.





