



Type: Journal Article

Giving the Book of Ether its Proper Due

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Source: *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*,

Volume 45 (2021), pp. 53-60

Published by: The Interpreter Foundation

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INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 45 · 2021 · Pages 53 - 60

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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GIVING THE BOOK OF ETHER ITS PROPER DUE

Brant Gardner

Review of Daniel L. Belnap, ed., *Illuminating the Jaredite Records* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University / Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2020). 320 pages. Hardback, \$27.95.

Abstract: *Illuminating the Jaredite Record collects ten papers by different Book of Mormon scholars. This is the second publication from the Book of Mormon Academy at Brigham Young University, a collection of scholars interested in the Book of Mormon. As with the first volume, the authors approach the text from different perspectives and thereby illuminate different aspects of the text.*

In his introduction to this collection of essays, Daniel Belnap notes that the Book of Mormon Academy, “established in 2013 at Brigham Young University, [was a] consortium of Religious Education faculty ... created to foster critical thinking about the Book of Mormon and to make their academic, theological, and pedagogical research available to the wider public” (v). The current volume, the second from the Book of Mormon Academy,¹ follows the general conceptual structure of the first, where essays are grouped according to the perspectives the various authors used while approaching this text.

This is an important formula because it reminds the reader of the breadth and depth with which the Book of Mormon deserves to be studied and understood. In particular, however, I must point out that the subject matter of this volume is just as important as the scope of the essays. Although

1. The first was Shon D. Hopkin, ed., *Abinadi: He Came Among Them in Disguise* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University / Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018).

Ether forms a critical subtheme to Mormon's apologetic explanation of the Nephite demise, it is less often the subject of study. Frank F. Judd Jr. notes at the beginning of his chapter, "Resources for the study of the book of Ether are relatively few in number, especially when compared with resources for the study of the rest of the Book of Mormon" (157). This volume's multifaceted approach is extremely welcomed and needed.

In the interests of full disclosure, I was a prepublication reviewer for the volume. I liked it then and I like it now. Now, however, I can give appropriate credit to the authors in ways in which they were previously concealed from me. This means I can finally begin to incorporate these various insights into my own understanding of the Book of Mormon and make sure that appropriate credit is given to these excellent scholars.

Illuminating the Jaredite Records is broken into four topical sections: 1) Cultural-Historical Lenses: Identity and Praxis in the Jaredite Record; 2) Narratological Lenses: Moroni and the Jaredite Record; 3) Reception-Historical Lenses: Women and the Jaredite Record in Antiquity and Modernity; and 4) Pedagogical Lenses: Teaching the Jaredite Record. I comment on each chapter in each part of the volume.

Cultural-Historical Lenses: Identity and Praxis in the Jaredite Record

"They are of Ancient Date: Jaredite Traditions and the Politics of Gadianton's Dissent" (Daniel L. Belnap). I asserted earlier that the Jaredite record played an important role in Mormon's apologetic for the Nephite demise. Belnap's article is an important explanation of one of the locations of that influence. It might seem unusual that the lead article in a volume about the Book of Ether concentrates on the Gadianton robbers, who are exclusively part of Mormon's text. Belnap understands that the Jaredite secret combinations are simply the earlier embodiment of the same secret combinations from his day. Thus one of the tasks of the article is to establish how the Gadianton presence is connected to those more ancient secret combinations.

"Divination as Translation: The Function of Sacred Stones in Ancient Mesopotamia and the Book of Ether" (Kerry Hull). The earliest mention of the interpreters (in time, though not in the Book of Mormon narrative) is with the Jaredites:

And behold, these two stones will I give unto thee, and ye shall seal them up also with the things which ye shall write. For behold, the language which ye shall write I have confounded; wherefore I will cause in my own due time that these stones

shall magnify to the eyes of men these things which ye shall write. (Ether 3:23–24)

Thus the earliest mention of the two stones, later known as the *interpreters*, was in the context of allowing a later generation to understand writing in a language that future generations did not understand. Hull is interested in that connection between stones and translation, a connection we see clearly when Mosiah (son of Benjamin) translates the Jaredite record using those very two stones (Mosiah 28:13). Of course this has implications for Joseph Smith’s translation of the Book of Mormon using stones as an interpretive tool.

Hull traces the Jaredites to a general Mesopotamian origin and examines a history of shining stones and stones as divination tools. All of this is a prelude to the important discussion of the relationship between divination and translation, a discussion I urge students of the Book of Mormon to read closely.

“Upon Mount Shelem: The Liminal Experience of the Brother of Jared” (Charles Swift). A liminal experience is one in which the person stands in a process of change and transformation. It might be described as standing before a door, then entering into something quite different from what was on the first side. Swift says of the brother of Jared:

Though we often speak of “the vision of the brother of Jared,” what occurred was much more than a single vision. His experience atop Mount Shelem comprised multiple visions, a dialogue with the Lord, a personal ministration by the Lord, and a personal transformation in which he grew from a man of faith in the Lord into a man of great faith and, eventually, into a man with great knowledge of the Lord. (85)

From this beginning, Swift details the process and stages of the great experience the brother of Jared had with the Lord on Mount Shelem.

Narratological Lenses: Moroni and the Jaredite Record

“Seeing Moroni and the Book of Ether through a Study of Narrative Time” (Amy Easton-Flake). Easton-Flake’s chapter begins the shift from looking at the text of the book of Ether in its historical context to a concentration on the nature of the text itself. Easton-Flake appropriately begins with a definition of narrative time, contrasting it with *objective time*, which is the way we experience time in a continuous flow; and *story time*, which refers to the passage of time within the story. Moroni’s rendition of the Book of Ether contains stories, and therefore

story time, but it also contains Moroni's editorial insertions, insertions that are outside of the story time. Since Moroni's insertions account "for 25 percent of the text," it makes Moroni "arguably the most prominent person in the book of Ether" (133).

She concludes: "What a close study of narrative time in the book of Ether makes clear is how Moroni (and possibly Ether and Mosiah as well) constantly guides readers' interpretation of the text" (152). Because my personal studies have led me to a greater investigation of Mormon and Moroni as writers, I found this an exceptionally interesting and important essay.

"Moroni's Six Commentaries in the Book of Ether" (Frank F. Judd Jr.) Easton-Flake, in her discussion of the book of Ether, notes that Moroni's insertion accounts "for 25 percent of the text" (133). Judd picks up the task of examining those insertions themselves. He examines each of the lengthy insertions and notes how they relate to the text of the Book of Mormon as Moroni's father, Mormon, wrote it.

He finds that "Moroni's six commentaries in the book of Ether give readers key insights into the heart of the author. This great man was concerned about many things, such as his personal mission, his own people, and future readers of the Book of Mormon" (172). The inserted commentaries allow modern readers to get a better picture of how an ancient prophet used written events about the past to inform his present and demonstrate his hopes for the future.

"Power in the Book of Ether" (Jared Ludlow). Our modern perceptions of power tend to be defined in political terms, and Ludlow understands that political power is but one type. Ludlow sees a contrast between the power represented in the brother of Jared's experience with the Lord and the ultimate political conflicts (and ultimate demise) of the Jaredite nation. Linking those two are the times when the political survival of the Jaredites was enhanced by their obedience to the prophets who came among them. Thus Ludlow juxtaposes a righteous power manifested through prophets of the Lord with the unrighteous power of the secret combinations instigated and encouraged by Satan. He concludes, "A primary message found throughout the Book of Mormon is the need for every person to choose between two ways: God or Satan" (196).

Reception-Historical Lenses: Women and the Jaredite Record in Antiquity and Modernity

"Jared's Two Daughters" (Joseph M. Spencer). A very modern problem underlies Spencer's selection of topic and approach: "Readers often

lament the paucity of female characters in the Book of Mormon. The volume is largely about men, with women appearing only in the margins of the story, often in unseemly ways” (203). Spencer proposes a careful reading to flesh out the textual skeleton of women in the Book of Ether. After an examination of where women appear according to the original chapters of Ether, Spencer takes a very close look at the daughter of Jared in Ether 8. He posits a textual tension in what may be seen as two parts of the story — the secret combinations story associated with the daughter of Jared and the dancing woman section. He suggests that this might be evidence of a very early combination of stories of two different daughters conflated into one in the current redaction (and probably the original as it existed on the plates of Ether).

This is a complex argument, and a type of analysis of potential sources that we seldom see in discussions of any book in the Book of Mormon. It is a chapter that requires close reading itself.

“Whence the Daughter of Jared? Text and Context” (Nicholas J. Frederick). Frederick has done a lot of work on the intertextuality between the Bible and the Book of Mormon; and it is therefore unsurprising that he would look at the story of the daughter of Jared in the Book of Ether against what many have assumed to be the clear biblical model found in the story of Salome — myself included, as he points out. I heard Frederick present an early version of this paper at a conference and have been eagerly awaiting its appearance in print.

Through a very careful analysis of the two stories, Frederick notes that the superficial and obvious similarities can obscure important, indeed critical, differences between the two stories. This is an important chapter that, in Frederick’s words, can remove “the shortsighted move of viewing Ether 8 as merely a recapitulation of the Salome story” (248).

Pedagogical Lenses: Teaching the Jaredite Record

“Of Captivity and Kingdoms: Helping Students Find a Place in the Book of Ether” (Ryan Sharp). The final section of this collection of essays moves from historical and textual to the pedagogical. The two essays in this section read the Book of Ether with an eye to the way the book can speak to its modern readers.

Sharp notes, “Teachers of the Book of Mormon delight in outlining the Jaredites’ journey and then using the text to guide students on their own metaphorical journey from spiritual Babel to the promised land” (253). Sharp suggests that while the early part of the Book of Ether is easy to apply, the second half, which relentlessly describes political

intrigue, dysfunction, and war, is much more difficult to use as a positive metaphor for a student's life.

What Sharp suggests is that teachers use Moroni as their guide. Where Moroni left his sources as a terse iteration of events, he followed with an inserted homily that summarizes “this troubling history and, by so doing, underscores the overarching narrative of seeking, obtaining, losing, and then regaining a kingdom” (254–55). Sharp points out the ways in which one might see Moroni's life paralleled in the Jaredite story.

Sharp concludes, “One of the responsibilities of teachers to help students remember that individuals in the scriptures are real people who battled real issues. Part of training students to read the Book of Mormon exegetically is helping them understand that the scriptural author, in this case Moroni, is writing in the context of his own struggles and anxieties” (270). If students can learn to see the writers in their most human moments, those moments can have a greater meaning and application to the very human trials of the modern world.

“The Jaredite Journey: A Symbolic Reflection of Our Own Journey along the Covenant Path” (Tyler J. Griffin). Where Sharp concentrated on the more neglected second half of the book of Jared, Griffin proposes to use the first part, the journey, to establish a model for modern personal journeys. He notes many parallels between the Jaredite and Lehite journeys from the land of their origin to a new land of promise, parallels which suggest that “the Lord seems to be invoking the law of witnesses by having Moroni include this abridgment in the record” (274). That is a legitimate suggestion, and perhaps one too easily overlooked. As is evident throughout Belnap's discussion in the first essay in this collection, Mormon's use of the plates of Jared focused heavily on the latter half. While Belnap doesn't say so explicitly, there is a remarkable absence in Mormon's writings that emphasize either the Jaredite journey or, particularly, the brother of Jared's experience.

Griffin elaborates the elements of the Jaredite journey with an eye to seeing in them a guide for modern journeys toward our ultimate spiritual goals. He concludes, “Thanks to Moroni acting as our chronological intercessor, we can learn from the relevance of these people's lives and legacies as we take our turn journeying over the land, building our symbolic barges, and launching into the deep opportunities that await us today” (291).

Conclusion

Illuminating the Jaredite Records begins to expand our understanding of a book in the Book of Mormon to which too little attention has been

paid. The breadth of the essays strongly suggests rich veins to mine, even in this relatively small and terse book. Those veins include not only the Jaredites themselves, but also Moroni and, even by extension, modern readers. I enjoyed the essays when I reviewed the book before its publication, but the multiple issues surrounding publication have meant that a long time has passed between my early view and the anticipated arrival of the publication. As I read it again for this review, I found even more depth that I had missed on my earlier reading. I highly recommend this volume and recommend that a reader return to it more than once to truly gain its full impact.

Brant A. Gardner (*M.A. 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*.

