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Nephi's Obsession, Or, How to Talk with Nephi about God

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NEPHI'S OBSESSION, OR, HOW TO TALK WITH NEPHI ABOUT GOD

Ralph C. Hancock

Review of Joseph M. Spencer, *1 Nephi: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, UT: The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020). 146 pages. \$9.99 (paperback).

Abstract: *Joseph Spencer's intimate familiarity with the Book of Mormon text, based upon years of close textual study and informed by a well-developed theological sensibility, is in full evidence in this lead-off volume in Neal A. Maxwell Institute's new series of books on the various books of the Book of Mormon. Leaving to prophets and apostles the responsibility for "declaring official doctrine," this new series approaches the book with the tools of the "scholarly practice" of theology. In Spencer's case at least, his practice is understood to be (1) informed by an emphasis on grace that is skeptical of claims of personal righteousness and (2) very much engaged with contemporary moral and social issues grounded in a fundamental concern for "equality." Accordingly, Spencer's reading is much more interested in "what God is doing in history with what we call the Abrahamic covenant" than with the more popular (non-scholarly) concerns of "everyday faithful living;" it is also more interested in Nephi's "realistic" and "mature" regret over his youthful over-boldness than in his confident statements of righteous faith. In the end, Spencer's extremely careful but theologically tendentious reading alerts us very skillfully to certain features of Nephi's imperfect humanity but reveals a consistent preoccupation with any possible faults in the prophet that might be extracted from an ingenious reading of the text. Finally, concerning women in the Book of Mormon, Spencer again expertly raises provocative questions about barely heard female voices but is too eager to frame these questions from the standpoint of the "modern sensibility" of "sexual egalitarianism."*

Joseph Spencer’s academic qualifications for batting lead-off in the Neal A. Maxwell Institute’s important new series of books on the various books of the Book of Mormon are notable. Professor Spencer, who has taught in BYU’s ancient scripture department since 2015, is author of two previous books closely examining the Book of Mormon text¹ as well as scores of articles, chapters, and reviews on these and related topics. He is co-editor of the Book of Mormon Series (in which the present title appears) as well as editor of the Maxwell Institute’s *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*. (Let us note as well that Joseph Spencer holds a PhD in philosophy and has also published extensively in that demanding field of scholarship.) As he demonstrates in the present work, Spencer has devoted years of close and faithful study to the Book of Mormon and has much to offer the reader who is willing to join him in a fresh and searching engagement with an ancient and inspired text.

Interpretive Grace

Professor Spencer emphasizes that his approach to 1 Nephi is *theological*. “My first purpose in the following pages is . . . to show how much we miss in 1 Nephi — how much we miss that’s of a theological nature” (3). In this he echoes the series introduction: “This series focuses particularly on theology — the scholarly practice of exploring a scriptural text’s implications and its lens on God’s work in the world” (viii). It seems that the meaning of this “scholarly practice” is best understood (again from the series introduction) “as opposed to [that is, as distinct from] authoritative doctrine,” that is, “as, literally, *reasoned* ‘God talk’” (viii). This series, we read, intends to engage “each scriptural book’s theology on its own terms” (viii) without imposing any “single approach to theology or scriptural interpretation” (ix). Thus, the Maxwell Institute’s editorial approach enacts a rather abrupt division of labor between “prophets and apostles [in] their unique role of declaring official doctrines” (viii) and the theologian’s scholarly practice of reasoned engagement with the scriptural text. From this point of view, it seems, it would be surprising if prophets reasoned or if a theologian’s reasonings reckoned with prophetic authority.² The series introduction concludes quite decorously

1. Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology* (Salem, OR: Salt Press, 2012); Joseph M. Spencer, *The Vision of All: Twenty-Five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi’s Record* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016).

2. We should note that Spencer’s “theological” interpretation seems to take as given the historicity of the Book of Mormon as an ancient record; he certainly treats Nephi as the author of the text under examination. This view of Book of

with a dedication to Elder Maxwell's "apostolic conviction that there is always more to learn from the Book of Mormon and much to be gained from our faithful search for Christ in its pages" (ix), as distinct, to be sure, from the official declaration of definitive doctrines.

If a "theological" approach is not to be confused with one that takes its bearings by "authoritative doctrine," then what kind of "God-talk" will serve as Spencer's interpretive touchstone? "And this might be the truest sign of prophecy," Spencer writes, "that it comes through those God exalts *despite* their human nature" (5, emphasis added). This insight or sensibility sets the tone of Spencer's theology and thus of his interpretation of 1 Nephi. To remember that prophets are, like us, "earthen vessels" (6; quoting 2 Corinthians 4:7), is to look at scripture as "an astonishing textual embodiment of *grace*" (5, emphasis added). With this in mind, the author will minimize any evidence of Nephi's own virtue or righteousness and highlight or, rather, seek out evidence — even the most subtle and indirect — of the prophet's all-too-human nature. And this interpretive choice, we will see, aligns nicely with Spencer's interest in the "questions [that] are most pressing right now, two decades into the twenty-first century" (4). (Direct attention to these contemporary questions occupies the second half of this book.) As we keep in mind both our dependence on grace and the contemporary issues that swirl around us, Spencer promises (in a characteristically self-effacing resort to the second person plural) to "show how much we miss in 1 Nephi — how much we miss that's of a theological nature" (3).

Textual Structure and Covenantal History

Along with this theological emphasis on grace/earthen vessels, Spencer's interpretive method relies heavily on his very searching investigations of the overarching structure of Nephi's writings (with due attention, of course, to the original chaptering). The theological purpose of the book can only come to light after we "ask how 1 Nephi is organized" (12). There is reason to believe that this organization is very careful and deliberate,

Mormon historicity is unmistakably affirmed in the Maxwell Institute's excellent *Maxwell Institute Study Edition* of the Book of Mormon. See editor Grant Hardy's "General Notes," which make a very strong case for real historicity on many grounds — linguistic, intra-textual, geographical (old world and new), reliable witnesses, etc. See Grant Hardy, ed. *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ, Maxwell Institute Study Edition* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University/Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018).

since the account we are reading was written decades after the events recounted. Spencer proposes that the main theme or underlying concern of 1 Nephi is the “intertribal conflict between Nephites and Lamanites” (12). Attention to this concern leads Spencer to “connect Nephi’s vision to Isaiah and Isaiah to Nephi’s vision” (21), and this attention culminates in the major thesis of his interpretation: “For the most part, then, Isaiah’s prophecies aren’t for Nephi about everyday faithful living. They’re about the long-term destiny of Israel” (22). Spencer is willing to indulge more naïve readers who look at 1 Nephi as “a collection of illustrative stories, vignettes modeling faith amid adversity” (22), as “just another means to the end of feeling the Spirit and receiving direction for our lives” (23), but he is clear that “Nephi asks us to read his work primarily in a different way” (22). In particular, while “we’re certainly free to read 1 Nephi 8 as an allegory for our individual struggles to prove faithful” (30), Spencer strikingly suggests, mainly on the basis of “the sudden shift in the dream-scape, specifically when Laman and Lemuel refuse the tree,” (29) that “the numberless concourses are the children of Laman and Lemuel — perhaps especially in the last days” (29), and thus that “the dream is primarily about Lehi’s two oldest sons” (29). “Nephi’s vision is about getting the children of Laman and Lemuel into God’s presence” (32).

Spencer is thus much more interested in “what God is doing in history with what we call the Abrahamic covenant” (35) than with the more commonplace concerns of “everyday faithful living” (22). Concretely, this means seeing the Book of Mormon as “the iron rod that leads latter-day Lamanites — and Gentiles with them — along the gospel path” (36). From this perspective, the apostasy is less a matter of “early Christians jettison[ing] specific ordinances” than it is of forgetting “the covenants of the Lord, which he hath made unto the House of Israel” (35; 1 Nephi 13:23), as these have to do with the destiny of “latter-day Lamanites” (36). This is the meaning of Nephi’s “likening” to Isaiah: “The two stories, Nephi’s and Isaiah’s, are one, although occurring among different branches of Israel” (41).

“We should share Nephi’s obsession with the history of the Abrahamic covenant. Perhaps we should even share his obsession with Isaiah” (43). Why Spencer’s focus on this “obsession?” And just what follows from it? Although he recognizes — as any passably attentive reader of Nephi must — that “Christ is the hero of the covenantal story Nephi has to tell” (61), that “to know Christ is to know the covenant, for Nephi” (62), Spencer seems determined to emphasize what we might call the historical and communal features of Christ and the covenant.

This historical-covenantal “obsession” inevitably tends to the neglect of the plain meaning of the gospel for every faithful individual as this is explained by Nephi himself in his wonderful concluding statement of the “doctrine of Christ” in 2 Nephi 31. Is it not in Jesus Christ and his doctrine of faith, repentance, baptism, the gift of the Holy Ghost, and enduring to the end, that the Lord universalizes his covenant for all people? Why then would a student of Nephi’s prophecies wish to set the “historical” and “covenantal” meaning of Nephi’s teaching against the doctrine of Christ as it applies to each of us individually?³

3. If we were to brave just for a moment the Maxwell Institute’s firm distinction between authoritative doctrine and the academic practice of theological interpretation, we might take note of President Russell M. Nelson’s striking willingness to confuse the gathering of Israel with concerns related to personal righteousness:

My dear young brothers and sisters, these surely *are* the latter days, and the Lord is hastening His work to gather Israel. That gathering is the most important thing taking place on earth today. Nothing else compares in magnitude, nothing else compares in importance, nothing else compares in majesty. And if you choose to, if you want to, you can be a big part of it. You can be a big part of something big, something grand, something majestic!

When we speak of the *gathering*, we are simply saying this fundamental truth: every one of our Heavenly Father’s children, on both sides of the veil, deserves to hear the message of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. They decide for themselves if they want to know more. ...

My question tonight to every one of you between the ages of 12 and 18 is this: Would you like to be a big part of *the greatest* challenge, *the greatest* cause, and *the greatest* work on earth today? ...

Every child of our Heavenly Father deserves the opportunity to *choose* to follow Jesus Christ, to accept and receive His gospel with all of its blessings — yes, all the blessings that God promised to the lineage of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who, as you know, is also known as Israel.

My dear extraordinary youth, you were sent to earth at this precise time, the most crucial time in the history of the world, to help gather Israel. There is *nothing* happening on this earth right now that is more important than that. There is *nothing* of greater consequence. Absolutely *nothing*.

This gathering should mean *everything* to you. This *is* the mission for which you were sent to earth. (Russell M. Nelson, “Hope of Israel,” Worldwide Youth Devotional, June 3, 2018, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/2018/08-se/hope-of-israel>.)

To inquire further into the reasoning behind Spencer’s obsession with covenantal-collective history *as opposed to* the gospel as addressed to individuals would lead

Against “Individualism”

The answer to this question seems to emerge later in Spencer’s book,⁴ in the context of a discussion of Nephi’s killing of Laban:

Nephi learned through his encounter with the Spirit that God’s purposes are bigger than our own. *The communal and the covenantal are to be privileged above our individual – and often selfish – concerns.* We’re proud of our *modern individualism*, but Nephi’s story suggests there’s something important beyond our cloistered concerns. We’re not to be hermits, demonstrating our *individual righteousness* to God and others in our withdrawal from the world. We’re meant to live together in love, jointly keeping the commandments and making wherever we live a land of promise. (80, emphasis added)

This remarkable confessional statement provides the key, I think, to understanding Spencer’s obsessions. He has already told us that a certain understanding of “grace” provides his theological touchstone, that is, that human beings are exalted, not so much through excellent personal qualities or the ongoing work of perfecting individual human nature, but “despite their human nature” (5). From this point of view, any preoccupation with “individual righteousness” can be classified with the “selfish” concerns of “modern individualism.” Such spiritualized selfishness, from Spencer’s point of view, constitutes a “withdrawal from the world,” where “the world” is interpreted, not, say, as the allurements of a Great and Spacious Building, but as the commitment “to live together in love, *jointly* keeping the commandments and making wherever we live a land or promise” (80, emphasis added). Spencer’s historical-covenantal

us to examine Spencer’s impressive earlier writings on the Book of Mormon, and especially his *On Typology* (see, in the volume under review, endnotes 1.2, 2.1, and 4.1). The substantive question of Israel’s covenant is bound up for Spencer with the textual-structural question of the divisions of Nephi’s text. Surprisingly (at least to me), Spencer (following a 1986 article by Frederick W. Axegard; see endnote 1.2) advocates not Nephi’s own division between 1 Nephi and 2 Nephi, but a division between 2 Nephi 5 and 6. This division serves an argument that emphasizes Isaiah’s prophecies and Nephi’s “likening” of them over Nephi’s concluding doctrinal chapters, and especially the remarkable “doctrine of Christ” set forth in 2 Nephi 31 in which Nephi is uniquely instructed *by the Father and the Son*. In Spencer’s structural scheme, this powerful and luminous chapter can only figure as a kind of epilogue to the main treatment of Israel- and Lamanite-directed prophecy.

4. Part II, “The Theological Questions of 1 Nephi,” chapter 4 (the first chapter in this Part), “Laban’s Death” (66–81).

focus is thus rigorously associated with his theology of grace. And this theology of grace, despite the concession to “commandments” (qualified by *jointly*), implies a de-emphasis, at least, on personal righteousness, which would entail “our withdrawal from the world,” and a distinct collective-historical turn towards “making wherever we live a land of promise” by “living together in love.”

Spencer’s highlighting of Nephi’s preoccupation with the historical and collective Abrahamic covenant as it applies particularly to the descendants of the Lamanites is an important contribution to our understanding of Nephi’s prophetic voice. Perhaps the central question the author puts to the reader is whether the collective-historical interpretation of grace — *as opposed to* the faithful individual’s quest for salvation, enduring to the end while “relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save” (2 Nephi 31:19), according to the doctrine of Christ — best serves the cause of Israel’s redemption.

As noted above, the other main fruit of Spencer’s theology of grace-based interpretation is his emphasis on Nephi’s quite flawed humanity, especially in his relations with his less righteous — or, shall we say, less-than-cooperative — brothers, Laman and Lemuel. Now, anyone who has read 2 Nephi 4 has heard Nephi himself confessing and grieving over his own imperfect humanity, and the context of this confession certainly suggests that Nephi’s vexations have to do with his relations with his now thoroughly alienated brethren. Certainly Spencer is right, as Noel Reynolds showed long ago,⁵ that Nephi’s authorial perspective has much to do with the “intertribal conflict between Nephites and Lamanites” (12). The subtitle of 1 Nephi refers, after all, to the prophet’s “reign and ministry.” But Spencer wants to suggest further that a close reading of Nephi’s text reveals his intention to apologize for his mistreatment of Laman and Lemuel:

We’re apt to feel that Nephi is unfair to his understandably baffled brothers and that maybe they were right to see Nephi as self-righteous and judgmental. If so, shouldn’t we worry that Nephi lacks common feeling, that he was spiritually gifted but socially clueless? And could someone like that really be a reliable guide to living a rich spiritual life in community with others? (67) ... Among these more human figures, Nephi looks almost pathologically faithful. (83)

5. Noel B. Reynolds, “The Political Dimension in Nephi’s Small Plates,” *BYU Studies* 27, no. 4 (1987):1–24. Cited by Spencer, endnote 5.3.

This criticism of Nephi⁶ perfectly fits the mold of Spencer's interpretive scheme: Nephi went wrong in that he prioritized "judgmental" *personal* righteousness over the grace-enabled understanding that makes possible a *communal* spiritual life, "a rich spiritual life in community with others" (67). Spencer grants that Nephi is "neither dismissive nor mean" to his brothers, but he does blame Nephi for being "paternalistic" (95). From this point of view, the narrative of 1 Nephi appears "as an aspect of national propaganda," a propaganda that the rest of the story in the Book of Mormon suggests "worked too well" (85).

To be sure, Spencer's purpose is ultimately to vindicate Nephi insofar as the prophet eventually realized the error of his ways, and it is from the perspective of this mature recognition and communal spirituality that the books of Nephi were written. The point of bringing to light and emphasizing Nephi's "foibles" is "to make clear that we follow the prophets precisely because of what *God* does through them, not because of what or who they are *on their own*" (96, emphasis in original). For Spencer, Nephi's resolute statement of his readiness to obey the Lord's commandments in what is surely one of the most quoted passages in the Book of Mormon (1 Nephi 3:7, "I will go and do . . . ") is an example of the prophet's youthful self-righteousness, later corrected or adjusted by his more "realistic" and "mature" statement that the Lord nourishes and strengthens those who keep the commandments and provides "means whereby they can accomplish the thing which he has commanded them" (1 Nephi 17:3).

I must say I am underwhelmed by the supposed contrast between these statements. More generally, I would say that Nephi's humanity is evident enough throughout his account (nowhere more than in 2 Nephi 4, to be sure), and needs no deepening through the attribution of immature and anti-social self-righteousness. There is no reason to contend, in response to Spencer's preoccupation with "humanizing" Nephi, that the prophet never made a misstep he regretted. But Spencer is perhaps a little overconfident of his capacity to judge the youthful Nephi. Is it a fault to be humorless and overly serious when coming out of a conversation with the Father and the Son into a squabble with faithless brothers who refuse to believe their own father and his claims to visions? And how much slack should Nephi have given Laman and Lemuel, who were known to have schemed and even attempted on multiple occasions to murder Nephi or his father, ultimately being restrained only by divine interventions? The fact that Nephi dwells so little on these facts in his writing seems indeed to point to his decades

6. My point is not that Spencer simply agrees with such criticism of Nephi, but he certainly takes his bearing by it and expands upon it.

of distance from the events being reported — but not quite to the kind of change of heart Spencer perceives. Nephi has certainly put the events of 1 Nephi into a much larger perspective by the time of his writing, but perhaps not a perspective that questions his earlier righteousness in quite the way or to the degree that Spencer aims to show.

The Theological Questions of Modern Morality

We will touch more lightly on the rest of the second half of Spencer's *1 Nephi*, "Part II, The Theological Questions of 1 Nephi." Interestingly, these theological questions arise not from the great questions of the theological tradition (the Godhead, salvation, atonement, etc.), which, to be sure, have been addressed to some degree in Part I as they emerge from the text, but from the characteristic preoccupations of contemporary social progressives, or let us say of younger Latter-day Saints influenced by a contemporary, progressive moral-political framework. Thus, the question of personal morality — pushed aside or demoted in Spencer's account of Nephi and his brethren, as it relates to the "doctrine of Christ," in favor of the collective-covenantal perspective — now returns in force, but from a contemporary moral perspective not drawn from but superimposed upon scripture. From this perspective, Spencer imagines his reader asking, or invites his reader to ask, whether, since "prophets aren't infallible ... could [Nephi] get something so seriously wrong that he leads us astray?" (67).

The first such "theological question" Spencer engages, in Chapter 4, is the classic one of Laban's death. His discussion of this hard case is careful and rewarding. Much to his credit, the author invites his readers to adopt a critical attitude concerning "strictly rational ethical demands" in "an increasingly secularized world" (70). He here seems to identify *rational* rather narrowly, I would say, with a liberal-secular view of "public reason," in which reason is defined *a priori* as excluding any religious or otherwise soulful considerations. In any case, Spencer shows himself ready to allow the Lord to "smash the rational and ethical idols we're tempted to place before the God of faith and obedience" (71).

But Spencer dismisses rather abruptly one sort of the argument that might be considered "rational" — namely, one that would justify Nephi's action as "excusable homicide under the public law of the time" (69), quite confident that the argument from legality to morality is of little worth, that "ethical questions generally eclipse legal questions for good reason" (70). I can see Spencer's point, but is there not good reason to regard positive laws as practical instantiations and indispensable

determinations of ethical norms? Surely the legal deserves to be taken into account as an essential domain of the ethical.

In keeping with his overall approach, Spencer seems somewhat over-eager to interpret Nephi's killing of Laban as another example of his maturation from self-righteous youth to mature, covenant-focused prophet. That is, he is eager to distinguish motives that might well be considered as two aspects of one righteous motive: Nephi's interest in being a righteous person — a desire “tainted with a competitive spirit” (78) — *as opposed to* his obedience to divine commands understood as instrumental to “God's covenantal promises to whole peoples” (78). When he cannot quite prove this distinction from the text, Spencer resorts to leading questions: “Was [Nephi] interested in keeping commandments, or did he treat the commandments primarily as something to force himself into his role as ruler and teacher? ... Is he depressed, aware that he has perhaps overreached? Or is he as confident as ever? We don't know” (76). No, in fact, we do not. And we have no reason to assume such overreach unless we insist *a priori* on dividing personal righteousness from covenantal promises.

Spencer's reading finally supports a faithful approach to the text in that he is ready to accept Nephi's action as commanded — or rather *constrained* — by the Spirit. (Spencer is convinced this distinction is important.) Indeed, he pushes back against those who adopt a “self-congratulating intellectual superiority” and are thus scandalized by the story of Laban's slaying. It's “hard to be critical without being hypocritical” (80), he wisely notices. But, characteristically, he reaches out to Nephi's critics and, braving his own warnings about hypocrisy, judges that “there are motes in Nephi's eyes, to be sure — maybe even beams” (80). Nephi is redeemed, from this point of view, by the fact that Nephi's own story, when read closely enough, shows that “he seems to hope we'll see those motes, or even those beams” (80).

Joseph Spencer's extremely careful reading certainly alerts us very skillfully to certain features of Nephi's imperfect humanity. But it seems to me that the author's own theological priorities — a certain understanding of grace motivates his determination to drive a wedge between personal righteousness and salvation and the collective-covenantal — consistently lead him to overstate Nephi's faults.

Women and Feminism

There is much that is valuable and, I think, quite original in Spencer's chapter 6 (“The Women”) on women and sexuality. He rightly draws our

attention to Jacob 3:6, which seems to tie the Lord's eventual mercy toward the Lamanites to what Spencer calls their "relative gender parity" (103). Once again, the author seems more confident than the textual evidence supports that the story of Nephites and Lamanites over ten centuries can be significantly structured around Lamanite superiority in terms of sexual morality and the treatment of women. It must be granted to Spencer's thesis that there is a striking and disturbing resonance between Jacob's condemnation of Nephite sexual practices very early in the story and Moroni's shocking revelations at the very end (Moroni 9:9-10). It must be noted, still, that the Lamanites are hardly models of morality,⁷ and Moroni's late judgment against the Nephites takes the form of an equivalence with the Lamanites: "this great abomination of the Lamanites ... doth not exceed that of our people" (Moroni 9:9). Spencer is certainly right, in any case, to draw our attention to the sexual violence at the heart of Moroni's accusation of his own people.

Spencer also provides a very richly suggestive comparison between the "conflict between the sexes" (113) in the persons of Sariah and Lehi, on one hand, and the second-generation conflict between Nephi and Laman, in which the question of women's suffering is wholly subordinated to "rivalry between Israelite men ... in their own fights for dominance and inheritance" (113). But are we sure we want to reduce Nephi's struggle with his brethren to a fight for dominance or inheritance? More generally, the very expressions by which Spencer frames the Nephite/Lamanite comparison on sex and gender points once again to a certain excess or arbitrary tendency in Spencer's rhetorical framing of scriptural teachings and theological problems. What the prophet Jacob frames as monogamous chastity (as opposed to polygamy, concubinage, and whoredoms), Spencer expresses in keeping with the contemporary preoccupation with "gender parity" (103). Thus a very natural and surely legitimate concern for the mostly silent struggles of womankind is fitted to a distinctly contemporary ideological frame. Nephi's readers are urged to look for "a promise of sexual egalitarianism" and examples of "women willing to resist oppression" (113-14). This "oppression" seems to include any circumstances in which a woman's commitment to her "social role" (106, 115) might seem to trump her individual self-expression. It must be said that Spencer decidedly wavers here in his own critique of "modern individualism." In fact he plainly judges all earlier societies as "oppressive cultures" from the standpoint of our

7. See Moroni 9:8: "they [the Lamanites] feed the women upon the flesh of their husbands, and the children upon the flesh of their fathers."

apparently unimpeachable modern sensibilities. This is the standpoint from which “the Nephites’ ‘imperfections’” (114) — including, to be sure, Nephi’s own — are scrutinized. If some belief or habit or social role tends to “make us cringe today” (114), this seems to provide a sufficient basis for moral judgment. At least, for Spencer, Nephi deserves credit for his “struggle against those attitudes” (114) that we have at last overcome in the name of the “modern sensibility” of “sexual egalitarianism.”

To be sure, Professor Spencer acknowledges that even we (that is, we modern egalitarians) are all still struggling, since “we’re as enmeshed in oppressive cultures as the prophets of the past” (115). But in this very acknowledgement, the author seems to convict living prophets as much as the rest of us; the implication is that the prophets were and are as enmeshed as we are, and that only modern moralists can begin to escape the oppression inherited from less enlightened times in that moment of awakening in which our individual consciousness is liberated from our “social roles,” and thus from complicity in the oppression that modern prophets don’t yet clearly see. The prophets are included in the convicted “we,” and the author situates himself among those awakening from “oppression.”

Invoking once again the convicting first person plural, Spencer confesses that “we’re almost certainly blind to our own prejudices” (115).

I suppose we can agree on that.

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