



Type: Journal Article

Overwriting Ether: Moroni's Transfiguration of Jaredite Scripture

Author(s): David J. Larsen

Source: *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*,
Volume 50 (2022)

Published by: The Interpreter Foundation

Page(s): 145-160

Abstract: The Book of Ether is a sometimes-overlooked gem of a text within the Book of Mormon, a history within a history that deserves careful and innovative investigation. Rosalynde Frandsen Welch offers such with a novel perspective in her entry in the Maxwell Institute's series of "brief theological introductions" to the books within the Book of Mormon. The principal focus of Welch's analysis is on issues concerning Moroni's editorial purposes, how he interacts with his source text, and the ethics of his agenda for his abridgment of the Jaredite record. She critiques what she sees as Moroni's lack of interest in the Jaredite record for its own sake and his attempts to "Christianize" the indigenous religion and culture of the former inhabitants of the land he occupies. Additionally, Welch presents Moroni as offering his future audience a "reader-centered theology of scripture" that seeks to transfer the authority of Scripture from the author to the reader. This review finds some of Welch's proposals to be problematic but recognizes the great value of her beautifully written contribution to the academic study of the Book of Ether and the Book of Mormon.

INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 50 · 2022 · Pages 145- 160

Overwriting Ether: Moroni's Transfiguration of Jaredite Scripture

David J. Larsen

Offprint Series

© 2022 The Interpreter Foundation. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

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

The goal of The Interpreter Foundation is to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines, including language, history, archaeology, literature, culture, ethnohistory, art, geography, law, politics, philosophy, etc. Interpreter will also publish articles advocating the authenticity and historicity of LDS scripture and the Restoration, along with scholarly responses to critics of the LDS faith. We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures—that Jesus is the Christ.

Although the Board fully supports the goals and teachings of the Church, The Interpreter Foundation is an independent entity and is neither owned, controlled by nor affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or with Brigham Young University. All research and opinions provided are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication of the Interpreter Foundation, a non-profit organization located at InterpreterFoundation.org. You can find other articles published in our journal at Journal.InterpreterFoundation.org.

OVERWRITING ETHER: MORONI'S TRANSFIGURATION OF JAREDITE SCRIPTURE

David J. Larsen

Review of Rosalynde Frandsen Welch, *Ether: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, UT: The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020). 128 pages. \$9.95 (paperback).

Abstract: *The Book of Ether is a sometimes-overlooked gem of a text within the Book of Mormon, a history within a history that deserves careful and innovative investigation. Rosalynde Frandsen Welch offers such with a novel perspective in her entry in the Maxwell Institute's series of "brief theological introductions" to the books within the Book of Mormon. The principal focus of Welch's analysis is on issues concerning Moroni's editorial purposes, how he interacts with his source text, and the ethics of his agenda for his abridgment of the Jaredite record. She critiques what she sees as Moroni's lack of interest in the Jaredite record for its own sake and his attempts to "Christianize" the indigenous religion and culture of the former inhabitants of the land he occupies. Additionally, Welch presents Moroni as offering his future audience a "reader-centered theology of scripture" that seeks to transfer the authority of Scripture from the author to the reader. This review finds some of Welch's proposals to be problematic but recognizes the great value of her beautifully written contribution to the academic study of the Book of Ether and the Book of Mormon.*

Rosalynde Frandsen Welch is an independent scholar of Latter-day Saint literature, theology, and scripture. She earned a PhD from UC San Diego in early modern English literature. She is a member of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute's advisory board and received a research grant from the Institute to write the manuscript for this study of the Book of Ether. Welch has published an impressive number and variety

of scholarly works that can be found in academic journals such as *BYU Studies*, the *Mormon Studies Review*, and the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, as well as in multiple blogs and in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. The focus of this review is on her entry in the Maxwell Institute's *Book of Mormon: Brief Theological Introductions* series, which looks at the Book of Ether.

Welch is a wondrous wordsmith, with a highly articulate and lucid writing style, so much so that I could honestly read her eloquent prose all day. The way she organizes her treatment of the Book of Ether is accessible, fluid, effective, and interesting to read. In this theological analysis of the Book of Ether, she builds upon the work of scholars such as Grant Hardy and Joseph Spencer and adds notable original perspectives in an effort to present this singular Jaredite/Nephite blend of inspired writings in a light that most readers would not have previously considered.

In Welch's introductory remarks, she explains her approach to this volume:

My basic method in this study is threefold: (1) to make the best sense I can of the text's language and structures, (2) to infer something of the writer's intent, and then (3) to press beyond the plain sense and authorial intent to draw out emergent patterns of meaning at work in the passage. (pp. 12–13)

Readers should keep in mind that this collection from the Maxwell Institute is a series of "brief theological introductions," not the standard verse-by-verse commentaries or intensive doctrinal expositions many may be used to seeing. Instead, Welch's approach is to more broadly "search the book of Ether for themes at the heart of religion as it is experienced by believers" (p. 13). Although the author does occasionally touch briefly on particular points of the story of the brother of Jared and other highlights of the Jaredite record, it is clear from the outset that her principal focus is on what Moroni's intentions are and how he is interacting with his source text. She foregoes extensive discussion of some well-known motifs from the book, such as the "recurrent theme of secret combinations" (p. 12), to examine issues relating to authorship such as Moroni's editorial purposes, the ethics of his agenda for his abridgment of the Jaredite record, and how he "models a wrestle with God over the pages of a written text" (p. 13).

This may sound like a rather ethereal approach to Ether for some readers. Indeed, the chapters in this short treatment cover expansive, overarching concepts that run through the text such as "the salvation of the Gentiles" (Chapter 1), "faith after Christ" (Chapter 2), Moroni's

“Christianizing” of the original Jaredite record (Chapter 3), and how the Book of Ether encourages a “reader-centered approach to Scripture” (Chapter 4).

In her Introduction, Welch makes a broad statement regarding Moroni’s approach to the original writings of Ether that I feel represents the position she generally takes throughout her book. She asserts, “Moroni has a clear agenda for the book of Ether, and at times he overwrites Jaredite history and culture in order to convey his own priorities” (p. 14). She notes that although the original Book of Ether, compiled by the Jaredite prophet of that name, was Moroni’s primary source, “Ether’s voice is largely absent from Moroni’s rendition” (p. 5). She goes on to explain:

It is Moroni’s prophetic mind, then, that prevails in the book of Ether. As Mormon does with the large plates of Nephi, Moroni introduces interpretive comments to highlight lessons of Jaredite history. Unlike Mormon, however, Moroni directly addresses these comments to a particular readership and expands them at length in his own voice. (p. 5)

What is Moroni’s agenda, then, according to Welch? What is his purpose in “overwriting” Ether’s original record to share so many thoughts of his own? She expands on this in Chapter 1 and returns to this subject throughout her writing. She turns to Grant Hardy’s work in *Understanding the Book of Mormon* to launch her discussion of her views on this. She states:

Hardy argues that Moroni’s abridgement of the twenty-four gold plates aims quite simply to transform the Jaredite text into Christian scripture. He shows that the Jaredite record in itself, without Moroni’s interspersed comments, contains little material about Jesus Christ and the Christian gospel, beyond the passage in Ether 3:6–16 describing the brother of Jared’s encounter with Christ. (p. 19)

For Welch, Moroni’s approach to the Jaredite record is to “Christianize” whatever material he can from the original text and include that in his abridgement. She sees Moroni as being determined to prove that the God of the Jaredites is the same Jesus Christ that appeared to the Nephites, as recounted in the book of 3 Nephi. She explains:

Moroni’s first step in transforming the Book of Ether into Christian scripture, then, is to highlight any connection he sees between the Jaredite record and the Christian gospel

preached among the Nephites. Moroni wants to persuade the reader that this ancient indigenous text, distinct from Nephite culture and religion, independently confirms the universal truth of the Christian revelation given to his people centuries before their extinction. (p. 20)

It is hard to tell how much merit Welch sees in Moroni's Christianizing efforts. She expresses great interest in his ability to apply Nephite Christian theological principles to the Jaredite story and then extrapolate the results for a future Gentile audience. For example, she presents Moroni as solving the puzzle of how salvation can be extended to groups like the Jaredites and Gentiles — people not born under the Abrahamic covenant — through the Christian principle of faith. "The brother of Jared's salvation occurs through faith alone, outside of birth-covenant" (p. 25), she explains. Later, she further asserts, "Moroni uses the Jaredite record as raw material to work out a theology of salvation for those beyond the reach of the Israelite covenant and Mosaic law" (p. 36).

Modern Ethics, Ancient Texts

Despite her apparent admiration for Moroni's theological and literary nimbleness, she still questions at length the ethical appropriateness of his transformation of an indigenous people's sacred text. She points out a clear distinction between Moroni's frequent and lengthy interpolations into the text he is redacting and, in her view, his father's more reserved and respectful treatment of the original texts he was working with. She argues, of Moroni's approach, that "one can imagine an alternate treatment of the Book of Ether in which Moroni prioritizes *Jaredite* experience in his interpretation" (p. 62), one that demonstrates "honoring and caring for ethnic difference" (p. 63).

"Moroni is not especially interested in the Jaredite record for its own sake" (p. 55), Welch complains. "He passes over aspects of Jaredite experience that do not connect with Nephite experience. He shows little curiosity about the specifics of religious belief and practice. He has no comment on Jaredite society, culture, or politics" (p. 55). When he does show interest, "he does so because the material seems to confirm Nephite history or prophecy" (p. 56). In Welch's view, Moroni's approach constitutes a troubling violation of a responsible "ethics of reading" (p. 56). She explains:

It's puzzling that Moroni, finally able to unfold the full meaning of the Jaredite record, seems incurious about the civilization for its own sake ... But it also raises ethical questions. From a modern perspective, Moroni's translation could be seen as an ethnocentric appropriation of the original text, insensitive to the value of Jaredite experience in its own right. ... But the book of Ether foregrounds the ethical stakes of looking for Christ in somebody else's book. Moroni, unlike previous Nephite redactors, is putting his fingerprints on the sacred text of another people, not his own. (pp. 58–59)

Welch admits that “it is a thorny enterprise to impose modern ethical perspectives on ancient texts” (p. 59), but she justifies her repeated chastisement of Moroni's work by arguing that the Book of Mormon authors themselves reflect on the ethics of reading borrowed sacred texts. She suggests that Nephi₁, for example, is careful in his treatment of others' scriptures and advocates that all readers use the same care. She interprets 2 Nephi 29:4–6 as Nephi arguing that the Gentiles would appropriate Jewish scripture without showing appropriate respect for Jewish culture and history. “To responsibly ‘occupy’ the text of another people, Nephi₁ suggests, means to value their history and sacrifice” (p. 61).¹

Mormon, Welch argues, was similarly concerned about the future Gentiles' treatment of the Lehtes, from whom they would receive the Book of Mormon (see Mormon 5:9–10). She claims:

The Book of Mormon itself, the voice of the slain from the dust, is to be the chief agent of the Gentiles' ethical awakening to the indigenous inhabitants of their continent. Like Nephi₁, Mormon sees the ethical treatment of persecuted peoples as part and parcel with the ethical reading of their texts. (p. 61)

She argues that Moroni was certainly aware of these teachings and that he, likewise, accuses the modern Gentiles of “transfiguring” the scriptures (Mormon 8:33, 37), willfully misinterpreting the holy word to justify their pride, materialism, and neglect of the poor and needy. She feels, however, that Moroni does not have the same awareness of, and mastery over, this concept that Nephi and Mormon have.

1. Welch cites 2 Nephi 29:4–6 and 2 Nephi 25:1–2. I do not, however, agree with her conclusions regarding Nephi's intent in these passages. I see her reading her own ethics into these verses — neither have anything to do, in my view, with producing a faithful and culturally sensitive translation of another people's scriptures.

In any case, Moroni does not express the gratitude, honor, and compassion for the Jaredites that his predecessors advocate in the delicate work of interpreting the religious text of another people. He is quick to interpret the Jaredite record in Nephite terms and use that interpretation to exhort the future readers, but he is rather slow to seek its meaning on its own terms. (p. 62)

I found it rather disheartening and frustrating that the author chose to spend so much space on this subject — it is the main topic of concern in Chapter 3 of her book and comes up frequently in other chapters as well. Her attention to this matter is so ubiquitous throughout her writing that it seems that she is deeply offended by it. She finds the lack of what she deems authentic Jaredite religious and scriptural tradition to be, in her words, “jarring” (p. 65). It is rather ironic that Welch can be seen as similarly guilty of attempting to “occupy” or colonize Moroni’s ancient text. The complaints she raises and ethical standards she imposes are anachronistic and presentistic; they are the preoccupation of modern scholars, not ancient ones. Perhaps Welch is not aware that in ancient times, the reworking, repurposing, or “updating” of older texts was a common practice that was seen as honorable and inspired when done by an author/editor who had the spirit of prophecy.²

Before she ends her passionate protestation against the Nephite prophet-author, she makes a rather ineffective and somewhat condescending attempt to soften the blow:

In the end, I am inclined to judge Moroni gently for his “transfiguration” of the book of Ether. We can learn caution from his hasty interpretive move to pave over the Jaredite text with a Christianizing gloss. We can honor his invitation to be “wiser than [he]” by treating other people’s sacred texts with gratitude, sensitivity, and respect — and by amplifying that same gratitude and care in our interactions with the peoples from whom those texts were borrowed. (p. 68)

Christ in Jaredite and Other Ancient Scripture

As I read Welch’s book, I was left wondering, at times, what she was hoping to see of Jaredite religious tradition and why she assumed that Moroni was giving us something so markedly different. She refers

2. Although, she does clearly understand the importance of “translating,” or interpreting, a text in modified form for the benefit of one’s audience (pp. 64-65).

frequently to “Nephite Christianity,” and apparently sees this central characteristic of Nephite religion as stemming from the fact that Jesus Christ visited them at a certain point in their history. But, as Welch notes, one of the Jaredite progenitors had his own vision of the Savior, in which the Deity specifically introduced himself as Jesus Christ. She also brings up the fact that there is another reference to Christ by Emer, a later Jaredite king (Ether 9:21–22). As such, what reasons do we have to imagine that Jaredite religion is particularly less “Christian” than Nephite religion? Notwithstanding this, Welch appears to see no room for Christ and “Christianity” in the original Jaredite record.

We do not, of course, have the original Jaredite record, so we do not know how Christian they might have been after the brother of Jared’s vision. Also, the story of that vision bears many similarities to the rituals of the Israelite high priest.³ They apparently had the story of Adam and Eve in a form that was familiar to Moroni as well (Ether 1:3–4). With the forgoing in mind, I do not believe it would be out of line to ask what evidence Welch has that Moroni is not being faithful to Jaredite religion and traditions? What real grounds are there to conclude that Jaredite religion was so different from Nephite or from Israelite religion? It is obvious that there would have been some differences due to the fact that they did not have access to the same prophets, revelations, scriptures, and so on; however, it seems to me that Welch is both imposing a foreign ethical standard on Moroni’s treatment of historical texts and also failing to properly acknowledge the continuity of divinely-revealed religion that is portrayed throughout the sacred texts (ancient and modern) of the Restored Gospel.

The scriptures revealed in modern times place Christ at the center of divine interaction with humanity in every age. From early on in the Book of Mormon, many hundreds of years before His visit, Nephi and his descendants knew the name of Jesus Christ (2 Nephi 10:3; 25:19). The Nephites were “Christianizing” the Torah and the Prophets long before Moroni got his hands on the Jaredite plates (see 2 Nephi 11:2; 25:24–30).

Looking at the Pearl of Great Price, we see that in Moses 5, Adam was told that the sacrifices he was commanded to offer were “a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father” and that he should do all things “in the name of the Son” (Moses 5:7–8). Later, the “Gospel”

3. See Book of Mormon Central, “Why Did Moroni Use Temple Imagery While Telling the Brother of Jared Story?” *KnoWhy* 237, November 23, 2016, <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/why-did-moroni-use-temple-imagery-while-telling-the-brother-of-jared-story>.

regarding the “Only Begotten Son” who “should come in the meridian of time” began to be preached among Adam’s posterity. In Moses 6, we learn through Enoch’s preaching that Adam was taught that all need to be baptized in the “name of mine Only Begotten Son ... which is Jesus Christ” (Moses 6:52). In Moses 8, Noah taught the people, “Believe and repent of your sins and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, even as our fathers, and ye shall receive the Holy Ghost” (Moses 8:24).

If we take these revealed words at face value, the early biblical patriarchs were arguably just as Christian as Moroni was. If Noah was preaching the first principles and ordinances of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, why should we not expect the early Jaredites, not many generations afterwards, to have been comparably “Christian” as well, especially after the brother of Jared’s vision? Whether they were or not, Welch’s polemic against Moroni’s presumed Christianizing transfiguration of Jaredite culture and religion seems, to me, antithetical to the general Christ-centered thrust of restored scripture.

Before moving on from this point, I would note that Welch also seems to be leaving out Christ himself from this equation. She suggests that Moroni’s abridgement “raises ethical questions” and that it “could be seen as an ethnocentric appropriation of the original text” (p. 58). She claims that Moroni essentially silences Ether’s personal voice, and, as previously noted, she tries to “imagine an alternate treatment of the Book of Ether in which Moroni prioritizes *Jaredite* experience in his interpretation” (p. 62). However, Welch has apparently failed to notice that Moroni was in close communication with Jesus Christ himself during this process and that he prepared the record following the instructions given to him, including leaving out much that he may have otherwise included:

And now I, Moroni, have written the words which were commanded me, according to my memory; and I have told you the things which I have sealed up. (Ether 5:1; see also 8:20, 26)

And I was about to write more, but I am forbidden; but great and marvelous were the prophecies of Ether. (Ether 13:13)

It would appear that, to some essential degree, Christ was responsible for the final shape and content of the Book of Ether. For some parts of his manuscript, at least, Moroni claims to have had the guidance, approval, and authority of Jesus Christ to write the things that he did. These

considerations are a fitting segue into a discussion of Welch's fourth and final chapter, "A Reader-Centered Theology of Scripture."

Whence the Authority of Scripture?

Chapter 4 represents one of the most unique contributions to how Moroni's approach should be interpreted. Welch starts the chapter with the question, "How does writing become scripture?" She sees Moroni as wrestling with this very question, as he views his own weaknesses and considers "his written expression insufficient to inspire anything but derision in potential readers" (p. 72).

In her discussion, Welch points out that both Mormon and Moroni use the expression "these things" to refer to their work on the Book of Mormon (see Mormon 5:12; Ether 5:3; Moroni 10:4). Drawing on the meaning of "thing" in the American English of Joseph Smith's time ("that which comes, falls or happens, like event" [p. 74]), Welch suggests that Mormon and Moroni use the phrase "these things" to point to the notion that the Book of Mormon is more of an event than an object. The event that she sees these prophet-authors referring to is the reception of the Book of Mormon by modern readers.

Many hundreds of years before it will be taken up by its first reader, the Book of Mormon frequently imagines the moment of its own reception, whether faithful or faithless. I suggest that this is what Mormon and Moroni mean when they so often refer to their work as "these things": the Book of Mormon distributed through millions of potential microevents, ordinary yet fraught with spiritual significance, wherein the Book of Mormon is sincerely received by a reader. (pp. 74–75)

If the true power and potential of the Book of Mormon lies in its reception by modern readers, then, Welch argues, "the potential flowering of 'these things' waits to be unlocked — and it is the reader, not the writer, who holds the key" (p. 75). Mormon and Moroni are undoubtedly concerned with the book's reception and direct many comments (especially Moroni) towards the future readers of the book. For Welch, this focus "points us toward a *reader-centered theology of scripture*" (p. 76).

What this fourth chapter becomes is Welch's definition of what scripture is, according to her interpretation of Mormon and Moroni's view of their work on the Book of Mormon. As I suggested previously,

this will be quite a novel perspective for most readers — one that will cause them to consider where the authority of scripture comes from. For Welch, the Book of Mormon weighs in on this question and “implicitly denies that scripture is defined by any of the following”:

- the infallibility of its writers, because human error is regularly acknowledged (Mormon 9:31);
- its comprehensive or sufficient character, because the book itself promises a flood of additional scripture (2 Nephi 29:12–13);
or
- the ecclesiastical authority of an existing church, because the publication of the Book of Mormon preceded the organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (p. 76).

What the book does affirm, according to Welch, is that “text becomes scripture in the hands of humble, receptive readers who are moved upon by the Lord or his Spirit” (p. 76). In fact, Welch argues that the reference to “weak things” that will “become strong unto them [the Gentile readers]” in Ether 12:27 is the Book of Mormon itself. “Moroni shifts the locus of scriptural authority away from the prestige of a sacred text’s writers ... more toward *readership* to establish scriptural authority” (pp. 76–77). It is the reader that “completes its final transformation into scripture in the moment of sincere encounter” (p. 77). In short, Welch’s perspective in this chapter is that:

A reception theory of scripture treats scripture less as an established deposit of truth certified by “author”-ity and more as a field of potential ready for communities of readers to unlock its meaning and power. (p. 77)

There is certainly value in the type of reader-response criticism that Welch advocates. Too much focus on the historical (or “authorial”) approach to interpreting biblical texts led many scholars in recent decades to turn their focus to how the reader/audience, whether ancient or modern, affects the creation and meaning of scripture. This methodology is especially useful, in my view, if inclusive of both the authors’ intentions and the readers’ encounter with the text. Welch does this as she considers both Moroni’s concerns to offer up the best work he can, in his weakness, to the Lord and also how his humble (in his view, inadequate) efforts will be received by future readers. Moroni’s foreseeing of how readers might experience and react to his words certainly seemed to influence the content and style of his writing.

The strength of this reader-reception approach breaks down, in my opinion, when it is applied to our understanding of the authority — as well as the definition — of scripture. Welch describes her view as shifting the authority of scripture from the author to the reader. Placing the locus of scriptural authority on each individual reader’s experience with the text is a poignantly postmodern approach that deemphasizes the clearest and most important source of scripture’s authority — the Divine.

Popular biblical scholar N.T. “Tom” Wright has argued that the phrase “‘the authority of scripture’ ... must mean, if it means anything Christian, ‘the authority of God *exercised through* scripture.’”⁴ Ultimately, the authority of scripture does not come from the reader *or* the author — it comes from God.

To say this is not to deny the weakness of men’s hands, or minds, in producing texts that we consider to be sacred. Moroni, as did other ancient authors, made it clear that he did not consider his writings to be perfect. We do not view the authors of scriptural texts (or the texts themselves) to be inerrant. However, if we are in agreement with the author of 2 Peter 1:20–21, then we should not emphasize the “private interpretation” of scripture but should view the “prophecy of the scripture” as coming not “by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.”

The authors of the Book of Mormon certainly believed that they were producing what they wrote under the direct authority and guidance of God. As noted previously, Moroni believed that he was writing with God’s authority and writing what the Lord has asked him to write.

And now I, Moroni, have written the words which were commanded me, according to my memory. ... And now, if I have no authority for these things, judge ye; for ye shall know that I have authority when ye shall see me, and we shall stand before God at the last day. Amen. (Ether 5:1, 6)

Later, in one of the passages where Moroni uses the phrase “these things,” he acknowledges the weakness of his writing but emphasizes that much of what he did write came directly from Christ. What Moroni records is not something that is waiting to be “scripture” when the reader receives it, but it is the express Word of God, coming directly from the mouth of Deity.

4. N.T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*, 18, emphasis in original.

And then shall ye know that I have seen Jesus, and that he hath talked with me face to face, and that he told me in plain humility, even as a man telleth another in mine own language, concerning these things; And only a few have I written, because of my weakness in writing. (Ether 12:39–40)

In some of his final recorded words, Moroni again claims that what he has engraved on the plates are God’s own words and that the Lord himself will testify of this fact in the next life.

And I exhort you to remember these things; for the time speedily cometh that ye shall know that I lie not, for ye shall see me at the bar of God; and the Lord God will say unto you: Did I not declare my words unto you, which were written by this man, like as one crying from the dead, yea, even as one speaking out of the dust? I declare these things unto the fulfilling of the prophecies. And behold, they shall proceed forth out of the mouth of the everlasting God; and his word shall hiss forth from generation to generation. And God shall show unto you, that that which I have written is true. (Moroni 10:27–29)

In very similar manner to Moroni, the last author of the Book of Mormon, the first author, Nephi, believed it important to declare to future readers that the words he wrote “are the words of Christ,” given to Nephi by Christ himself with the divine command to write them down.

And now, my beloved brethren, and also Jew, and all ye ends of the earth, hearken unto these words and believe in Christ; and if ye believe not in these words believe in Christ. And if ye shall believe in Christ ye will believe in these words, for they are the words of Christ, and he hath given them unto me; and they teach all men that they should do good. And if they are not the words of Christ, judge ye — for Christ will show unto you, with power and great glory, that they are his words, at the last day; and you and I shall stand face to face before his bar; and ye shall know that I have been commanded of him to write these things, notwithstanding my weakness. . . . For what I seal on earth, shall be brought against you at the judgment bar; for thus hath the Lord commanded me, and I must obey. Amen. (2 Nephi 33:10–11, 15)

Welch seeks to parry this type of criticism of her theory by acknowledging that the Book of Mormon does not allow for simply any reader-determined definition of scripture and that it “will countenance no ‘unfaithed’ or reductively naturalistic account of its emergence” (p. 81). She explains that just as the brother of Jared’s sixteen stones required God’s “sanctifying touch” to turn them from normal rocks into the miraculously illuminated objects that the Jaredites would need for their journey, so the writing of Mormon and Moroni, et al., no matter how weak and humble, would become Scripture through the intervention of Divine grace (p. 81). She expands this metaphor to include the idea that readers need to exercise faith to be able to see through the weakness of the Book of Mormon authors’ writing to behold its divine origin, just as the brother of Jared was able to perceive the divine power emanating from what looked like the rather normal (perhaps even “weak” and “mangled,” considering its post-crucifixion look), human-like finger of the pre-mortal Christ (pp. 81–87).

In my view, Welch is correct to suggest that the faith and charity of the Book of Mormon’s future readers are key for them to *accept* the book as scripture. However, notwithstanding the helpfulness of the above-noted elucidation of her perspective, Welch’s emphasis on the written words of the book *becoming* scripture in the hands of the reader strikes me as an inadequate representation of what the Word of God is. For sure, the worth of God’s Word for the individual will only unfold when that individual applies their own faith and charity to what they read, but if they fail to do so, this will not affect the fact that the words of the books are Holy Scripture, as Moroni and Nephi both so forcefully asserted. I would argue that for Moroni, Nephi, and other Book of Mormon authors, the authority of scripture lies not with the author or the reader, but clearly with that Divine Source that directs, guides, and inspires the words of scripture.

Concluding Thoughts

This review of Rosalynde Frandsen Welch’s brief theological introduction to the Book of Ether has been critical of some of her principal arguments, including her critique of the ethics of Moroni’s “Christianizing” approach to Ether’s record and her description of his perspective on the authority of scripture. Despite these disagreements with her views, I did find much of value in Welch’s effort.

I enjoyed her repeated emphasis on how Moroni’s message to both Jew and Gentile is that “God will never cease working to bring outsiders

into his blessed presence” (p. 9). She underscores how the Book of Ether demonstrates the “limitlessness of Christ’s saving work” by teaching that those from any ethnic or cultural context, including those with no background in Christianity, can access the redemptive power of Christ through faith. Considering the scope of Christ’s Atonement and the reach of His grace, Welch notes:

Looking backward to the non-Israelite brother of Jared and his extraordinary faith, Moroni sees a template for the future salvation of the Gentiles. Both views, past and future, assure Moroni that the saving power of the Messiah is available in all times and in all places. The book of Ether is Moroni’s historical “proof of concept” for the universal salvation promised in Christianity (see 3 Ne. 16). (p. 36)

Even though Moroni has “witnessed the apocalyptic destruction of his world” and wanders alone as “a time traveler, a ghost walking the border between two worlds” (his own and that of his future Gentile readers), he can find a place in both for faith and hope (p. 10). Welch brilliantly shines a spotlight on this beacon that Moroni lights for his envisaged audience. She repeatedly calls attention to how Moroni reassures the Gentiles that “ye may also have hope, and be partakers of the gift, if ye will but have faith” (Ether 12:9). For Welch, Moroni’s message is timeless and not limited to ethnic/cultural identity or whether one is born under the Abrahamic covenant or not. I close with Rosalynde Welch’s eloquent expounding on that message:

Hope leads us to the sober, patient labor of good works. It comforts us in the groanings of the present. This is true whether we live long before, long after, or in between the comings of Christ, as Nephi₁ and Moroni testify. Every day may be the day of our salvation. Every second may be the Messiah’s door. Every moment bears the image of Christ because time is the inexhaustible well of life. (p. 51)

David J. Larsen received his PhD from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland with the dissertation, “*The Royal Psalms in the Dead Sea Scrolls.*” He also holds an MA degree in Biblical Theology from Marquette University and a BA in Near East Studies from Brigham Young University. His research interests include Jewish and Christian apocalyptic and mysticism, pseudepigrapha and apocryphal literature, royal/messianic themes in the

Bible and in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and “ascent to heaven” traditions. He is the author of the blog heavenlyascents.com, where he explores topics in early Jewish and Christian mysticism, Latter-day Saint theology, and other topics in religious studies. He currently lives in Charles Town, West Virginia, with his wife Marluce and their five children.

