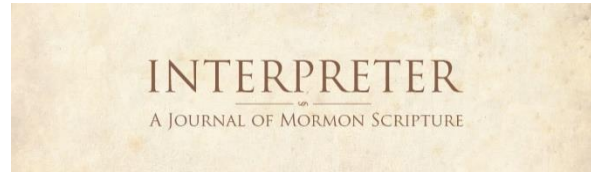




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The Small Voice

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THE SMALL VOICE

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Abstract: Revelation comes in various forms, some of them spectacular and some of them extremely subtle. The scriptures and the history of the Restoration offer numerous examples across the entire spectrum. Whatever its form, however, divine revelation remains divine revelation, and it is the avowed mission of the Interpreter Foundation to thoughtfully ponder such revelation, to try to explicate its meaning, and to illustrate its richness. In turn, such examination can itself provide an opportunity for personal revelation—both for the examiners and, we hope, for those who read or hear the results of their work.

*I*ntertextuality is a fancy word that many contemporary literary scholars use to describe ways in which various texts refer to, or play off of, each other. Often, writers do this without explicitly indicating it; in such cases, only fairly sophisticated (or, at least, well informed) readers will notice. But it isn't always subtle. To choose an example essentially at random, a 2012 book by Satinder Dhiman was titled *Seven Habits of Highly Fulfilled People*, alluding unmistakably to Stephen Covey's famous 1989 bestseller, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.¹ Sometimes, though not always, subsequent authors hope that their audiences will have prior texts in mind as they read.

¹ Satinder Dhiman, *Seven Habits of Highly Fulfilled People: Journey from Success to Significance* (Fawnskin, CA: Personhood Press, 2012); Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989).

The Book of Mormon contains numerous such examples, and probably quite a few remain to be discovered.² Perhaps I may suggest two additional illustrations here.

The first involves the famous passage in which Alma the Younger expresses his yearning to reach all humanity with the message of the gospel:

O that I were an angel, and could have the wish of mine heart, that I might go forth and speak with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth, and cry repentance unto every people! Yea, I would declare unto every soul, as with the voice of thunder, repentance, and the plan of redemption, that they should repent and come unto our God, that there might not be more sorrow upon all the face of the earth.³

Alma's expression of his desire seems plainly based upon his own personal conversion experience, in which an angel appeared to him who "spake as it were with a voice of thunder, which caused the earth to shake," and who summoned him to repentance. "Doth not my voice shake the earth?" the angel asked, rhetorically. "He spake unto us, as it were the voice of thunder, and the whole earth did tremble beneath our feet."⁴

In fact, Alma felt guilty about his desire for an angelic voice. If God had willed such a thing, he realized, it would be so. That it isn't typically the case is clear evidence that God doesn't wish to convince us by means of dramatic special effects.⁵

The second proposed example suggests a reliance upon the Old Testament story of Elijah, presumably available to the Nephites via the brass plates that Lehi brought with him from the Old World. (John Sorenson, incidentally, has suggested on other grounds that the brass plates originated in the northern kingdom of Israel, where Elijah lived and prophesied.)⁶

2. Compare, for instance, 1 Nephi 1:8 and Alma 36:22, as well as Mosiah 3:8 and Helaman 14:12.

3 Alma 29:1–2.

4 See Mosiah 27:10–15; Alma 36:6–11.

5 See Alma 29:3–8.

6 John L. Sorenson, "The 'Brass Plates' and Biblical Scholarship," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 10/4 (Autumn 1977): 31–39. See http://www.dialoguejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/Dialogue_V10N04_33.pdf.

In the Old Testament's First Book of Kings, we read of Elijah's experience in the wilderness (perhaps in the Sinai or else across the Gulf of Aqaba in what is today Saudi Arabia) that

the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.⁷

Somehow, the Lord was “in” that “still small voice,” and he was “in” it in a sense that he wasn't “in” the wind, the earthquake, or the fire.

Similarly, the account of the destructions in 3 Nephi 8–11 tells of a great “storm,” “tempest,” “thunder” and “whirlwinds,” as well as of fire and of an earthquake that broke the rocks, ultimately followed by a “small voice” heralding the Savior's appearance. Such literary crafting suggests that its author wanted us to think, while reading it, of the story of Elijah:

And it was not a harsh voice, neither was it a loud voice; nevertheless, and notwithstanding it being a small voice it did pierce them that did hear to the center, insomuch that there was no part of their frame that it did not cause to quake; yea, it did pierce them to the very soul, and did cause their hearts to burn.⁸

And this is what it said:

Behold my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, in whom I have glorified my name — hear ye him.⁹

Once again, in a very real sense, God was “in” that voice.

Strikingly, though, the people — and remember that these were the more righteous among the Nephites; the wicked had died in the destructions that had just occurred — understood the voice only the third time.¹⁰

7 1 Kings 19:11–12.

8 3 Nephi 11:3. It may be significant that the voice itself is described as piercing, quake-inducing, and burning — plain metaphorical analogues to the physical destruction that had just occurred.

9 3 Nephi 11:7.

10 3 Nephi 10:12–13; 11:3–6.

This is the manner in which revelation is typically given and received. While the scriptures, distilling the experiences of prophets and apostles and saints over millennia, might seem to suggest that glorious manifestations are common with such people, that would be a misapprehension.

As Elder Spencer W. Kimball put it just months before he unexpectedly became president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,

The burning bushes, the smoking mountains, ... the Cumorahs, and the Kirtlands were realities; but they were the exceptions. The great volume of revelation came to Moses and to Joseph and comes to today's prophet in the less spectacular way — that of deep impressions, without spectacle or glamour or dramatic events. Always expecting the spectacular, many will miss entirely the constant flow of revealed communication.¹¹

“The Spirit does not get our attention by shouting or shaking us with a heavy hand,” Elder Boyd K. Packer explained in 1983. “Rather it whispers. It caresses so gently that if we are preoccupied we may not feel it at all.”¹²

Sometimes, of course, revelation *does* come in spectacular ways. Immediately after the Nephites that gathered about the temple in Bountiful understood what that “small voice” was announcing to them, they were granted what surely ranks among the grandest Christophanies or appearances of Christ in human history:

And it came to pass, as they understood they cast their eyes up again towards heaven; and behold, they saw a Man descending out of heaven; and he was clothed in a white robe; and he came down and stood in the midst of them; and the eyes of the whole multitude were turned upon him, and they durst not open their mouths, even one to another, and wist not what it meant, for they thought it was an angel that had appeared unto them.

And it came to pass that he stretched forth his hand and spake unto the people, saying:

11 Spencer W. Kimball, Munich Germany Area Conference, 1973, 77.

12 Boyd K. Packer, “The Candle of the Lord,” *Ensign* (January 1983): 53.

Behold, I am Jesus Christ, whom the prophets testified shall come into the world.¹³

Several years after assuming the presidency of the Church, Spencer W. Kimball again warned us not to ignore, downplay, or dismiss revelation when it arrives quietly and without fanfare, while humbly but plainly bearing witness to his own calling:

Expecting the spectacular, one may not be fully alerted to the constant flow of revealed communication. I say, in the deepest of humility, but also by the power and force of a burning testimony in my soul, that from the prophet of the Restoration to the prophet of our own year, the communication line is unbroken, the authority is continuous, a light, brilliant, and penetrating, continues to shine. The sound of the voice of the Lord is a continuous melody and a thunderous appeal.¹⁴

Thirteen months later, President Kimball received the revelation on priesthood that is now commemorated in Official Declaration 2, in the Doctrine and Covenants. The late historian Leonard J. Arrington describes the event as follows:

Those in attendance said that as he began his earnest prayer, they suddenly realized that it was not Kimball's prayer, but the Lord speaking through him. A revelation was being declared. Kimball himself realized that the words were not his but the Lord's. During that prayer some of the Twelve — at least two who have said so publicly — were transported into a celestial atmosphere, saw a divine presence and the figures of former presidents of the church ... smiling to indicate their approval and sanction. Others acknowledged the voice of the Lord coming, as with the prophet Elijah, "through the still, small voice." The voice of the Spirit followed their earnest search for wisdom and understanding.

At the end of the heavenly manifestation, Kimball, weeping for joy, confronted the [other members of the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve], many of them also sobbing, and asked if they sustained this heavenly instruction. Embracing, all nodded vigorously and jubilantly their sanction. There had

13 3 Nephi 11:8–10.

14 Spencer W. Kimball, "Revelation: The Word of the Lord to His Prophets," *Ensign* (May 1977): 78.

been a startling and commanding revelation from God — an ineffable experience.

Two of the apostles present described the experience as a “day of Pentecost” similar to the one in the Kirtland Temple on April 6, 1836, the day of its dedication. They saw a heavenly personage and heard heavenly music. To the temple-clothed members, the gathering, incredible, and without compare, was the greatest singular event of their lives. Those I talked with wept as they spoke of it. All were certain they had witnessed a revelation from God.¹⁵

“Spectacular” revelations may come, in the Lord’s due time, to those who demonstrate their willingness to follow the small voice of the Spirit.

One of the missions of the Interpreter Foundation is to take canonized revelation — whether its origins are spectacular or to be found in the merest divine whisper — with thoughtful, reflective, and scholarly seriousness.

Daniel C. Peterson (*PhD, University of California at Los Angeles*) is a professor of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham Young University and is the founder of the University’s Middle Eastern Texts Initiative, for which he served as editor-in-chief until mid-August 2013. He has published and spoken extensively on both Islamic and Mormon subjects. Formerly chairman of the board of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and an officer, editor, and author for its successor organization, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, his professional work as an Arabist focuses on the Qur’an and on Islamic philosophical theology. He is the author, among other things, of a biography entitled *Muhammad: Prophet of God* (Eerdmans, 2007).

¹⁵ Leonard J. Arrington, *Adventures of a Church Historian* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois, 1998), 177. On the preceding page, Arrington remarks that, “As a historian I sought to learn the particulars and record them in my private diary. The following account is based on dozens of interviews with persons who talked with church officials after the revelation was announced. Although members of the Twelve and the First Presidency with whom I sought interviews felt they should not elaborate on what happened, I learned details from family members and friends to whom they had made comments.” Arrington’s entire chapter on the subject, “The Long-Promised Day,” pp. 175–85, is of interest. It can now be supplemented with the material gathered in Gregory A. Prince, *Leonard Arrington and the Writing of Mormon History* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press and Tanner Trust Fund, 2016): 306–27.

