

Book of Mormon Theology—Anticipating the Future of a Discipline

The Book of Mormon: Brief Theological Introductions. Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, Brigham Young University, 2020.

Reviewed by John Christopher Thomas

The academic discipline of Book of Mormon theology is a relatively recent development that appears to have begun in earnest with a little-cited 1997 University of Nottingham PhD thesis by Tyler Rex Moulton entitled “Divine Benevolence, Embodiment, and Salvation in the Teachings of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon.” Nearly two decades later, the discipline would take shape with the appearance of studies by LDS scholar Charles R. Harrell¹ and Community of Christ apostle Dale E. Luffman.² My own contribution—from outside the Restoration tradition—would follow three years later, which ironically would be the most extensive examination of Book of Mormon theology to that point.³ Rather clearly, these attempts focus on the theology of the Book of Mormon as a whole, a necessary first step, or so it would seem. At the same time, a variety of theological soundings in individual Book of Mormon books—and in some cases individual chapters within those books—was taking place via the efforts of the Mormon Theology Seminar, signaling that the discipline was developing still further.

1. Charles R. Harrell, *“This Is My Doctrine”: The Development of Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Gregg Kofford Books, 2013).

2. Dale E. Luffman, *The Book of Mormon’s Witness to Its First Readers* (Independence, Mo.: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013), 126–79.

3. John Christopher Thomas, *A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon: A Literary and Theological Introduction* (Cleveland, Tenn.: CPT Press, 2016), 189–291.

With the appearance of the Book of Mormon: Brief Theological Introductions series from the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Book of Mormon theology as an academic discipline has taken an important and necessary step forward. This ambitious undertaking has in one fell swoop changed the Book of Mormon theological lay of the land in ways that are significant and will no doubt prove lasting in various respects. Remarkably, the entire twelve-volume series seems to have appeared in print within one calendar year, a testament to the efficiency of the series editors and publishers and an accomplishment few series have ever achieved.

The physical appearance of these paperback volumes is reminiscent of Oxford University Press's Very Short Introductions series, complete with cover flaps that double as bookmarks. The front covers feature nicely designed raised letters, and each of the twelve volumes displays a woodcut illustration by Brian Kershisnik, originally created for the Maxwell Institute Study Edition of the Book of Mormon, providing a visual link between these two important Maxwell Institute projects that may not go unnoticed by the discerning reader.

The entire Book of Mormon—with the exception of the Words of Mormon—are covered in twelve published volumes that make up the series: 1 Nephi;⁴ 2 Nephi;⁵ Jacob;⁶ Enos, Jarom, and Omni;⁷ Mosiah;⁸

4. Joseph M. Spencer, *1st Nephi: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, Brigham Young University, 2020).

5. Terryl Givens, *2nd Nephi: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, Brigham Young University, 2020).

6. Deidre Nicole Green, *Jacob: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, Brigham Young University, 2020).

7. Sharon J. Harris, *Enos, Jarom, Omni: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, Brigham Young University, 2020).

8. James E. Faulconer, *Mosiah: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, Brigham Young University, 2020).

Alma 1–29;⁹ Alma 30–63;¹⁰ Helaman;¹¹ 3 Nephi and 4 Nephi;¹² Mormon;¹³ Ether;¹⁴ and Moroni.¹⁵ An examination of the individual volumes reveals a significant amount of gender diversity among its contributors, where nearly half the writers (five of twelve) are women. One contributor is from outside the United States (the UK), with one contributor adding a little ethnic diversity. With regard to the academic backgrounds of the contributors, five come from philosophy (Spencer, Green, Faulconer, Wrathall, and Miller), four from literature (Givens, Harris, Turley, and Welch), two from history (Becerra and Holland), and one from theology (Berkey). Significantly, no biblical scholars are to be found among the contributors. For the most part, the age demographic of the contributors tilts in favor of younger scholars, perhaps a testament to the imaginative approach envisioned for the series.

According to the editors' series introduction, no methodological approach was prescribed, freeing writers to follow their own instincts about how best to approach their individual assignments. This approach may well reflect the reality of the current state of Book of Mormon theology studies, where there has been little by way of models to follow in

9. Kylie Nielson Turley, *Alma 1–29: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, Brigham Young University, 2020).

10. Mark A. Wrathall, *Alma 30–63: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo: Maxwell Institute, BYU, 2020).

11. Kimberly Matheson Berkey, *Helaman: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, Brigham Young University, 2020).

12. Daniel Becerra, *3rd, 4th Nephi: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, Brigham Young University, 2020).

13. Adam S. Miller, *Mormon: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, Brigham Young University, 2020).

14. Rosalynde Frandsen Welch, *Ether: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, Brigham Young University, 2020).

15. David F. Holland, *Moroni: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, Brigham Young University, 2020).

such an innovative endeavor. Thus, part of the encouragement for individual writers to find their own way might well have been an attempt to identify the approaches that work better for the tradition than others—a sort of first step in discerning the way forward, one might say. Despite this lack of uniformity in method, it should be observed that at least half of the writers offer a structural overview of their individual books to serve as the basis for the theological reflection and discussions to follow. Interestingly, these approaches were not confined to those with backgrounds in literature but included three trained in philosophy, one trained in theology, and one trained in history. While each of the volumes in the series is worthy of its own detailed review, in the space that follows I will attempt to give interested readers a taste of some of the volumes' contents.

After offering a somewhat detailed discussion of the structure of 1 Nephi, Joseph M. Spencer, assistant professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University, leads his readers in theological reflection on three significant questions that arise from the book: the significance of the killing of Laban, Nephi's difficult relationship with his brothers, and the near invisibility of women in the text. The open-endedness of this approach as well as Spencer's keen theological observations on nearly every page indicate something of the depth of this volume.

For Terryl Givens, senior research fellow at the Maxwell Institute, 2 Nephi is best engaged in the shadow of the "visionary" destruction of Jerusalem and the people on the other side of the world from this destruction, "the new (and very old) covenant," and the role of Jesus as the covenant's foundation. Methodologically, Givens makes sense of the theology of 2 Nephi by placing it within the broad sweep of restoration scripture and thought.

The volume devoted to Jacob by Deidre Nicole Green, postdoctoral research fellow at the Maxwell Institute, grounds her own theological reflections on the suffering of Jesus and that of Jacob, as well as the social nature of our spiritual lives, in the broader issues of equality, the

dissolution of hierarchies, and empathy for all people. The condemnation of those who abuse the powerless, regardless of the reason for such powerlessness, is seen as one of Jacob's overarching themes.

For Sharon J. Harris, assistant professor of English at BYU, covenant and inheritance function in some ways as the centralizing topics found in her volume on Enos, Jarom, and Omni. A distinctive aspect of this volume is Harris's decision to follow the dictation order of the Book of Mormon, seeking to tease out any theological significance that concluding the volume with Enos, Jarom, and Omni might make.

The volume on Mosiah by James E. Faulconer, professor of philosophy at BYU and senior research fellow at the Maxwell Institute, gives pride of place to Mosiah's structure, which he sees as intentional on the author's part despite the chronological challenges presented. Among the theological issues addressed are the futility of politics and the necessity of the Atonement, along with salvation as creation from nothing and an extensive discussion of the person of God.

Kylie Nielson Turley, who teaches English and ancient scripture at BYU, contextualizes her work on Alma 1–29 by exploring Alma's age, "the beliefs and practices of unbelievers," and the relationship between his unbelieving past and the contents of these chapters. The second half of the volume addresses Nephite conceptions of mourning, national grief, and Alma's experience of healing and hope in Alma 29.

The volume on Alma 30–63 comes from Mark A. Wrathall, professor of philosophy at the University of Oxford, who takes an avowedly philosophical approach to his work. The volume has a three-fold structure based on Alma's structure of the Christian life. Part I focuses on Alma's sermon on the seed and how one's response to this planting can shape characters and dispositions. Part II examines the Christian present as a "probationary" or "preparatory" state. Part III explores the temporal nature of human existence.

Helaman is examined by Kimberly Matheson Berkey, PhD candidate in theology at Loyola University Chicago. Grounding her analysis

in an examination of the politics, structure, and theme of the book of Helaman, Berkey is intentional about following the chapter divisions of the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, owing to the internal narrative coherence of each chapter. This structure provides the basis for her very careful theological reading in which she identifies a pattern of comparisons and contrasts that are imbedded throughout the text.

Rather than moving chronologically through the structure of the books of 3 Nephi and 4 Nephi, Daniel Becerra, assistant professor of ancient scripture at BYU, structures his volume thematically around “Christ,” “Humankind,” “Spiritual Development,” and “Society.” In this methodological decision, Becerra’s contribution resembles many of the volumes in Cambridge University Press’s New Testament Theology series. The author supplements his careful analysis of the text by intentionally drawing on the later Christian theological tradition to demonstrate its similarities to and dissimilarities from the Book of Mormon.

Adam S. Miller, professor of philosophy at Collin College, provides the volume on Mormon. Contextualizing his work in Mormon’s experience of living through the end of his world, Miller uses this question as a means of raising important theological inquiries for contemporary discipleship. Drawing on both a structural synopsis and a narrative synopsis, the author works his way narratively through the book, usually commencing with a general discussion of a theological theme that is explored in the particular section of Mormon under consideration.

The volume on Ether is contributed by Rosalynde Frandsen Welch, an independent scholar with close ties to the Maxwell Institute at BYU. Welch begins with basic questions and an outline of the book that is structured around Moroni’s six inserted comments. Her theological interests include the brother of Jared’s experience of Christ, the theme of faith, Moroni’s editorial purposes and the book’s ethics of reading, and a reader-centered theology of scripture.

The series' final contribution—on Moroni—comes from David F. Holland, John A. Bartlett Professor of New England Church History at Harvard Divinity School. For Holland, the theme of the giving of gifts is Moroni's dominant one, and, consequently, the author structures his own volume around Moroni's "soteriological" structure. This structure includes: resolute faith in Jesus, the ordinances, the church as coalesced around these ordinances, Mormon's sermon culminating in pure love, the reception by the saints of the essential gifts of grace, two letters from Mormon, and a final declaration of God's gifts to humanity.

It should be self-evident, even from this briefest of surveys, that the appearance of the Book of Mormon Brief Theological Introductions series changes the landscape of Book of Mormon theology in many ways. With their appearance, scholars working on any number of topics in Book of Mormon studies will have ready access to a depth and breadth of theological reflection not available to past students. While future researchers will no doubt determine that some of the efforts work better than others and that perhaps some of the positions advocated will need to be rethought, the publication of the series is a significant step forward for Book of Mormon theology in particular and Book of Mormon studies in general. The series is to be enthusiastically welcomed.

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