



Type: Journal Article

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## An Intelligent, Thoughtful Work on One of the Richest Portions of the Book of Mormon

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Source: *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*,  
Volume 41 (2020), pp. 145-152

Published by: The Interpreter Foundation

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# INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT  
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 41 · 2020 · Pages 145 - 152

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Offprint Series

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

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# AN INTELLIGENT, THOUGHTFUL WORK ON ONE OF THE RICHEST PORTIONS OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

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Jeff Lindsay

Review of Terryl Givens, *2nd Nephi: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, UT: The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020). 124 pages. \$9.95 (paperback).

**Abstract:** *Terryl Givens's well-written and enjoyable book does much to equip readers of the Book of Mormon with new tools to appreciate the riches of a text often viewed as the most difficult part of the Book of Mormon. Givens helps us recognize Nephi's sorrow over Jerusalem and his passionate hope and joy centered in the Messiah, Jesus Christ. He helps us understand the weightier matters that Nephi focuses on to encourage us to accept the covenants of the Lord and to be part of Zion. Readers will better respect 2 Nephi as a vital part of the Restoration with content critically important for our day.*

Terryl Givens's recent book *2nd Nephi: A Brief Theological Introduction*,<sup>1</sup> part of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute's series on the books of the Book of Mormon, exceeded my expectations. Givens, of course, is a popular, skilled, and intelligent writer who has done much to expand readers' appreciation of the scriptures. In spite of that, I approached this book wondering just how much he could do with the constraint of writing about 2 Nephi, a book many less experienced students of the scriptures feel is dull and difficult to understand, in part because of its emphasis on Isaiah and the paucity of action within its pages, rather unlike 1 Nephi with its dramatic tales of fleeing Jerusalem, obtaining the

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1. Terryl Givens, *2nd Nephi: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2020).

brass plates, journeying across the Arabian Peninsula, and sailing to the New World. Givens surprised me by revealing both the poignancy and the spiritual depth in 2 Nephi with fresh perspectives. While *2nd Nephi: A Brief Theological Introduction* is a short work of 124 pages, it is packed with meaning and is a book I am pleased to recommend.

A useful introduction considers just how deeply Nephi must have been affected by Lehi's prophetic confirmation that Jerusalem had been destroyed and considers Nephi's possible motivation for starting a second volume in his writings. Givens then begins with a discussion of "The New (and Very Old) Covenant" in chapter 1, reminding us of the background to the grand plan of salvation and the covenant relationship that God invites us to enter into in order to return to Him. Some of this basic knowledge, including a knowledge of the premortal existence, was among the "plain and precious things" (1 Nephi 13:28) Nephi foresaw would be lost in our day but would be restored to those who would hear. Givens then briefly surveys covenant theology from the perspective of modern Protestantism and compares that to covenant theology in the Book of Mormon and shows some of the helpful additions brought by the perspective of the Book of Mormon.

Given notes that the Book of Mormon greatly emphasizes the theme of covenants, using the word far more (174 times) than the New Testament (30 times), and sees the covenant-oriented Book of Mormon as a text that would resonate with growing interest in covenant theology among many Christians in Joseph's day (22).

Givens discusses the Book of Mormon's unique combination of New Testament themes and a belief in Christ among Hebrews living the Law of Moses, followed by a "New World John the Baptist figure (Samuel the Lamanite, a descendant of Lehi)" (23) declaring the imminent birth of Christ, followed by the dramatic account of the visit of the Resurrected Lord to the New World, where the Savior then established His Church and commissioned twelve disciples. "It is as if the Book of Mormon rewrites the Old and New Testament records into a holistic gospel narrative in which Christ is the fulcrum rather than the culmination of Christian history, with both sides of the historic divide equally Christocentric" (23). That struck me as a beautiful way to summarize what the Book of Mormon does.

Givens emphasizes Nephi's passionate faith in Christ, rejoicing in His future Atonement and victory over death even as he kept the law of Moses long before the coming of the Lord. Givens also notes an important feature of the Book of Mormon is not just its focus on the House of Israel *per se* as the beneficiary of the Lord's covenants, but its additional focus

on the Gentiles who can join Israel by adoption, a concept that is not a New Testament innovation but one that was known in Nephi's day. The universality of the covenants and blessings of the Gospel is an important contribution of the Book of Mormon (25–26).

In 2 Nephi, Givens sees a subtle but important shift in speaking of the future Savior as Christ rather than as the Messiah as in 1 Nephi. That semantic shift is accompanied by a shift in Nephi's spiritual field of vision as he moves from a focus on the local land of promise of the tiny Nephite people to a broad scope embracing "Jew and Gentile, literal Israel and spiritual Israel alike" (27) and even a shift that moves from a localized land of promise to the more universalized concept of Zion. Through his attention to such subtleties, Givens helps bring us closer to the meat of 2 Nephi and the intent of Nephi and his brother Jacob. This discussion of shifting perspectives in 2 Nephi makes an elegant segue to the second chapter, "They Are Not Cast Off."

A passage on the title page of the Book of Mormon speaks to the remnant of the House of Israel and tells them that one purpose of the book is "that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever." The latter phrase always struck me as odd. Why speak of not being cast off forever? Givens helped me better appreciate this. Four times in 1 Nephi we are warned that the wicked will be "cast off,"<sup>2</sup> and in 1 Nephi 17:47, Nephi fears that his wicked brethren might be "cast off forever." But 2 Nephi introduces another subtle shift. Instead of again raising the threat of being cast off, Jacob hopefully points to the possibility for just the opposite:

And now, my beloved brethren, seeing that our merciful God has given us so great knowledge concerning these things, let us remember him, and lay aside our sins, and not hang down our heads, for we are **not cast off**; nevertheless, we have been driven out of the land of our inheritance; but we have been led to a better land, for the Lord has made the sea our path, and we are upon an isle of the sea. (2 Nephi 10:20)

Though not cast off, much has been lost because of the wickedness of others. Not only have they been driven from their initial land of inheritance and led away from Jerusalem, but Jerusalem itself, the holy city, has been destroyed. Givens helps us understand just how terrible the news of Jerusalem's destruction would be for Nephi's people, though it

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2. See 1 Nephi 8:36, 10:21, 15:33, 17:47.

had been prophesied. But in spite of such trauma, God’s mercy remains extended and they are not cast off.

Givens sees significance in Nephi’s response to their second exodus after being driven from the land of Nephi toward another new territory in the wilderness (2 Nephi 5:5–7). After this loss of their first New World land of inheritance, which followed abandonment of their original land of inheritance in the Old World, Nephi builds a temple as if it were a marker for their new land of promise, however temporary, and moves forward. The land of promise can be fluid as the Lord leads His people, as with Nephi and Abraham, in a “pattern of guided exile” (37). Givens then applies this concept to the experience of the early Latter-day Saints and their repeated migrations. He also sees the shift in the focus from a particular geographical land of promise for the Saints to our more universal concept of Zion. In our day, I would also add that we have had and will likely yet experience a series of guided retreats from the world in various ways on the path to build Zion and a Zion people, wherever we may live.

The next chapter also draws upon a phrase from the title page of the Book of Mormon, and an important theme of Nephi’s writings: “To the Convincing of Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ.” Givens reminds us of the unrelenting emphasis on Christ in Nephi’s writings, as in the whole Book of Mormon. He addresses the obvious question about how a little band of Hebrews in 600 BC would know of Jesus Christ, citing often overlooked New Testament passages such as Hebrews 4:6, where Paul says the Gospel was first preached to the children of Israel (see also Acts 3:28 and 1 Peter 1:10–11), and he quotes Daniel Boyarin:<sup>3</sup> “[V]ersions of this narrative, the Son of Man story (the story that is later named Christology), were widespread among the Jews before the advent of Jesus; Jesus entered into a role that existed prior to his birth, and this is why so many Jews were prepared to accept him as the Christ, as the Messiah, Son of Man” (52). Givens also cites Shirley Lucass,<sup>4</sup> who “argues that far more than a vague ‘pre-messianism’ was present” (52) among early Jews.

Nephi is absolutely clear that based on the writings of other prophets and continuing revelation in his day, he and his people knew of the coming of Jesus Christ and of His Gospel centuries before Christ was born. Indeed, Givens observes that Nephi is able to bear personal witness of Christ and His redemption (2 Nephi 1:15), as does his brother Jacob in 2 Nephi 9–11, and that the Book of Mormon urges us to seek

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3. Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels* (New York: New Press, 2012), 72-73.

4. Shirley Lucass, *The Concept of Messiah in the Scriptures of Judaism and Christianity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 13-14.

personal revelation on our own to know of the reality of Christ and the truthfulness of His Gospel.

Givens sees these prophetic, personal witnesses of Christ as

a motif of incalculable significance in the Book of Mormon. If this sacred record were no more than inspired fiction, then the testimonies of its mythical figures would be no more than a literary charade. The power and efficacy of the book and the testimonies it conveys are mutually dependent. (53)

It is refreshing to see a respected scholar so keenly aware of the power of the Book of Mormon in our increasingly secular age.

Speaking of the painful distance that many Christians feel between “the vanished moments of [Christ’s] living, breathing, bodily reality” (54) and the modern world with its scattered relics reminding us of ancient Jerusalem and His ministry, Givens writes:

Into this immense historical vacuum strewn only with dusty fragments and well-worn stony paths, the Book of Mormon bursts with a remarkable, audacious claim: Jesus was not a once-in-eternity incarnation of the Divine, flashing like a shooting star into the long night of history. His Palestinian birth and ministry were not the beginning and end of his human interaction, and the Old World and its people are not the only setting in which he loved and healed. The Book of Mormon multiplies the field of Christ’s operation and its perseverance across place and time. (54–55)

Givens nicely elucidates 2 Nephi’s persistent focus on the future Messiah, Jesus Christ.

In the fourth and perhaps most ambitious chapter, “More Plain and Precious Things,” Givens explores five doctrinal issues raised in 2 Nephi: (1) the fall as a fortunate occurrence, (2) the principle of opposition, (3) teachings on atonement, (4) the centrality of agency, and (5) the doctrine of Christ.

His treatment of the fall might be especially interesting for many readers who may not appreciate just how divergent the Book of Mormon view on the fall is from many other Christian views in our era. Givens considers statements by Jonathan Edwards and others, but could also have included views from Eastern Orthodox writers and many others. Givens recognizes how revolutionary it was to view the fall as necessary for human progress and ultimately joy, a teaching found in 2 Nephi 2:25

(“Adam fell that men might be, and men are that they might have joy”) and in the Book of Moses.<sup>5</sup>

Givens ably tackles the five topics of this chapter and adds a number of insights on such issues as the importance of choice with consequences for free agency to be meaningful (75–77) and the way Christ’s Atonement allows us to be free, such that we can eternally persist in our choice for joy and righteousness through Christ (81). Some points in this chapter are rather philosophical and at times did not seem as clear as I would have liked, perhaps due to my inexperience in philosophy and theology. Nevertheless, readers should come away with enhanced appreciation for the richly satisfying intellectual content in 2 Nephi.

In this volume (as with many books) there are some things I would have liked to see included, but that list could quickly become unreasonably long, given the numerous treasures in Nephi’s books. Nevertheless, prior scholars have had much to say about Nephi’s writings that could have been profitably noted or incorporated into this volume, including exploration of the way Nephi used large chiasmic structures as part of his organization, the proposed reasons his writings were split into two books, his use of particular motifs, his many ancient poetical tools such as those in the unique gem of 2 Nephi 4 (“Nephi’s Psalm”), his extensive allusions to the Exodus, etc. But for the scope Givens covers, he has done remarkably well and has given readers a generally approachable and thoughtful book that will add new reasons for respecting the Book of Mormon and new windows into the richness of Nephi’s second book. It is a beautifully written, interesting, and thoughtful book worth studying carefully while also offering enjoyable and accessible content that may make for a pleasant initial quick read when time is short.

Congratulations to Terryl Givens for this contribution!

**Jeffrey Dean Lindsay** recently returned to the United States after almost nine years in Shanghai, China. Jeff has been providing online materials defending the LDS faith for over twenty years, primarily at [JeffLindsay.com](http://JeffLindsay.com). His *Mormanity* blog (<http://mormanity.blogspot.com>) has been in operation since 2004. He is currently a Vice President for The Interpreter Foundation and co-editor of *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*.

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5. Moses 5:11, where Eve says, “Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient.”

*Jeff has a PhD in chemical engineering from BYU and is a US patent agent. He is currently Senior Advisor for ipCapital Group, assisting clients in creating intellectual property and innovation. He was recently the Head of R&D and IP for a US consumer product company, Lume Deodorant, and from 2011 to 2019 was the Head of Intellectual Property for Asia Pulp and Paper in Shanghai, China, one of the world's largest forest product companies. Formerly, he was associate professor at the Institute of Paper Science and Technology at Georgia Tech, then went into R&D at Kimberly-Clark Corporation, eventually becoming Corporate Patent Strategist and Senior Research Fellow. Every year since 2015, Jeff has been recognized as one of the world's top IP strategists by Intellectual Asset Magazine in their global IAM Strategy 300 listing based on peer input. He is also lead author of Conquering Innovation Fatigue (John Wiley & Sons, 2009). He is active in the chemical engineering community and was recently named a Fellow of the American Institute of Chemical Engineers. Jeff served a mission in the German-speaking Switzerland Zurich Mission. He and his wife Kendra are the parents of four boys and have eleven grandchildren.*

