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Messianic History: Walter Benjamin and the Book of Mormon

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Abstract: Early Christian history is haunted by anachrony. More than a hundred years of biblical scholarship has shown that most New Testament Christology comes late and is discontinuous with the historical Jesus. While Jesus appears to be properly historical, Christ does not. His messianicity appears anachronistic. Mormon history is vexed by the same ghosts. Historical incongruities are abundant in the Book of Mormon and in accounts dealing with both the First Vision and the restoration of the priesthood. But, in this respect, the Book of Mormon is exemplary. Page after page, its pre-advent Christian message typifies these kinds of anachronisms. Its anachrony is manifest both in terms of the details it gives about future events in the life of Christ and in terms of the highly developed Christian vocabulary its sermons use.

It is my argument that this anachrony is neither accidental nor debilitating. Rather, this anachrony is essential because the messianic, as messianic, is what retroactively reconfigures history itself. This essay reflects, in serial fashion, on the implications of this idea for the Book of Mormon's historicity. Each unit in the series consists of (1) a concise re-formulation of the initial thesis, (2) an elaboration of the thesis in terms of the work of Walter Benjamin, and (3) an exploration of the thesis in relation to the Book of Mormon.

Chapter 3

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It is my argument that this anachrony is neither accidental nor debilitating. Rather, this anachrony is essential because the messianic, as messianic, is what retroactively reconfigures history itself. This essay reflects, in serial fashion, on the implications of this idea for the Book of Mormon's historicity. Each unit in the series consists of (1) a concise re-formulation of the initial thesis, (2) an elaboration of the thesis in terms of the work of Walter Benjamin, and (3) an exploration of the thesis in relation to the Book of Mormon.

1. *The messianic, as messianic, involves the rediscovery of what was lost.*

1.1 According to Isaiah it is necessary, at least for a time, that the messiah go unrecognized. It is crucial that, at least for a while, he remain hidden, that he not shine forth, that he have "no form, nor comeliness" and that he possess "no beauty that we should desire him" (Isa. 53:2).

The Messiah's coming must be delayed. This is necessary, at least in part, because the very act of recognition has messianic force. The shock of recognition changes us. The advent of the messianic depends on our seeing what was previously unseen. It should be no surprise, then, if the messianic is initially obscure, hidden under a rock, given in a grove, or stowed in a stable.

1.2 Joseph Smith published the Book of Mormon in 1830 in upstate New York. But angels began appearing to Joseph as early as 1823, at the age of seventeen. On the twenty-first of September 1823 Joseph first learned of the book. An angel came to Joseph three times in one night and once more in the morning. Four times the angel repeated the same message. Four times he quoted verses from the Bible and four times he told Joseph of a book long hidden, long lost, and long forgotten. Go, the angel told him, to a big hill just south of your house, look under a rock, and you will find it.

2. *The messianic, as messianic, occurs within history without belonging to history.*

2.1 In relation to the messianic, time is the crucial factor. The messianic must, at least for a time, go unrecognized. It is this delay, this beat between repetitions, between arrival and appearance, between being buried and unearthed, that allows the messianic to gather light. This space, the gap of the "for a time," is the space of history. Whether we are in a position to recognize the messianic depends on the way we do history. It is a question of how we live time. If time is lived homogeneously, as simply temporal, then the messianic will never appear. But if time remains open to interruption by the eternal, then its heterogeneity preserves the possibility of the messianic. The heterogeneity of time is crucial and it is manifest, precisely, in anachronism. What is eternal—what is time-*less*—shows up in history as the *un*-timely, as anachrony.

2.2 After the angel's initial appearances, Joseph went to the hill he'd been shown. There he found the rock, unearthed the book, and saw what had remained hidden for hundreds of years. Joseph tried to remove the book but with a shock the angel appeared again, interrupting him. Wait, the angel told him, and come back every year for four years, then it will be time. So, for the space of four years Joseph waited, the visits were repeated and the book remained in the ground.

3. *The messianic, as messianic, interrupts the tyranny of homogeneous time.*

3.1 Walter Benjamin distinguishes two ways of doing history. One is messianic, the other is not. The kind of history that is not messianic—“universal history”—is merely additive. It simply “musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time.”¹ This type of history is homogeneous because it is content to string together events strictly according to “causal” connections. But, as Benjamin is quick to point out, “no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical.”² Rather, causes become historical “posthumously, as it were.”³ On what basis are causes retroactively selected as historical? The criterion is straightforward. Universal history selects and relates those events that are most obviously momentous and epoch forming. In other words, universal history is elaborated from the victor’s point of view. It is a history articulated by the powerful about their uses of power. They valorize accounts of great men and celebrated events that shape and inform our entire sense of history. Indeed, the very weight and magnitude of these larger than life heroes and celebrated events imprint on us a distinct notion of time. In light of them, history appears as both inevitable and progressive. In light of them, time gets flattened and incongruities get effaced in favor of a streamlined linearity that rockets of its own accord towards an appropriate climax. This kind of homogeneous temporality is familiar. It characterizes the kind of inexorable temporality that naturally belongs to any kind of history that is ordered strictly according to causal connections. It is determinism.

3.2 When thinking about the Book of Mormon, it is important to remember that the angel initially appeared to Joseph in response to a very specific prayer. Joseph relates that prayer as follows: “On the evening of the above mentioned twenty-first of September, after I had retired to my bed for the night, I betook myself to prayer and supplication to Almighty God for forgiveness of all my sins and follies.”⁴ Late at night,

1. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 262.

2. *Ibid.*, 263.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Joseph Smith, et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts, 7 vols., 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978 printing), 1:10–11.

in his bed clothes, Joseph was pleading for a fresh start. He was asking to be freed from the inevitable consequences of his sins and follies. Joseph was looking to interrupt the homogeneous chain of cause and effect. We can name this plea for messianic intervention in a single word: repentance. Repentance is a one word summation of all I mean to say by the messianic anachrony characteristic of heterogeneous time. In response to Joseph's prayer the angel appears and says: if you want to repent, there is a lost book hidden under a rock not far from your home. Go and see.

4. *The messianic, as messianic, marks the intervention of the eternal in time by way of a pure repetition.*

4.1 Benjamin argues that "calendars do not measure time as clocks do."⁵ Instead of incessantly ticking forward like clocks, calendars repeat the same days of the same months every year. They rotate on an axis that moves them ahead only by turning them back around. For Benjamin, calendars exemplify the double movement of messianic time: they are a pure repetition that succeeds in going beyond only by circling back. When Benjamin wants to describe the kind of history proper to this notion of time, he uses a particular word: constellation. A historian who takes messianic time "as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one."⁶ This image of stars aligning, of constellations forming, is in sync with Benjamin's description of messianic time as calendrical. The messianic historian is able to gather both the past and present in a single glance because for her time moves only by means of novel repetition. She watches the stars run their course as they wheel through the seasons and waits for the moment when the events of her own era will repeat, correspond with, and thus be illuminated by events from an earlier time. For her, events correspond and form distinct constellations in accordance with criteria that are not causal. Rather, constellations form on the basis of affinities and resemblances. Here, the causal diachrony of history is interrupted by the synchrony of resemblance. Time is interrupted by the eternal, and thus, history itself becomes novel. These synchronic constellations are messianic when they involve events or images from the past that

5. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 262.

6. *Ibid.*, 263.

have gone unrecognized or remained hidden, images that had been lost, discounted, or repressed, but remain nonetheless. When recognized, the revelatory shock produced by such surprising constellations fractures the hegemony of the present, touches eternity, opens new horizons, and ushers in a revolutionary moment. This revolutionary potential—a potential borne by what had been lost or discarded—indicates why Benjamin refers to this kind of history as messianic.

4.2 Joseph Smith described himself as both a prophet and a seer. He meant this description to apply equally to himself and to those whose writings he translated as the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon defines a seer as one who is able to recover and “translate all records that are of an ancient date; and it is a gift from God” (Mosiah 8:13). As a result, a seer is even greater than a prophet and is able, in a single glance, to hold all of time together. “But a seer can know of things which are past, and also of things which are to come, and by them shall all things be revealed, or, rather, shall secret things be made manifest, and hidden things shall come to light, and things which are not known shall be made known by them” (Mosiah 8:17). Thus it is that by means of a seer, “God has provided a means that man, through faith, might work mighty miracles; therefore he,” because of his messianic testimony, “becometh a great benefit unto his fellow beings” (Mosiah 8:18).

5. *The messianic, as messianic, exposes homogeneous “progress” as vain.*

5.1 Our faith in “progress” must be broken. All is not well, nor are things proceeding along smoothly from cause to effect to effect. We must learn to see history from a new perspective. When we learn to view history as does Benjamin’s own “angel of history,” then we will find ourselves incapable of continued belief in the paralyzing promise of progress. Instead of viewing the past as a wave of momentous events whose crest has successfully carried us thus far and will carry us through to the end, we will learn to see the past and present as they genuinely stand: in need of salvation. This is the revelation borne by Benjamin’s angel of history. “Where we perceive a chain of events,” each improving upon and adding to those that proceeded it, Benjamin says, the angel sees only “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm

is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.”⁷ The angel’s traumatic vision of the past and present is both unnerving and necessary. Without it we fail to recognize both the need for the messianic and the moments when its inception may be possible.

5.2 The angel told Joseph that the Book of Mormon would give “an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and the sources from whence they sprang,” and that “the fullness of the everlasting Gospel was contained in it, as delivered by the Savior to the ancient inhabitants.”⁸ But the history recounted by the Book of Mormon is, in its consummation, bleak. A virtually universal rejection of the Messiah sets in motion a devastating ethnic conflict that results in the nearly complete annihilation of the people and civilization described. One of the few survivors is a prophet named Mormon. Mormon is both the book’s compiler and redactor. The sense of desolation that suffuses the book’s conclusion is augmented by how a catastrophic vision of both the past and present tangibly shapes Mormon’s editorial efforts throughout. Mormon not only watched his world self-destruct as the bodies literally piled up, he also found himself, as an angel of history, incapable of making things whole again.

6. *The messianic, as messianic, carefully collects the heterogeneous debris of history.*

6.1 Benjamin’s messianic historian is the consummate collector. The collector’s methods often bear a closer resemblance to those “of the nineteenth century ragpicker, than to those of the modern historian.”⁹ While quaint, this description is helpful. We must be careful not to underestimate the gravity of the difference between the methods of the “ragpicker” and the modern historian. While it is true that the modern historian commendably attempts to trade in measured objectivity, it is also true that only the collector possesses both the affection and attention needed in order to breathe new life into old anonymous things.

7. *Ibid.*, 257.

8. *History of the Church*, 1:12.

9. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, “Translators’ Foreword,” in *Arcades Project*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999), ix.

Only the collector lovingly gathers and cares for what others have cast off as outmoded, unusable, or unimportant. Only the collector attends to what is materially inassimilable for homogeneous history. Only the collector possesses the passion for anomalous detail capable of allowing peculiar affinities and resemblances to gather weight and unity until they stand forth together with striking and illuminating clarity. Unlike the historians of the powerful, the collector is interested not only in objects, but in their history. She is interested not only in use, but in memory. Like the foolish star-gazer, only the collector has the leisure time needed to attend to remnants and contingencies with the kind of concerned patience and long-suffering that allow surprising constellations to align, appear, and transform us.

6.2 In the end, only one thing remained for Mormon to do. Mormon turned to the task of collecting and examining the debris. He poured over the stacks of records at his disposal, records that chronicled the events of the last thousand years, and asked as he read: what has been rejected? what shards remain of what once was valued? what is on the verge of being forgotten? He was looking for the messianic and, as he found a piece here and a fragment there, he arranged these heterogeneous pieces into a constellation that no one would see for more than a thousand years.

7. The messianic, as messianic, speaks from the dust.

7.1 What collects around the lost objects desired by the collector? The dust of history collects around lost objects, a dust that is not to be brushed off, but treasured in itself. One name for this dust that the collector treasures is “aura.” Benjamin says, “if we designate as aura the associations which . . . tend to cluster around the object of a perception, then its analogue in the case of the utilitarian object is the experience which has left traces of the practiced hand.”¹⁰ An object’s aura is not something subjective or personal. Rather, auras are tied to the autonomy of the signifier. Aura is a “matter of tradition” that involves “collective existence as well as private life,” and “it is less the product of facts firmly anchored in memory than of a convergence in memory of ac-

10. Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 186.

cumulated and frequently unconscious data.”¹¹ These accumulated and convergent associations that constitute an aura are, according to Benjamin, based on the kind of non-sensuous, but non-arbitrary similarities that he takes as constitutive of language itself. Auras, like the traces left behind on a well-worn tool by a practiced hand, are in some sense both collective and personal, both conscious and unconscious. They are actually there—one need only learn to look in order to see them.

7.2 The Book of Mormon predicts its own messianic advent. Drawing on Isaiah 29, it explicitly describes its own recovery in terms of dust. “For those who shall be destroyed shall speak unto them out of the ground, and their speech shall be low out of the dust, and their voice shall be one that hath a familiar spirit; for the Lord God will give unto him power, that he may whisper concerning them, even as it were out of the ground; and their speech will whisper out of the dust” (2 Ne. 26:16). The voice of the Book of Mormon is a voice that is both hauntingly familiar and disconcertingly other. It repeats what was lost but remains. It is the whisper out of the ground, unearthed, of those who had been lost, forgotten, destroyed. It is, according to its own description, the voice from the dust—or, better, the voice *of* the dust. Of us, its future readers, it says:

The Lord hath poured out upon you the spirit of deep sleep. For behold, ye have closed your eyes, and ye have rejected the prophets; and your rulers, and the seers hath he covered because of your iniquity. And it shall come to pass that the Lord God will bring forth unto you the words of a book, and they shall be the words of them which have slumbered. And behold the book shall be sealed; and in the book shall be a revelation from God, from the beginning of the world to the ending thereof. Wherefore, because of the things which are sealed up, the things which are sealed shall not be delivered in the day of wickedness and abominations of the people. Wherefore the book shall be kept from them. But the book shall be delivered unto a man, and he shall deliver the words of the book, which are the words of those who have slumbered in the dust. (2 Ne. 27:5–9)

8. *The messianic, as messianic, is both monadological and universal.*

11. Ibid., 157.

8.1 Messianic history is monadological. That is to say, the discarded materials that give it strength are each meant to be, as Benjamin describes it, “a magic encyclopedia” that is at once both esoteric and comprehensive.¹² It is esoteric in that its revelatory capacity is neither obvious nor immediately accessible. It is comprehensive in that by means of it, the whole world is offered to our view. By means of its aura, of its convergence of associations, each separate article in the collection offers an image of the entire epoch to which it belongs. For Benjamin, what can be divined from the hem of a dress, the heft of a lighter, or the binding of a book is limitless. Hence, Benjamin describes messianic history as monadological. Each article in the collection opens the whole world to our gaze from that monad’s singular point of view. It is from this magically encyclopedic capacity of the aura that messianic history derives its revolutionary capacity and its universal import. We unavoidably and continuously view the entire world from our own particular, homogeneous, well-worn perspective. Here the historical monad intervenes. It offers us just what we need: a new point of view. It does not, however, offer just any novel point of view. Rather, it offers us the whole world from the point of view of what has been systematically excluded from history—the very exclusion necessary in order for homogeneous history to be constituted as such. In short, the monad is messianic because it shows us the world, the whole world, from the dust-filled perspective of the forgotten and oppressed.

8.2 The Book of Mormon is a monad. It is intentionally microcosmic. Spanning nearly a thousand years it narrates the messianic journey of a family from the old world to the new, their expansion into a people, their fracture into parties vying for power, their rejection of the Messiah, and the genocidal catastrophe that ensues. It gives us, despite all its concrete particularities and idiosyncrasies, the world as a whole in “the words of them which have slumbered” in the dust. It is, as we have noted, a book that is “sealed” and made unavailable, but also a book that is conjointly a “revelation from God, from the beginning of the world to the ending thereof” (2 Ne. 27:6–7). It is meant to be revelatory in a universal way, revealing the world from beginning to end, and revealing it in such a way as to usher in the coming of the Messiah.

12. Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 60.

9. *The messianic, as messianic, reveals “necessities” as contingent.*

9.1 The historical monad allows what had been present but unrecognized to appear. In a well-known essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin offers a vivid description of the revolutionary punch packed by the advent of the camera. “By close-ups of things around us,” Benjamin says, “by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action. Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and our furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling.”¹³ The camera is the historical monad. It freezes the diachrony of history in a moment of synchronic exposure. It offers us the familiar world from an unfamiliar perspective. It extends our comprehension of the necessities that rule our lives even as it calls those very necessities into question. The immutability of these necessities appeared much more immutable when they presented to us only the side they wished us to see. Hence, an immense field of action opens before us. Not only does the world appear in new and unexpected ways, but we find ourselves capable of performing surprising and messianic deeds. A gap in time opens between *what must be* and *what is* and so, as Benjamin puts it, “every second” becomes “the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.”¹⁴

9.2 When Joseph Smith unearthed the book for the first time in the fall of 1823, he found with it a number of objects in addition to the book itself. Joseph recounts that “on the west side of the hill, not far from the top, under a stone of considerable size, lay the plates” on which the lost record was written, “deposited in a stone box. This stone was thick and rounding in the middle on the upper side, and thinner towards the edges, so that the middle part of it was visible above the ground, but

13. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 236.

14. Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 264.

the edge all around was covered with earth. Having removed the earth, I obtained a lever, which I got fixed under the edge of the stone, and with a little exertion raised it up. I looked in, and there indeed did I behold the plates, the Urim and Thummim, and the breastplate.”¹⁵ What is a Urim and Thummim? Joseph describes it simply as “two stones in silver bows” into which he could look in order to translate the Book of Mormon. They operated, apparently, as a set of lenses that unsealed the book, revealed its world, and opened what was to be the dispensation of the fullness of times. Here, in light of all that has been said, the term “dispensation” can acquire a very precise sense. A dispensation is an epoch forming retroactive reconfiguration of history.

10. *The messianic, as messianic, persists out of its time, irremediably.*

10.1 We catch wind of the vanity of “progress” when it fails to assimilate what it ought to have assimilated. Discarded, lost, and forgotten objects have the power to arrest our gaze and command us simply because they are a genuine surprise. “How could this thing still be around? It no longer has a place in this world. It no longer belongs to us.” The brute material incongruity of an object’s continuing subsistence stares back at us in a way that calls into question the hegemony of the present moment. Benjamin cites Proust in relation to the importance of this materiality. Though “the past is ‘somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect, [it remains] unmistakably present in some material object.’”¹⁶ Benjamin goes further in this regard when, addressing the nature of a collector, he asks, “And the non-reading of books, you will object, should be characteristic of collectors?”¹⁷ It goes almost without saying that, for Benjamin, this is the case. The collector is not primarily interested in the contents of the book, in what is relatively accessible by the intellect on its own power, but in the book as a material object that is itself capable of bearing the necessary convergence of revelatory associations in the same way that it is capable of collecting dust. This is the power of the collector. While the universal historian, bent on progress and causally myopic, is only able to look *through* objects, the collector is able to look *at* them and stay with them.

15. *History of the Church*, 1:15–16.

16. “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” 158.

17. Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library,” 62.

10.2 In his study, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion*, Terryl Givens is clear about what has always mattered most to Mormons about the Book of Mormon.¹⁸ Serious and persistent study by Mormons of the actual text of the Book of Mormon is a relatively recent phenomenon. What has always mattered most is that *there is* such a book. Joseph had transcendent visions and midnight visits from angels, but his experiences also produced this brute material thing and its sheer material incongruity is, of itself, incontrovertible. This in itself provokes the need for a response and incites a messianic interruption of the status quo.

11. *The messianic, as messianic, is anachronistic.*

11.1 A messianic constellation is formed when present events align with and repeat what is lost in a way that reveals revolutionary possibilities. Such a constellation is simply the synchronic actualization of an aura. That is to say, such a constellation is an experience of the convergence of associations that belong to any historical object and constitute it as an object with a life history. The crystallization of such a constellation produces a shock that arrests the inevitable forward march of progress and realigns past and present in a way that is not causal. It follows, then, that such a realignment of past and present opens a future that is no longer “predetermined” and is now “free” for change. When a lost or discarded object is actualized in this way it is reborn. “I am not exaggerating,” Benjamin insists, “when I say that to a true collector the acquisition of an old book is its rebirth.”¹⁹ What is reborn in this way both does and does not properly belong to the present moment. This is to say, an articulation of this “rebirth” forces again the question that concerns us most: the question of anachrony. This synchronic rebirth involves both a retroactive reconfiguration of the past in light of what had been forgotten and an opening of the present to messianic intervention. Benjamin describes this process as follows: “Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters

18. Terryl Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

19. Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library,” 61.

it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.”²⁰ It follows, then, that to such historical objects there is a certain kind of untimeliness. Benjamin indicates this dimension of untimeliness when he notes that “if we are prepared to consider history as a text, we can say about it what some modern author said about a literary text: the past has deposited in it images which could be compared to those retained by a photographic plate. ‘Only the future disposes of developers strong enough to make appear the picture with all its details. More than one page of Marivaux or of Rousseau attests to a meaning which their contemporary readers were unable to decipher completely.’”²¹ The past retains in it images that are incapable of appearing as contemporaneous with its milieu. Before they can appear they require the space of “for a time.” Only in light of the future can they appear as what they are. Only when the past is anachronistically and retroactively reconstituted can the lost and excluded elements of history be redeemed. And only if such an anachronically and retroactively reconfigured history is legitimate is repentance possible. Further, to return to the initial point, this event of retroactive reconfiguration is also what makes the “actualization” of a historical monad possible. The thesis, remember, is this: without anachrony the messianic would simply fail to appear.

11.2 With respect to anachrony, the Book of Mormon is exemplary. This correlates fundamentally with its claim to messianicity. It is certainly the case that any attempt to neatly peg the Book of Mormon as belonging clearly to one particular historical period (e.g., to nineteenth century rural American or to ancient Hebrew refugees living most likely somewhere in Central America) quickly becomes unwieldy. Further, nothing is more disconcerting to the historically attuned reader than to find Hebrew prophets predicting with great precision the details of Jesus’ life and ministry—except, perhaps, the ways that the Book of Mormon so profoundly and unabashedly employs the theological vocabulary and addresses the religious aporias of nineteenth century rural

20. Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 263.

21. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* I, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1955), 1238. Translation cited as given in Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, (New York: Verso, 1989), 141.

America.²² The Book of Mormon apparently accomplishes the task of retroactively reconfiguring all of history with surprising ease. In light of the Book of Mormon, *all* of history is reconfigured as explicitly and undeniably Christ-centered. This anachrony need not come as an embarrassing surprise. Rather, anachrony is the very condition necessary for the Book of Mormon to operate in a messianic fashion. Were the book otherwise, it would fail to accomplish its own explicit purpose of testifying universally “that Jesus is the Christ,” the *Messiah*, “manifesting himself unto all nations.”

We have, then, offered twelve complimentary formulations of our initial thesis:

1. The messianic is that which retroactively reconfigures history itself.
2. The messianic involves the rediscovery of what was lost.
3. The messianic occurs within history without belonging to history.
4. The messianic interrupts the tyranny of homogeneous time.
5. The messianic marks the intervention of the eternal in time via a pure repetition.
6. The messianic exposes homogeneous “progress” as vain.
7. The messianic carefully collects the heterogeneous debris of history.
8. The messianic speaks from the dust.
9. The messianic is both monadological and universal.
10. The messianic reveals “necessities” as contingent.
11. The messianic persists out of its time, irremediably.
12. The messianic is anachronistic.

In light of these, a final reformulation can be ventured. *The messianic, as messianic, is what, with the smallest synchronic displacement, anachronically and retroactively reconfigures history itself.*

Walter Benjamin conceives of eternity, of synchronic repetition, as impinging on time in the form of anachrony. This surprising interruption, however slight, is capable of ushering in the Messiah. Giorgio Agamben relates: “There is a well-known parable about the Kingdom of the Messiah that Walter Benjamin (who heard it from Gershom Scholem) recounted one evening to Ernst Bloch, who in turn transcribed it in *Spuren*: ‘A rabbi, a real cabalist, once said that in order to

22. See, for example, Charles R. Harrell, “*This Is My Doctrine*”: *The Development of Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012).

establish the reign of peace it is not necessary to destroy everything nor to begin a completely new world. It is sufficient to displace this cup or this bush or this stone just a little, and thus everything. But this small displacement is so difficult to achieve and its measure so difficult to find that, with regard to the world, humans are incapable of it and it is necessary that the Messiah come.”²³ This infinitely small displacement—a displacement that both changes everything and nothing, that reveals the whole world and its history as meaning something radically different from what had been supposed while retaining everything that had hitherto been acknowledged—is the displacement of anachrony. It is through the strait gate of anachrony that the Messiah enters. In this respect the Book of Mormon is, perhaps, as it should be.

23. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 53.

