MOTIF CRITICISM

As Applied To The Book of Mormon In Blake Ostler's 1987 "*The Book of Mormon As a Modern Expansion of An Ancient Source*"

This document is not any kind of full commentary on Ostler's article or his key proposal. Rather, it is simply a collection of quotes put together for the specific purpose of demonstrating how the field of "Motif Criticism" can point to 19th century origins for a lot of Book of Mormon content. A bit of background is in order, however. Ostler is a believer. He and I both agree that much of the Book of Mormon's content simply cannot be reasonably retrojected back onto ancient Israelites, and that much of it is specifically of an early 19th century nature. However, unlike me, Ostler still believes there was a legitimate underlying historical text that existed, but accounts for the modern content by proposing a very "loose" process of "translation" where Joseph is "expanding" the text with 19th century ideas as he translates. His full article can be found HERE. I think a good summary of Ostler's position is found in the following paragraph:

> "It is my purpose to demonstrate that both extremes are too limited and to offer a theory of the Book of Mormon as Joseph Smith's expansion of an ancient work by building on the work of earlier prophets to answer the nagging problems of his day. In so doing, he provided unrestricted and authoritative commentary, interpretation, explanation, and clarifications based on insights from the ancient Book of Mormon text and the King James Bible (KJV). The result is a modern world view and theological understanding superimposed on the Book of Mormon text from the plates." (p. 66)

I think this was a groundbreaking and extremely important article for LDS studies—especially for its time. In my view, as information spreads more and more people are going to find that retreating to his approach is really the only chance the Book of Mormon has of continuing to be viewed as having a basis in an actual historical document. Ostler does acknowledge that "to a certain extent" his approach does undermine the book's historicity, but more and more scholars are finding a retreat to such an approach to be the only viable path forward. In a recent interview Richard Bushman stated that we need to "go back to Blake Ostler's dialogue essay that says the Book of Mormon is an expanded text." Brant Gardner's recent book provides a model similar to Ostler's. I tried desperately to make this approach work for me, but in my view it simply couldn't account for the depth of the problems. In my view, much of the 19th century content in the book is too integral to the surrounding narratives to identify as "expansions" without massively undermining the surrounding text. More importantly, much of the 19th century content is foundational even to the book's very self conception and big picture narrative.

In any case, Ostler's article aptly introduces the concept of Motif Criticism, and proceeds to document why various Book of Mormon concepts can't reasonably be retrojected back onto these ancient Israelites in the Book of Mormon. I figure you'll give the idea more of a chance if you hear it from a believer. The following will all be direct quotes from Ostler unless it begins with the phrase "A Note From Me." Many of these quotes also contained supporting references in parentheses within them, but I've removed most for ease of reading.

Ostler Introduces Motif Criticism (p. 79)

Motif criticism (as Slingerland calls it) analyzes the comparative development of theological ideas in a document and is another useful mode of scholarly analysis to help determine authorship and provenance (1977, 98-103). For example, analyzing the comparative development of the concept of Christ in the synoptic gospels and the gospel of John suggests that John was written later (R. Brown 1966, lxxxiv). It is possible to analyze Book of Mormon doctrines to determine whether they resemble pre-exilic Israelite thought or nineteenth-century Christianity.

Baptism (p. 80)

Many Book of Mormon doctrines are best explained by the nineteenth-century theological milieu. For example, though there may have been ritual washings performed in the tabernacle and temple, there are no pre-exilic references to baptism (Exod. 29:4; 40:12; Lev. 8:6). Yet Jacob explains repentance and baptism as if his hearers were completely familiar with the concept: "He commandeth all men that they must repent and be baptized in his name, having perfect faith in the Holy One of Israel, or they cannot be saved in the kingdom of God" (2 Ne. 9:23-24). It is difficult to see this passage as anything but the Christian baptism of repentance necessary for salvation. Ritual washings were never seen as necessary to salvation in the Old Testament.

The Book of Mormon also addresses several problems that simply were not, and could not be, problems for Israelites. For example, the salvation of infants and those who had not heard the gospel arises only if a soteriology is adopted which excludes the unbaptized or non-Christians. In Hebrew thought non-Israelites are not thus excluded (Dubarle 1970, 34-35). Nineteenth-century Methodist theology taught, however, that non-Christians and the unbaptized could not be saved. The Methodist solution resembles the Book of Mormon's.

Note From Me: The issue of infant baptism that so forcefully makes its way into the Book of Mormon (Moroni 8 and Mosiah 3:16,18) happens to have been a hot topic in Joseph's day. In fact, it was a key issue raised by Alexander Campbell, a key leader in the "Restoration Movement."

Salvation

The Book of Mormon doctrine of atonement and free will shows influences of a theological conflict over depravity, grace, and the role of the will in salvation, all central to the conflict between Calvinism and Arminianism in the early nineteenth century. Calvin and his followers believed that persons are incapable of meritorious acts, and the atonement applied Christ's undeserved grace to those predestined to salvation. Human will or choice had nothing to do with salvation, for humans were captives of their depraved nature and could not avoid sin (Calvin 1961, 3.13.6; Edwards 1846, 185-97). In contrast, salvation in Arminian theology depended on an individual's free choice to accept Christ's freely offered grace. (p. 80)

The idea that the atonement freed persons from their depraved "natural" state and restored them to the state enjoyed before the fall of ability to choose between good and evil is a distinctive Arminian concept taught in Joseph Smith's day... (p. 81)

Such developed ideas of free will enabled by the atonement are not found in Israelite thought but are presented in 2 Nephi 2:8-9, 26-29 and 10:24. Lehi predicted that the Messiah would come to "redeem the children from the Fall. And because they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon." The choice which gives rise to free agency in the Book of Mormon (2 Ne. 2:27; 10:23-24) is invariably the choice between the way of life and the way of death also found in Deuteronomy 30:15, 19; such freedom is never said in the Old Testament to be made possible by the atonement. (p. 81)

The next chapter, Mosiah 16, can be identified as Joseph Smith’s expansion on motif critical grounds. Here Abinidi says we are “carnal and devilish” by nature as a result of the Fall, themes that stem from Paul and Calvin. (p. 98)

The Fortunate Fall (p. 81)

The concept that the fall of Adam benefitted humankind by fulfilling the plan of God (felix culpa) and making the moral growth of humans possible is a Christian interpretation which developed very early in Christian thought. The same concept appears in 2 Nephi 2:17-26 and Alma 42:2-14. An Arminian influence on the Book of Mormon seems evident in its stress on the paradoxical commandments God gave Adam and Eve and idea of "opposition in all things" to emphasize that choices among alternatives are necessary to moral freedom. In contrast, there simply is no pre-exilic interpretation of the fall of Adam. Indeed, the fall of Adam is not mentioned in the Old Testament after Genesis 2:4-3:23, although the myth of the fall was probably available in sixth-century Israel in some form.

The doctrines of original sin and the fallen nature of humankind are also foreign to pre-exilic Israelite thought. The fall of Adam was never linked with the human condition in pre-exilic works, as it is in the Book of Mormon (1 Ne. 10:6; 2 Ne. 2:15-16; 9:6; Mosiah 3:16-27; 4:7; Alma 12:22; 18:36; 22:13; 42:2-10; Hel. 14:16). Human "nature" was not

considered inherently sinful in Israelite thought — if one can meaningfully speak about a Hebrew concept of "human nature." The idea of nature is Greek rather than Israelite. Humankind was impotent and dependent on Yahweh for well-being in Israelite thought, but not evil by nature. Teachings of original sin and depravity first appear in the Bible in Paul (Rom. 5:12-21).

The Atonement

The satisfaction theory of atonement elucidated in Alma 34:9-17 and 42:9-17 is a medieval theological development. The idea of atonement as necessary to satisfy two opposed but ontologically necessary attributes of God — his mercy and his justice — was first suggested by Anselm of Canterbury in his A.D. 1109 treatise, Cur Deus Homo? The satisfaction theory was premised on medieval concepts of law and justice and assumed that justice required full retribution for sin while mercy acquitted the sinner and did not require such penalties. The conflict in God's nature could be resolved only by a sinless individual upon whom justice had no claim but who would allow justice to be done vicariously through his suffering. The suffering would have to come from one having both human and divine natures, however, because an infinite being had been offended by human sin, and only an "infinite atonement" could satisfy the demands of justice. Thus, Christ's undeserved suffering provides infinite merit which can be dispensed vicariously to depraved creatures who stand in need of Christ's grace. It is possible to detect influences of this theory in Alma's presentation of God's plan, which also shows Arminian influences in its description of vicarious sacrifice: (quotes Alma 42:13-15) (p. 82)

Finally, Mosiah 3:5 - 4:8 seems to be nineteenth-century expansions on the atonement (p. 92).

Chiasmus can also be found in some nineteenth-century works, including the Doctrine and Covenants and Book of Abraham (D&C 88:34-38; 98:18-38; 132:19-26; Abr. 3:16-19). Thus, the assumption that chiasmus is an exclusively ancient poetic device appears to be false. Further, many Book of Mormon chiastic passages presuppose a doctrine of Christ developed far beyond anything found in the Old Testament (Mosiah 3:18-19; 5:10-12; 2 Ne. 25:2-17; Alma 36; 41:13-15). (p. 101)

The Concept of Messiah (p. 83)

The idea of a Messiah who dies for the sins of others, then rises from the dead, was unknown in ancient Israel (Klausner 1956), though competent scholars have maintained that Isaiah's suffering servant refers to an individual identified with Israel through his vicarious suffering and death as Yahweh's servant. Early Christians identified the suffering servant with Christ. A similar development occurred in Nephi's thought; he learned from an angel that God himself would appear as a man and be delivered to the wicked (1 Ne. 19:19). (p. 83)

Mosiah 14-16 are also best explained as Joseph Smith's expansions or interpolations. Abinadi refers to a messianic prophecy by Moses, probably with Deuteronomy 18:18-19 in mind (Mosiah 13:33). He then states, however, that "all the prophets who have prophesied ever since the world began — have they not spoken more or less concerning [the Messiah]? Have they not said that God himself should come down among the children of men, and take upon him the form of man, and go forth in mighty power upon the face of the earth . . . and that he himself should be oppressed and afflicted? Yea, doth not Isaiah say . . ." (Mosiah 13:34-35). At this point, the King James Translation of Isaiah 53 is read into the text. This passage comes from a section of Isaiah commonly attributed to deutero-Isaiah; but even without that problem, it is commonly accepted that the KJV translators made a chapter division in the wrong place. The poem about the suffering servant actually begins at Isaiah 52:13. It is highly unlikely that Abinadi would break up this poem by beginning with the present chapter division. (p. 93)

The Afterlife (p. 84)

Concepts of an afterlife appear to undergo development in the Book of Mormon…

Hebrews did not have a refined notion of life after death (Wolff 1974, 102-5)…

Robinson maintains, however, that the concept of after-life did not develop until after the return from the exile (J. A. T. Robinson, 3:38-53).

It was difficult for pre-exilic Hebrews to conceive of life without the body because they did not think of mortals in dualistic terms of corruptible body and eternal soul. The term soul {nephesh) connoted the entire person in Hebrew thought, consisting of the breath of life or "spirit" (ruah) plus the body (basar) (Tresmontant 1962, 12-56; Eichrodt 1967, 131-50). The discussion of the grave delivering up the body and hell delivering up the spirit (2 Ne. 9:10-13) is thus awkward and perhaps inappropriate given Hebrew anthropology.

Resurrection (p. 85)

The resurrection in the Old Testament is first mentioned in Isaiah 26:19 and usually attributed to deutero-Isaiah or trito-Isaiah in the fourth century B.C. Ezekiel 37:5, is usually dated to 350-338 B.C. In contrast, the Book of Mormon has a well-developed concept of universal resurrection brought about by the Messiah's death and resurrection (2 Ne. 9:10-16; 26:13; Jac. 4:11-12; Mosiah 15:21-22; 16:7-11; Alma 16:20; 27:28; 33:22; 40:2-21). (p. 85)

"The next chapter, Mosiah 16, can be identified as Joseph Smith's expansion on motif critical grounds…. (Mosiah 16:6-7). These verses depend on 1 Corinthians 15:55-56." (p. 98)

The Devil (p. 85-86)

Pre-exilic Hebrews did not have a concept of a personal devil who tempted individuals and opposed deity (Eichrodt 1:205-8).

The early Hebrews did not equate the serpent of the Eden story with the devil (Nordio 1975, 105).

In 1 Nephi 14, the devil is associated with the great and abominable church, a usage which Joseph Smith clearly borrowed from Revelation 17:1-18:3 to expand the original text.

1 Nephi 13-15 can be distinguished as Joseph Smith's expansion through motif criticism. Its denunciations of the devil's great and abominable church depend on Revelation and appears to express anti-Catholicism characteristic of nineteenth-century New York (Ahlstrom 1:666-81). These chapters contain ideas foreign to pre-exilic Israelites, such as a "church," a personal devil, and Jews and gentiles.

Christology

“Mosiah 15-16 appear to be Joseph Smith’s expansions to explain how God becomes man. Mosiah 15 does not discuss the relationship between the Father and Son in the Godhead as is often assumed (Alexander 1980, 25). Rather, Joseph Smith here addresses, through Abinadi, how the Son can be both fully man and fully God. Mosiah 15 adopts a genetic theory of Christology wherein the Son is deemed to partake of the nature of mortality because literally descended from humans in the flesh, though also truly God because he is also begotten by God the Father through the spirit (Mosiah 15:2-3). Hence, the Son partakes of both the nature of humanity and of the Father, “ and thus the flesh becoming subject to the Spirit, or the Son to the Father, being one God . . .” (Mosiah 15:5). Abinadi further explains that the Son can become subject to death in the flesh by virtue of his mortality and can thus “make intercession for the children of men,” thereby satisfying the demands of both mercy and justice by virtue of his dual humanity-divinity (15 :7-9).

Mosiah 15 thus attempts to answer theological questions that were asked only after the council of Nicea in A.D. 325, and the answer is premised on Anselm’s medieval satisfaction theory. Joseph Smith also resolves a problem raised by interpreting Isaiah 53 to apply to Jesus. Isaiah speaks of the servant’s “seed.” How, then, could this passage refer to Christ who had no seed? Joseph Smith interprets “seed” as a metaphor for the prophets who testify of Christ to resolve the problem (15:10-13).” (p. 97)

19th Century Views of Native Americans:

“The prophecies of the discovery of America and the role of a gentile nation in the Book of Mormon can be most reasonably explained, in my opinion, as popular nineteenth-century concepts inserted in the text by Joseph Smith (1 Ne. 13:10-20). In short,

similarities between View of the Hebrews and the Book of Mormon do not require the dependence of one upon the other but are more easily explained as two reflections of common nineteenth-century assumptions about the American Indians." (p. 70)

Masonry:

"…Helaman 6:21-30; 8:3-4; 3 Nephi 6:28-30 and Ether 8:10-16, 22-26 appear to be influenced by anti-Masonic terminology and concerns. They may be explained best, it seems to me, as Joseph Smith's independent commentary on Masonry, sparked by his reflection on Nephite secret combinations." (p. 76)

Note from me: While Mormons ultimately developed significant involvement with Masonry, it was very controversial and a hot topic during the time the Book of Mormon was produced. There was concern that Masonic judges were (sometimes literally) letting their fellow masons "get away with murder" (or perhaps ordering it in the first place). It was also a major political concern of the day. (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Masonic_Party)

Ostler's Conclusions Regarding Motif Criticism and the Book of Mormon:

"The Christian motifs in the Book of Mormon require either that a Christian has been at work during some stage of the compilation or that it is Christian in origin (Slingerland 1977, 100). A study of the editorial tendencies may determine whether the Christian motifs derive from Mormon or from Joseph Smith. In 1 and 2 Nephi, Jacob, and Enos, however, expansions must come from Joseph Smith because the small plates were not abridged by Mormon." (p. 86)

"The expansion theory, premised on a concept of revelation as creative co-participation, also helps us to understand the historical development of Mormon doctrine. The Book of Mormon reflects the influence of Joseph Smith's earliest belief structure in its synthesis of passages from the KJV and contemporary theology with nineteenth-century concerns. Joseph Smith's interpretive framework was largely derived from Christian Primitivism, a particular orientation within nineteenth-century Protestantism (M. Hill 1968)…… In expressing the message of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith's revelatory experiences naturally assumed the world view arising from his culture. Later revelations, however, necessitated so much revision in this basic set of assumptions that the paradigm reflected in the Book of Mormon was largely abandoned." (p. 112)
"Some may see the expansion theory as compromising the historicity of the Book of Mormon. To a certain extent it does. The book cannot properly be used to prove the presence of this or that doctrine in ancient thought because the revelation inherently involved modern interpretation…Such a model does not necessarily abrogate either the book's religious significance or its value as salvation history. After all, much of the Bible is a result of a similar process of redaction, interpolation, and interpretation, yet its spiritual power is attested to by two thousand years of revealing God's mighty acts to later generations." (p. 114)

“In the final analysis, however, the value of the book as scripture is not whether its history is complete and accurate, but whether it adequately bears witness of God and what is ultimately most valuable. The Book of Mormon is not a history and was not meant to be; it is a revelation of the experiences of God and the salvation history of an ancient people.” (p. 114)