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ABINADI: A MINOR PROPHET, A MAJOR CONTRIBUTOR

Andrew C. Smith

Abstract: *The new edited volume Abinadi: He Came Among Them in Disguise, from the Book of Mormon Academy, is a valuable contribution to Book of Mormon studies. It should find a wide audience and stimulate greater and deeper thinking about the pivotal contributions of Abinadi to the Book of Mormon. It should, however, not be considered the end of the conversation. This review discusses the volume's importance within Book of Mormon scholarship generally. It also highlights certain valuable contributions from each of the authors, and points out places where more can be said and deeper analysis is needed.*

Review of Shon D. Hopkin, ed. *Abinadi: He Came Among Them in Disguise* (Provo and Salt Lake City, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book, 2018), 404 pp. \$27.99.

A strong addition to the field of Book of Mormon studies is available in a newly published volume titled *Abinadi: He Came Among Them in Disguise*. Its worth as an in-depth review and analysis of the story and character of Abinadi is enhanced by the quality of scholarship and the level of rigorous thinking that undergirded its production. Bringing together a strong collaboration of authors, Shon Hopkin has produced an edited volume that can be considered essential reading for anyone interested in better understanding the story of Abinadi before Noah and his priests as well as its impact on the rest of the Book of Mormon. This volume's importance is also heightened by the way it was produced. Published jointly by the Religious Studies Center at BYU and Deseret Book, the

volume obtains both the imprint of academic scholarship and approval by Church-owned and -operated institutions. While this may seem superficial to some, from my perspective this is an important point, for it means that *Deseret Book* is placing its stamp of approval on studies like this, which incorporate broader scholarly and academic approaches to scripture. It is also important in that this may (it is hoped!) reach certain audiences that have been historically wary or completely unaware of such academic approaches, showing that methods of academic analysis of scripture are not something to be feared and avoided.

This volume is also notable as the first major publishing effort of The Book of Mormon Academy (BOMA), “an academic think tank and research group begun at Brigham Young University in October 2013 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Book of Mormon” (vi). The value of this volume speaks well to the potential importance of such an institution. As an initial foray into the possibilities for research and production on the Book of Mormon, this volume gives me hope that such scholarship will become much more frequent. This is important, both for consideration of building the kingdom of God and also as it pertains to reaching out and speaking to the broader academic community: volumes of this type fill an important niche. As Hopkin explains in the introduction, this volume was deliberately conceived to follow upon and fit into the category of work by

scholars inside and outside of the Latter-day Saint faith [who] continue to use current academic tools and theories to produce work that takes the Book of Mormon seriously but that also seeks to be accessible to those who do not believe in the book’s divinely inspired nature ... [that] are neither polemic in nature nor “apologetically” designed to provide conclusive proof that the book of scripture is of ancient origin. (v)

There is — and always will be — a distinct need for continued scholarly thinking and writing about the Book of Mormon, particularly academic writing that is close, critical, and productive in a number of ways.

While opinions about the value of “bracketing” in scholarship may differ drastically, it is certainly a worthwhile effort to attempt to reach out to others in ways that speak to their “language, unto their understanding” (2 Nephi 31:3), in efforts to help them appreciate the beauty, depth, complexity, and value of the Book of Mormon. It should also be recognized that there is certainly room for many diverse opinions about approaches and conclusions vis-à-vis the Book of Mormon text,

even among faithful members of the Church. This is also evident in this volume, since all the contributors are professors of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University, though in some cases they come to very different conclusions about interpretation. Such a multiplicity of approaches, methods, and conclusions is something to be valued and appreciated rather than feared or disregarded. This is especially important in specific, non-mutually exclusive issues but also applies more broadly, since “the conclusions and approaches [in the volume] are not meant to be definitive” (vii). Although the volume is meant to follow norms and methods of scholarly analysis, the differing authors generally show various interpretations of what these norms and methods are and how those interact with their faith commitments. Some chapters end up leaning a little bit more, though not wholly so, toward the apologetic, while others do not. This approach is intentional: BOMA “believes that the Book of Mormon text shines best when the best tools are used to illuminate it” (vii).

Building upon these considerations, the intent of the volume is to begin filling a gap in attention to those figures who could be called “minor prophets” in the Book of Mormon, “whose important teachings span only pages instead of full books but whose recorded sermons have a powerful impact on the rest of the book and its modern-day readership. ... Abinadi seemed the logical choice as a figure whose page count is significantly smaller than his prophetic imprint” (vi).

Thus, all the authors are using the same relatively short text as their beginning point. But by bringing different scholarly approaches to bear on the same text, they reveal the internal complexity of the text and illuminate a variety of important meanings to be derived from it. These tools (and the training in them, which the authors exhibit) include a variety of types of academic analysis (textual, historical, literary, and form criticism), theological and philosophical thought, and comparative religious history.

Following these various approaches, the volume is divided into four parts, two or three chapters in each: “Literary Lenses: Narratological, Sociopolitical, Biblical”; “Intertextual and Intratextual Lenses: The Book of Mormon and the Bible”; “Cultural-Historical Lenses: Mesoamerican and North American”; and “Theological Lenses: Historical and Philosophical.” This review addresses briefly each of these headings, providing a brief overview of the topic of each as well as my reaction to the arguments or content presented (as valuation and criticism). In some cases this will be more because of their importance, or less where a simple summary suffices. In all cases, however, my strong recommendation

is that those interested in studies in the Book of Mormon pick up this volume and engage deeply with the essays.

Within the general category of Literary Lenses, the foundational chapter by Jared Ludlow, titled “‘A Messenger of Good and Evil Tidings’: A Narrative Study of Abinadi,” provides the essential “narratological” overview and analysis of the section of Mosiah devoted to Abinadi and his ministry. In this type of literary approach, Ludlow dissects the narrative into its constituent parts, showing the distinct emphases and broader literary intent of the author. He analyzes characters as protagonists and antagonists and their historical background as well as the setting and arc or progression of the story. Such a piece lays the groundwork for just about everything that follows. Ludlow’s analysis and conclusions are very well organized and articulated.

Even so, I quibble slightly with some of Ludlow’s views, specifically his use of literary approaches to scriptural text. Ludlow divides the text into parts based on how the discussion in Noah’s court moves between calls to repentance and overt interpretation of passages from Isaiah. The result is some choppy divisions and atomistic parts that, in my opinion, muddle rather than clarify the flow of Abinadi’s words. The speech seems more disjointed than seamless, and readers may not see how the divisions relate to one another. Though my quibble is minor, it may pose ramifications to how we understand Abinadi’s speech.

Daniel Belnap’s chapter, “The Abinadi Narrative, Redemption, and the Struggle for Nephite Identity,” is a remarkable analysis of the place and presence of the Zeniffite colony in the Land of Nephi and the impact of political and discursive realities on the story’s historical setting as well as its literary composition. Belnap’s impressive analysis helps clarify the dissension and colonizing efforts which Zeniff provokes: “This, then, is the scene which Mormon has set up — group of Nephites, some of whom were Nephite elites and believed that the land of Zarahemla was not part of their inheritance and certainly not the land of their fathers, left Zarahemla to reclaim the old Nephite territory, apparently believing that the greater Nephite population had gone astray through the policy of integration and that their own group therefore represented the true Nephite identity” (35). In one of his more impressive claims and arguments, Belnap construes the colony’s efforts essentially as rebellion, not simply against the state but also against God (47–48). This analysis alone is a worthy and important contribution. Overall, the piece obliges the reader to think about the sociopolitical realities of the historical situation as they interplay with the literary contextualization, or why

Mormon not only inserted the narrative of the Zeniffite colony into his broader history in the Book of Mosiah but also why he put it where he did. However, in some places — for instance the discussion and analysis of the position of Ammon₁ as a potential part of the Mulekite royal line and what that would mean for the search party sent to find the colony — I see a bit of interpretive overreach (see page 34).

The third chapter in this section devoted to Literary Lenses is Frank Judd’s “Conflicting Interpretations of Isaiah in Abinadi’s Trial.” Judd’s literary approach looks mainly at the passages of Isaiah that are pertinent to the Abinadi narrative and their places within the Book of Isaiah. It clarifies how they are interpreted by Abinadi and the priests of Noah: the difference revolves around the identity and mission of the Suffering Servant, becoming one of the major points of contention between Abinadi and the priests. While Judd’s overview of the pertinent Isaiah material is valuable, it is still rather general; I found myself wishing for deeper discussion of some of the critical issues devoted to Isaiah. Likewise, while Judd’s careful reading of the position of Noah’s priests regarding the need for a Messiah is impressive, some distinct issues go unexplored. Judd recognizes that although the “priests of Noah accepted the legitimacy of the Law of Moses, it may be that they ... denied that the law was symbolic of the mission of the Messiah and that the Messiah played a primary role in the salvation of humankind” (84). However, in the broader issues of the denial of the Son in the Nephite record and the teachings of early Nephite leaders (particularly Jacob), additional pertinent evidence or information related to the existence of the colony and its theological project should be considered. Specifically, how could these priests firmly reject the teachings of Nephi and Lehi about the coming of the Messiah and his role, while yet strongly accepting their postulate that the Land of Nephi is the Promised Land or land of inheritance? How can the priests and Noah accept these promises and doctrines, as taught by Nephi and Jacob yet reject the divine nature of God himself descending? Perhaps the priests simply interpreted prophecies of the coming Messiah as not necessarily divine but as having been already fulfilled in someone else? I argue that this was their position with regard to the leadership of Zeniff, though other possibilities exist. Judd does not broach these possibilities.

The second major part of the book is devoted to intertextual and intratextual lenses, seeing the aspects of the Abinadi passages that echo down through the rest of the Book of Mormon as well as how they interact with biblical texts. John Hilton III’s contribution, “Abinadi’s

Legacy: Tracing His Influence through the Book of Mormon,” is essentially concerned with the former. Offering a wonderful introduction to the basics of method and approach of intertextuality (93–97), Hilton traces the usages, allusions, and echoes to Abinadi’s words through other major sections of the Book of Mormon. One major aspect that Hilton rightly picks up is the relationship between Benjamin and Abinadi. A major literary connection exists between the two, but as Hilton correctly points out, this is perplexing: Benjamin’s speech occurred roughly 30 years (by Hilton’s logic) after Abinadi’s martyrdom, and there is no simple or direct logical explanation of how Benjamin may have heard or been exposed to Abinadi’s teachings; no contact existed between the colony and Zarahemla.

The discrepancy may be accounted for in a number of ways. Most interpreters see Mormon as playing an editorial role (see footnote 28 on page 285 within the chapter contributed by Joseph Spencer). Hilton, however, while recognizing the influence of Abinadi’s speech on Mormon, does not engage himself with these interpretations, and presents only superficial arguments against such a possibility. Rather, Hilton points to the possible influence of the angel that visits King Benjamin, based on the fact that the strongest literary connections between Benjamin’s speech and Abinadi’s occur in the sections Benjamin quotes from the angel. Hilton broaches the possibilities (put forward by others initially) that not only did the angel teach Abinadi’s words, but the angel may have been Abinadi himself. Much of this is speculative (as Hilton points out), but Hilton presents it as being of great importance: “This potential influence is not tangential in understanding Book of Mormon teachings. If Abinadi did teach King Benjamin (or another angel taught Abinadi’s words to King Benjamin), then Abinadi is the first prophetic witness found in Mormon’s abridgement of the large plates of Nephi, influencing all prophetic voices after him” (109). However, this seems interpretive overreach. Do we really need to postulate or speculate on something like this to shore up our notions that Abinadi’s teachings were very important within the Nephite prophetic record and upon Mormon’s endeavor? What Hilton fails to discuss, though, is the possibility of further redaction of these records between the period when the original speeches were written and how they came down to Mormon. It seems much more plausible to postulate a harmonization of the records within the Church established by Alma₁, probably accomplished by Alma₂. There is even plausible literary evidence for this, specifically in the form of the gloss of the word *seed* in Mosiah 15:11, which reads, “or they are

the heirs of the kingdom of God.” This language is prominent in the writings and sermons of Alma², and it appears to be a later insertion because it breaks up the flow of Abinadi’s words in this section.¹

The next two chapters of this section deal with how the text of the Abinadi narrative interacts with and is illuminated by its intertextual relationship with biblical texts. Nicholas Frederick’s piece, “If Christ Had Not Come into the World,” deals with the interplay between specific phrases in Abinadi’s speech, Paul’s letters, and John’s writings in the New Testament. Frederick presents more information than can be dealt with in brief summary. Yet it is an extremely well thought-out piece that presents important considerations that emerge from a distinct comparison of these texts, focused not only on how the phrases are held in common but also how they are used in distinct ways, usually based in subtle shifts and added nuance. Frederick concludes that such subtle differences are integral to the way the Book of Mormon generally interweaves its narratives with textual language from the New Testament.

One of the most astonishing aspects of the Book of Mormon is the attention given to the weaving of text. To interact with the Bible to the extent the Book of Mormon does risks producing a “textual Frankenstein,” a book in which the parts have been so clumsily constructed that the seams linking the Book of Mormon to the Bible are not only visible but obtrusive. That the Book of Mormon (largely) avoids this speaks to its complexity. (131)

This interweaving supports broader points about the text of the Book of Mormon in its relation to the New Testament, specifically its confidence in using the New Testament and its demanding nature in that it presupposes or expects its reader to grasp and recognize where it specifically is in contact with the New Testament. It then expects readers to relate and analyze the differences in both texts.

Shon Hopkin, in “Isaiah 52-53 and Mosiah 13-14: A Textual Comparison,” takes a different tack on the interplay between the Book of Mormon and biblical texts, focusing on textual variants between the Abinadi materials and quotations of Isaiah and those same materials as found in the King James Version of the Bible as well as within the Great Isaiah Scroll (from the Dead Sea Scrolls). Let me point out only that this type of study is extremely valuable, perhaps essential, to future studies in

1. While the phrase “kingdom of God” is certainly used often within Nephi’s and Jacob’s writings, it is overwhelmingly found in Alma’s writings in Alma 5, 7, 9, 12, 39, 40, and 41.

this vein. Such studies may require an extremely close eye for detail and nuance, but this type of scholarship is essential to continued development of scholarly works and understanding of the Book of Mormon text. This type of engagement will pave the way for additional studies.

Part three of the volume, on cultural-historical lenses, illuminates the Abinadi narrative through contextualization within a Mesoamerican or North American setting. Kerry Hull, in the first chapter, “An ‘East Wind’: Old and New World Perspectives,” examines the usage of the phrase or image of the “east wind” that appears twice in Mosiah, in both cases connected to the Abinadi narrative (Mosiah 7:31 and 12:6). He examines the usage of such a phrase biblically, including its surprising usage in a number of places dealing with geographies outside of Palestine. This is of interest because it indicates the spread of this phrase beyond the original geographical location to which the idiom was specifically bound. In other words, the notion of an “east wind” bringing destruction or as an idiom of destruction has, in these instances, been decontextualized from the geography in which it arose (Palestine) and is applied to geographies where it does not apply directly (Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the broader Mediterranean). He presents not only several relevant connections with the Old World but also impressive information on the presence of “east winds” in Mesoamerica. He then presents distinct, plausible explanations for the usage of the phrase within a Book of Mormon set within a Mesoamerican context. Altogether, Hull shows a mastery of source materials and capabilities in a large variety of ancient contexts, cultures, and languages to make his point: the allusion to “east winds” might not be as odd as it may seem at first blush.

Kerry Hull teams up with Mark Alan Wright, another Mesoamericanist, to provide the next chapter, one of the chapters that will (and should, in my opinion) exert the most influence among Latter-day Saint readers on contemporary understandings of Abinadi’s martyrdom. Titled “Ethnohistorical Sources and the Death of Abinadi,” this chapter presents a very important study of the methods and means of painful torture and ritualized execution common throughout North and Central America. Rather than a common “colloquial” assumption of Abinadi being burned at the stake, the Book of Mormon text attributes Abinadi’s death to being beaten, or otherwise assaulted, with burning firebrands. Hull and Wright present ethnohistorical documentation on how this was accomplished broadly within an ancient American context, potentially resulting in “an extended process of torture” that could have taken hours if not days. “This refined view of Abinadi’s death

contributes to a greater appreciation of his act of willing martyrdom, knowing, as he likely did, the nature of physical torture he would have to endure” (209). This type of understanding, in my view, should become the standard interpretation and understanding of Abinadi’s execution, and an explication of context in print form is invaluable. However, it is also important to understand the broader questions this understanding evokes in LDS understanding of the Book of Mormon and scripture in general. This is an example of the type of influence of “colloquial” interpretations, which exemplifies the power of human imagination and assumptions, combined with cultural blinders, to influence our understanding of the scriptures.

The next natural question: If this is such a “spot on” case of Meso- or North American cultural practices that illuminate the narratives of the Book of Mormon, what else might we have overlooked? There is certainly much more work to be done here.

The final part of the volume consists of two papers that take a theological or philosophical approach to distinct portions of the Abinadi narrative. In “Infant Salvation: Book of Mormon Theology in a 19th-Century Context,” Amy Easton-Flake hones in on Abinadi’s statement that “little children also have eternal life” (Mosiah 15:25) and compares the Book of Mormon treatment of infant baptism with prominent views among a variety of denominations of 19th century America. Though I am not an expert in 19th century religious history, I find Easton-Flake’s exposition a model of how to understand the Book of Mormon within the context of its translation. More discussions such as this would be important contributions for viewing the Book of Mormon’s status as a 19th century document, that is, a document translated in the 19th century. Specifically, Easton-Flake notes how integral the discussion of infant baptism was to the broader issues of free will debated in the period. In comparing the teachings of the Book of Mormon with those of a variety of denominations, Easton-Flake concludes that

the Book of Mormon does not prescribe to or endorse any one of the dominant theological positions in early nineteenth-century America. Instead, the book clearly resonates with different aspects of various denominational thought while also offering a more concise rationale for infant salvation and maintaining a focus on Christ’s grace that is not seen in other denominations’ treatises on the subject. Its ability to touch on many of the most pressing issues within the nineteenth-century debate, while constructing its own unique teaching on the subject as a whole,

suggests a theological sophistication that has not often been granted to the Book of Mormon. (252–53)

The analysis and evidence that lead to this conclusion are well worth careful scrutiny.

The final chapter of the volume, Joseph Spencer’s “‘As Though’: Time Being, and Negation in Mosiah 16:5–6” builds on recent philosophical readings of Paul and his usage of the words *as* and *though* as they occur in the phrases *as though* and *as though not*. His philosophical analysis is fascinating and important. But the careful analysis and theological logic of Spencer’s argument cannot be simply summarized here. Readers are encouraged to read this essay particularly on their own. I will simply point to part of the conclusion of this impressive chapter, which mainly concerns the layering of real and possible worlds:

Sin and faith, that is, are two different ways of layering worlds. Faith amounts to a layering of the possible and the actual in such a way that the two interpenetrate, the future possible interrupting the present actual and all actuality opening directly on its fundamental possibilities. Sin, however, amounts to a layering of the possible and the actual in such a way that one entirely obscures — if not eradicates — the other, the merely possible posing as and in the place of the actual. (280)

While perhaps denser prose than many readers will be used to, this chapter pays well in dividends of deep thought that may help us understand the folly of living in the possible worlds of sin that reject and attempt to negate the reality of living in the light of our Savior.

While Spencer’s piece is the last of the essay-chapters of the volume, the book contains two appendices of distinct note. Appendix 1 is a heavily annotated critical text version of the Abinadi narrative (Mosiah 11–17). This will prove a valuable tool for students of the Book of Mormon who seek to understand the English text of the book and its connections (literary, textual, narratological, theological, and historical) to the rest of the Book of Mormon and the Bible. It is an impressive array of connections and insights, a work that will, one hopes, be the beginning of other critical textual work for other sections of the Book of Mormon to be produced by BOMA. The second appendix is a bibliography of important works (scholarly and devotional) on the Abinadi narrative. Like the first appendix, this appendix may prove to be a handy research and study aid for those who wish to deepen their understanding of this section of the Book of Mormon.

In short, this volume is a valuable resource. I heartily recommend it to all students of the Book of Mormon. It contains important original research and insights, and is as well as valuable model for future analysis of this book of scripture.

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