

Repurposing *the Book of Mormon* for Community of Christ Today

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“Wherefore, O Gentiles, it is wisdom in God that these things should be shown to you, that thereby you may repent of your sins, and suffer not that these murderous combinations shall get above you, which are built to get power and gain, and the work of destruction come upon you” –Ether 3:96

My aim is to repurpose *the Book of Mormon* for Community of Christ today by building on the work that has been done to re-contextualize it as a nineteenth century text. I will reinterpret it as an anti-imperialistic document. *The Book of Mormon* was written on the outskirts of the British Empire in the young fledgling American Republic. It emanated from Joseph Smith Jr.’s early life experience and imagination.¹ With this approach, I repurpose *the Book of Mormon* as a 21st century prophetic text for Community of Christ in mission.

Community of Christ has had a complicated relationship with *the Book of Mormon*. Although we believe it to be scripture, we can no longer say we are big fans. We are embarrassed by its magical and miraculous origins (Launius 2006). As we do not consider ourselves to be Mormons, but rather self-identify with the wider Christian family², we are kept from comfortably exploring or using *the Book of Mormon* in our worship or study. As the frequent use of *the Book of Mormon* would make us in the eyes of other Christians *de facto* Mormons by pure association, we seldom quote from it. Community of Christ has further embraced Christian ecumenism, become a radical Jesus-centered faith and turned its mission faithfully towards embodying Christ’s mission in the world in the pursuit of peace and the extension of justice, which makes the use of *the Book of Mormon* somewhat more problematic. It has been made clear in the last two decades since the adoption of our new name as “Community of Christ” that belief in *the Book of Mormon* has never

¹ In my research for this paper, I have especially been interested in the psycho-biographical reading of the Book of Mormon and recommend Robert Anderson’s *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith*. Other titles with similar conclusions might be worth reading.

² I very much enjoyed Tony Chvala-Smith’s description of our faith community as “Wilderness Christianity” and as peace pilgrims in his paper “*Let us Walk in the Light: Living the Restoration Vision in the New Millennium*”.

been a test of fellowship in the church, nor is it the measure of our Christian discipleship.³ Yet, it is part of our sacred story.

I echo Dale Luffman's argument that it is not the First Vision that was the founding event of 'Latter-day Saintism'. It was rather the coming forth of *the Book of Mormon* in the 1830s. Luffman's insistence on the book's authority being less rooted in its origin than in its message is vitally important to repurposing *the Book of Mormon*. We, as a faith community, must take its nineteenth century context seriously and seek to understand 'how it speaks to our day and time' (Luffman 2013). Community of Christ has reorganized, deconstructed and re-mythologized many core symbols and understandings since the 1970s when RLDS scholars first questioned the historicity of *the Book of Mormon* (Ham 1970). I do believe there remains from that questioning a space for re-reading, studying anew and re-purposing *the Book of Mormon* in our worships and classes to strengthen our current peace and justice witness to the world – if we were to find the right and appropriate approach. I propose to look at *the Book of Mormon* narrative as anti-imperialistic American folk literature. While I will further explain what is implied by anti-imperialistic, *the Book of Mormon* is seen here as an American settlers' tall tale: a story with unbelievable elements related as if it were true and factual.⁴ It is an American folk parable inspired by the Bible, but with biting criticism of the new republic.

The Book of Mormon speaks of a time supposedly six-hundred years before Christ, when peoples with Hebrew origins left for the Promised land, which we quickly come to understand to be the Ancient Americas. There, a civilization is established with two opposing peoples, the Nephites and the Lamanites, each with their respective kings and subjects. Throughout their stories, a series of preachers and prophets teach them repentance and of Christ who would come among

³ "This position is in keeping with our longstanding tradition that belief in the Book for Mormon is not to be used as a test of fellowship or membership in the church." World Conference Official Minutes of Business Session Wednesday, March 28, 2007

⁴ The Book of Mormon fits in many categories and literature genres, but for the sake of this essay I choose to consider it as American folk literature with Biblical themes.

them. The peoples are reconciled and live with all things in common after Jesus appears to them. They return to their 'evil' ways two hundred years after his departure, and the white dominant people is ultimately killed through genocidal warfare a few generations after that.

To understand the prophetic quality of the text, it is crucial to read the whole book through and, as a narrative, read it with the end of in mind. Moroni is the last warrior and concluding historian of the Book. It is therefore Moroni and his father Mormon, the abridger of the Nephite story, that are the voices that we need to first listen to. It is through the eyes of the last narrators, the implied storytellers of the Book of Mormon, that we find the ultimate meaning of the text. Moroni finds himself witness to the desolation that has taken place among his people. As Madson suggests "From its opening pages until its conclusion its authors plead with us to be wiser, to learn from their imperfections, and to come unto Christ. The book is not simply a collection of stories or morals for us to emulate – it is a tragedy, a warning, and a voice crying from the dust" (Madson 2012).

Published on 26 March 1830 in Palmyra, New York, a little town named after the great city of Palmyra in Syria, *the Book of Mormon* describes vividly the pictures we see on news flashes and TV-screens today from the Middle East. Palmyra in Syria is completely destroyed today due to infighting, civil war and the interference of superpowers on both sides of the conflict. We see the destruction of homes, the ravaging of families, the tearing apart of the social fabric, caused by senseless violence and bombshells. These images actualize the message of *the Book of Mormon* that the pursuit of dominance over others leads to endless suffering and cycles of revenge. With atrocities happening around him, Mormon cannot recommend his own people unto God like Abraham was able to do of the handful of innocents in Sodom and Gomorrah.⁵ "For I know that they must perish except they repent and return to him; and if they perish, it will be [...] because of the willfulness of their hearts, seeking for blood and revenge."⁶

⁵ "Behold, you know the wickedness of this people; you know that they are without principle and past feeling; and their wickedness exceeds that of the Lamanites. Behold, my son, I cannot recommend them to God lest he should smite me."

⁶ Moroni 9:24

Mormon further explains that the record was written in ‘reformed Egyptian’. In my understanding, reformed Egyptian is code language for American English. English was the language of the Empire of the day, and with the American revolution, settlers were now writing and speaking in ‘reformed’ English.⁷ It makes therefore further sense for Joseph Smith to suggest that ‘if we had written it in Hebrew, there would have been no imperfections in our record’.⁸ Hebrew is the language of the people who suffered in bondage under Egyptian rule. But in the text, it is suggested that the Hebrew had also been altered by them, perhaps based on the popular belief at the time of writing that Native Americans were descendants from the lost ten tribes of Israel and had Hebrew origins. We can thus conclude that reformed Egyptian stands for American English and altered Hebrew stands for what was supposed to be the Israelite origins of Native American languages. The latter implies simply that Joseph Smith wished the narrative had been written in a Native American language, as Native Americans, considered by him to descend from the Lamanites, were one of the main target groups of the message.⁹

Why is it necessary to answer the question about the characters in which the record was written and ‘translated from’? Because it makes sense for Community of Christ readers today to look at *the Book of Mormon* as a long fable, an epic story, about two peoples who fight each other and where the dominant white group is wiped out through genocidal violence. This works better than reading it as a historical record of factual events that occurred in the Ancient Americas. Relegating the language question squarely back into a 19th century setting uncomplicates the story of the origins of the book.

Being a Jesus-centred faith today, Community of Christ readers will ask: can we find the Jesus of the New Testament in *the Book of Mormon*? Although the Jesus who resurfaces in *the Book of*

⁷ In 1806, Noah Webster published his first dictionary, *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language*. It included an essay on the oddities of modern orthography and his proposals for reform. In 1807, Webster began compiling an expanded dictionary. It was published in 1828 as *An American Dictionary of the English Language*.

⁸ Mormon 4:99

⁹ Cover page of *the Book of Mormon*: It [was] “to shew unto the remnant of the house of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers; and that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever.

Mormon will be a familiar figure to New Testament readers, he only appears to the peoples in what is suggested to be the Ancient Americas as a glorified being after his resurrection. Jesus in the New Testament is a long-suffering and compassionate human being in the Jewish prophetic tradition resurrected after his death on the cross. Supposedly that same Jesus resurfaces on the outskirts of the British Empire in a book ‘translated’ by a young farm boy in the American Republic at about the same time as America’s own imperial pretensions had already surfaced in its treatments of First Nations peoples. But are we sure it is the same Jesus...? True, *the Book of Mormon* purports itself to confirm that Jesus Christ is the Living Word of God.¹⁰ Unfortunately, the ‘naïve art’ portrait that *the Book of Mormon* makes of Jesus, relegates to the background the *kind* of living Word that Jesus Christ is in the New Testament. For example, New Testament Jesus lived a simple, generous, and communal life. He shared his resources rather than hoarding wealth. Jesus built inclusive communities. He showed compassion and taught inclusion, rather than a doctrine of holiness. Jesus of the New Testament promoted peace and spoke up for justice and died on the cross as victim of Empire. How does *the Book of Mormon* re-contextualize the teachings of this Jesus in an imagined American past? What kind of disciples does *the Book of Mormon* lift up in the narrative? Central characters in the narrative identified as disciples are military generals and statesmen in armour and fine apparel, and not the poor fishermen with whom the carpenter Jesus surrounded himself with in Galilee. How does *the Book of Mormon* suggest its readers build inclusive communities? The Nephites distrusted the Lamanites and saw them as cursed. The only way to reach through to them, according to Nephites, was to send preachers to them to redeem them from their state of sin. On the other hand, in the New Testament, Jesus healed the lepers and the blind, went out of his way to include those that were despised and rejected, defended the adulteress and the tax collectors and taught his disciples to not be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil by doing good. Does *the Book of Mormon* suggest new ways for its readers to reject violence and resist the logic of Empire? The

¹⁰ Ibid.

Nephites were builders of protective forts and armies and wielders of the sword, while the Lamanites delighted in wars and bloodshed. Jesus in the New Testament taught Peter to put away the sword and healed the ear of the one who came to arrest him and reviled not against his accusers at the Sanhedrin.

The two narratives could not be more different from one another when contrasted at first sight. *The Book of Mormon* offers a whole different backdrop to its readers for its resurrected deity than the New Testament does for the young Jewish Rabbi called Jesus. But *the Book of Mormon* narrative was also written for a different time and place and for a people with different concerns than the communities of disciples around the Mediterranean Sea in the first century. Joseph Smith was trying to convince Anglo-Saxon settlers and Native Americans on the American frontier in the 1830s of their intimate connection to the Jesus story. Joseph Smith sought to answer the societal and religious questions of his day by repurposing the message of Jesus for his time and place, albeit from the vantage point of an imaginary past in the Americas. The intricate battle descriptions, the believed Native American themes, the miraculous apparition of Jesus after his resurrection on the New Continent, all make of *the Book of Mormon* an interesting read in American folk literature. But we cannot take its historical claims seriously (Ham 1970). *The Book of Mormon* confirms the biases of early 19th century worldviews and engages these as part of the narrative. Native Americans descended from the lost ten tribes of Israel and blackness was associated with sin and curse.

Nevertheless, let us not dismiss *the Book of Mormon* so easily because of its implied 19th century American themes. We should rather ask: What would be the added value of this strange story in a 21st century globalized context, in which the United States of America has been the dominant power culturally, militarily and economically for the last 75 years? What does this imaginary story of Jesus coming to the Ancient Americas offer anew to Community of Christ today after it has been in our possession for nearly two hundred years? Can we approach *the Book of Mormon* with new eyes? Using affirmation seven on scripture in Community of Christ, “the church

[should] interpret scripture responsibly. Jesus promised that the Spirit would guide his disciples into new truth (John 16:12–15). By the Spirit, the ancient words of scripture can become revelatory, allowing us to grasp what may not have been seen or heard before” (Community of Christ 2018).¹¹

To illustrate my point, it takes the Nephites 600 years to hate, disparage and fight the Lamanites in a state of continuous warfare before Jesus appears to them. Let us read the narrative of Jesus coming to the peoples of the Book of Mormon through the lens of a New Testament Jesus. The reality of skin color in the Middle East is that the New Testament Jesus was brown-skinned. Would not the reaction of the Nephites and of the Lamanites be exactly what we see in the text, if the New Testament Jesus appeared to them? After him descending from heaven and testifying that he ‘had drunk out of that bitter cup that the Father had given him’, the Nephites and the Lamanites fell down to the earth. Here is my assumption, the Nephites did so because they recognized in Jesus that the other, the oppressed, the rejected, was now also their God. Jesus had the appearance of a Lamanite! The Lamanites were surprised themselves to see that this deity came in their shape and form, dark-skinned and with visible signs of torture and execution across his body, hands and feet, ‘having taken upon [him] the sins of the world’, its violence, its hatred, its oppression and suffered ‘the will of the Father in all things from the beginning’. The impact and the shock of God’s self-revelation to the peoples in this imaginary America would have reconciled the white dominant people, the Nephites, to the cursed, dark-skinned Lamanites, and they would have indeed ‘lived happily ever after’ for another two hundred years. They were ‘all converted to the Lord upon all the face of the land, both Nephites and Lamanites, and there were no contentions and disputations among them, and every man dealt justly one with another, [...] because they were all made free and partakers of the heavenly gift’. The heavenly gift could be seen as Jesus showing himself to them in the least expected way, setting them free from the narratives of their own past. Thus,

¹¹ I believe members of Community of Christ have developed a deep trust for the Identity, Message, Mission and Beliefs statement found in *Sharing in Community of Christ*. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are solidly rooted in the Enduring Principles and must apply to the best of our ability our affirmations on scripture.

through the same logic, the first readers of *the Book of Mormon* were through Jesus' atonement no longer divided as Anglo-Saxon settlers and Native Americans but had the potential to become one in him.¹²

The above example of Jesus appearing to the Nephites and the Lamanites as a brown-skinned 'other' serves as a reminder that *the Book of Mormon* can still give us surprising insights when applying a Post-colonial Hermeneutic to the text. By adding the lens of our understanding of the Jesus in the gospels that we now have two centuries later onto *the Book of Mormon* text – where Jesus is inclusive of the role of women, where he helps us identify ourselves with the other, and where he proposes a third way of transformation through deep encounter instead of fight or flight in the face of conflict – we could rediscover the teachings and power of a young brown-skinned healer on the outskirts of the Roman Empire in the first century through the interpretative reading of a young white farm boy on the outskirts of the British Empire in the 19th century. We could explore anew how Jesus challenged the religious codes of his day and turned the world upside down by declaring that the kingdom of God was at hand. *The Book of Mormon*, reinterpreted through the prism of the new Testament Jesus story, could potentially speak to a world saturated by American culture nearly two centuries later.

In this way, *the Book of Mormon* may still have 'revelatory power' for us today, wherever we may live and whatever our circumstances, because it criticizes what we have all become so very accustomed to: American imperialism.¹³ Through re-interpreting the New Testament Jesus story in his own context, Joseph Smith was hoping to criticize power and privilege in his own culture, the parts of that society that he was excluded from (Hatch 1989). In its 19th century context, *the Book*

¹² Jesus has not come to save us (Nosotros) from them (Los Otros), or them (Muslims) from us (Westerners) - but to free all of us from the cultures of violence, exploitation and separation that dominate us. This includes saving us from the narratives found in the Book of Mormon that may reinforce or strengthens oppressive cultures of violence and death.

¹³ The 200 years of peace with Nephites and Lamanites living justly together is Zion, the abandonment of tribalism, the end of ethnicity through baptism (Galatians 3:27-28) and the ending of the dividing wall of hostility between groups (Ephesians 2:14).

of Mormon can be re-interpreted as an anti-imperialistic text, a little explored topic among scholars studying *the Book of Mormon*. Christian theologians, on the other hand, have often reflected on the problems of imperialism in relation to Christ and his kingdom¹⁴. Through that hermeneutic lens, *the Book of Mormon* could be repurposed as a narrative of redemption from whiteness, from military prowess and from economic systems of oppression in light of God's self-revelation as Jesus of Nazareth.

Discussions about the origins of *the Book of Mormon* have distracted our people and most of its readers from the serious and prophetic indictment it imposes on imperialism. I believe we have to forgo all claims to historicity in order to understand the teachings of the book and place it squarely in its own context as argued by others¹⁵. Furthermore, the story itself is secondary to the message and the lessons of the book, that violence is not redemptive ('do not put your trust in the arm of flesh')¹⁶, while covenants of peace with God and with others are (God will remember the covenants made unto the fathers).¹⁷ *The Book of Mormon's* criticism of imperialism must have applicability in the 21st century for it to make sense to new readers today. For this reason, it must read as critical of all imperialisms, be they American, Chinese or Russian forms of neo-imperialism.

Firstly, let us define what imperialism is and how this relates to *the Book of Mormon*. Even though policies of 'new imperialism' began only in the late 19th century with the 'scramble for Africa', Joseph Smith contended in his day already with the aftermath of the American War against the British Empire from 1812 to 1816 (Grunder 2008), was also witness to the 'Trail of Tears' where Native Americans were dislocated from and killed on their lands (1830-1850) and the development of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 to avoid further interferences of European empires

¹⁴ There are many different titles on the subject, but those consulted were: *Empire— The Christian Tradition, Caesar Ate my Jesus, If you are the Son of God, and Jesus and the Powers*.

¹⁵ See Dale Luffman, *The Book of Mormon's Witness to its First Readers*, and Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman in *Americanist Approaches to the Book of Mormon*

¹⁶ 2 Nephi 3:62-63

¹⁷ The Book of Mormon is an invitation to turn our baptismal covenant into a covenant of peace: at the waters of Mormon an amazing passage reminds us of the purpose of baptism. Mosiah 4:39-40

within the American sphere of influence¹⁸. The ‘scramble’ for America was well on its way. George Washington is recorded as having said, that “however unimportant America may be considered at present, there will assuredly come a day, when this country will have some weight in the scale of Empires.”¹⁹ Thomas Jefferson famously labelled the United States the “Empire for Liberty (Kennedy 2010)”²⁰

In contrast to empire, imperialism refers to a process by which one state employs instruments of power to acquire control over peripheral peoples and territory. This process may result in the extension of liberty for some (for example, the liberty to attain more wealth and power), but the loss of others’ liberty is unavoidable. Yale historian Paul Kennedy argues that ‘advocates of American expansion in the late nineteenth century consequently were not “merely” empire-builders. They were imperialists. And they generated opposition not only among subject peoples, but also from Americans themselves’ (Kennedy 2010). In order to make the case for the anti-imperialistic reading of *the Book of Mormon*, we have to turn to the Biblical narrative and remain grounded in that. *The Book of Mormon* is after all “fanfiction” around the Biblical Jesus story. As stated above, several authors have reflected on the ‘three temptations of Christ’ in relation to Empire and the extension of instruments of power to bring about the Kingdom of God on Earth²¹ (see table):

¹⁸ Its justification was to make the New World safe for liberty and American-style republicanism as well as prevent the further growth of European empires in the New World.

¹⁹ Niall Ferguson, who wishes that the United States wore the mantle of empire proudly, captures the national delusion: “The great thing about the American empire is that so many Americans disbelieve in its existence. [...] They think they’re so different that when they have bases in foreign territories, it’s not an empire. When they invade sovereign territories, it’s not an empire.”

²⁰ American empire, regardless of what the term denoted and connoted at any given time, has always been inextricably tied to establishing and promoting “liberty” in the contemporary context. Further, the extension of America’s territory and influence has always been inextricably tied to extending the sphere of liberty.

²¹ Matthew 4:1-11

Global instruments of power – extensions of imperialism	Temptations of Christ	Logic of Empire
Economic power: Extractive capitalism and exploitation	Turning stones into bread	Highest possible gain with the least possible investment (slavery, low wages, resource conflicts, pollution)
Religious-ideological power: colonization of hearts and minds	Turning sceptics into obedient followers	Highest possible authority with least possible accountability (strong media, little access to quality education, religious collusion)
Military and political power: Commander-in-chief	Turning himself into Warrior-King	Highest level of control with the least possible resistance (authoritarianism, militarism, police state)

The same temptations still hold sway and present themselves for anyone trying to effectuate change today. “Ye are they which have continued with me in my temptations”, says Jesus in the New Testament to his disciples after he rebukes them for wanting to lord over each other like the Gentiles do. The last temptation contained a caveat of having to ‘worship the devil’. This helps us perhaps understand what is meant in the Book of Mormon by the ‘great and abominable church, whose foundation is the devil’. Although my conclusion requires further exploration, I believe the word church here is used with reference to worship and therefore also to the logic of Empire in the context of Matthew 4:1-11.²² However, the stakes are so much higher today than 200 years ago or two thousand years ago because these three temptations have led us down some extremely dangerous roads to their three counter-part existential threats: climate change and soil erosion, loss of liberties through ideological-technological disruption, and nuclear annihilation (Harari 2018). Martin Luther King Jr.’s indictment more than half a century ago still stands, “we have the choice between nonviolence or non-existence” (King 2003).

The theme of the three temptations are repetitively found in *the Book of Mormon* together with the ensuing danger of looming civilizational destruction and death. Only looking at the first character, Nephi, who establishes his own ‘empire’ on the promised land and exploits it for minerals

²² 1 Nephi 3:138-144.

and ores, who builds himself a temple after the manner of Solomon to worship God, and who fashions weapons after the sword of Laban (which he did use to murder Laban himself as a sacrifice for grander purposes),²³ signals the presence of an immediate ‘civilizational impulse’ at an early stage in the narrative against the Lamanites and one in which Nephi is made king. In a vision, he sees the destruction of his people and that the remnant of his brethren would survive this destruction and would later be ‘restored’ to the covenants God had made to their fathers.²⁴

Although, this restoration is often referred to as a “great and marvelous work about to come forth among the children of men”, one of the passages given in a vision to Nephi implies that this great and marvelous work is either on the one hand or on the other: “either to the convincing of them to peace and life eternal, or to the deliverance of them to the hardness of their hearts and the blindness of their minds, to their being brought down into captivity and also to destruction, both temporally and spiritually, according to the captivity of the devil”.²⁵ Nephi’s brother, Jacob, is a repeat on the same three themes, but as a warning now: “do not walk in pride because of your gold and fine apparel, do not commit whoredoms and abominations because of your idolatrous thinking, do not fight wars in anger with your brethren the Lamanites”.²⁶ The same criticisms of imperialistic behaviour can be found in the story of Abinadi, a few chapters later. King Noah and his priests were “supported in their laziness, and in their idolatry, and in their whoredoms by the taxes which King Noah had put upon his people, thus the people laboured exceedingly to support iniquity. [...] King Noah built many elegant and spacious buildings; and he ornamented them with fine work of wood and of all manner of precious things, of gold, and of silver, and of iron, and of brass, and of ziff, and of copper” (i.e. extractive capitalism). “And [his people] also became idolatrous, because the priests were speaking flattering things to them (i.e. religious corruption)”²⁷ Abinadi, a Nephite

²³ 2 Nephi 4:19-27

²⁴ 1 Nephi 4:6 and 2 Nephi 8:10

²⁵ 1 Nephi 3: 214-215

²⁶ Jacob 2-5

²⁷ Mosiah 7:9-14

appears out of nowhere among these Nephite people, calls out their violence and their delight in bloodshed because Noah's armies boast of their fighting with the Lamanites (i.e. military and political power).²⁸ Abinadi is arrested for his preaching and brought forward before the unrighteous king and his priests. In the exchange that ensues a few questions are raised, including the priests asking Abinadi what is meant by the saying in Isaiah that 'blessed are they that shall publish peace on the mountains'.²⁹ Abinadi asks them if they teach the law of Moses, upon which he tells them that although they say that they teach the law of Moses they do not abide by it. Abinadi contends that the law of Moses was a type of things to come, necessary for a stiff-necked people, and then recites Isaiah 53. Abinadi testifies of a nonviolent deity that would come to earth as a human, to carry the burdens and take upon himself the sins of humanity and identifies the Messiah as 'the founder of peace'.³⁰

For the sake of space, I suggest that the three instruments of power (economic exploitation of people and resources, religious corruption of priests and idolatry, and military violence against own subjects and others) be considered for further scrutiny in *the Book of Mormon* as criticisms of imperialisms. Nathan O. Hatch clearly demonstrates in his book *The Democratization of American Christianity* that *the Book of Mormon's* message of economic justice was not lost on the poor and marginalized farmers in the States or on the millworkers in Great Britain in the early parts of the 19th century. He writes for example, that "the Book of Mormon is a document of profound social protest, an impassioned manifesto by a hostile outsider against the smug complacency of those in power and the reality of social distinctions based on wealth, class, and education" (Hatch 1989). Joshua Madson further argues for a non-violent reading of *the Book of Mormon* (Madson 2012). I would add and underline the importance placed in *the Book of Mormon* on the things that "harden the hearts and blind the minds and that lead unto destruction and captivity",³¹ which expands our

²⁸ Mosiah 7:27-30

²⁹ Mosiah 7:77-80

³⁰ Mosiah 8:47

³¹ 1 Nephi 3: 214-215

definition of instruments of power with cultural imperialism. This addition strengthens the overall thinking about *the Book of Mormon* as an anti-imperialistic text that includes the ‘colonization of minds and hearts’.³²

Could this reading of *the Book of Mormon* strengthen our journey to becoming a prophetic people? Joseph Smith and his unlikely narrative about peoples in the Americas could still hold promise for contributing to a better global future and sharpening our criticisms of social injustice. The story of Jesus, having been appropriated by the young farm boy for his own cultural and societal needs in the young American Republic, could be reinterpreted as criticizing, at the very moment of its foundation, the imperial trajectory the United States of America was on. *The Book of Mormon* can turn the world upside down today, not because its message is revolutionary in and of itself, but because Jesus of the New Testament, of whom the book testifies, is the true scandal preaching the good news of the Kingdom of God on Earth—opposed to all empires.

In conclusion, as restoration peoples we have perhaps been too closely aligned with American imperialism to see how *the Book of Mormon* questions the logic of empire. We have not been faithful to the Jesus who spoke truth to power in Jerusalem. If this turning upside down of the world order is not readily available as a metaphor when thoroughly reading *the Book of Mormon*, it will be of little worth as a prophetic text to Community of Christ. If we consider imperialism as the (secret) combination of economic, religious-ideological and military power, albeit for the sake of liberty or on behalf of a civilizational impulse, then the patriarchal, violent and racist emphases found in the text can be attributed to the humanity of the writer (not separated from the 19th century context in which Joseph Smith jr. dictated the story).

³² Kwok Pui-Lan takes this reasoning a step further when she suggests that “oppressed people of the world must understand that their liberation is contingent upon purging their consciousness of their oppressors. When the oppressed are intentional about this process, the hegemony of the oppressor is seriously threatened and the possibility of liberation is at hand. Only when the oppressed reject their oppressors' beliefs, values, and manipulations can they experience authentic liberation (Compier, Pui-lan and Rieger 2007)

This view is strengthened when we take Community of Christ's third affirmation on scripture into account, which states that "God's revelation through scripture does not come to us apart from the humanity of the writers, but in and through that humanity" (Community of Christ 2018). However, the following is clear: We are never meant to emulate or take literally those parts of scripture that are violent, abusive or oppressive. When measured up against the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, they are simply not tenable. Jesus was neither patriarchal, violent nor racist. Render therefore to Caesar what is Caesar's (violence, racism, misogyny and greed) and to God the things that are God's (nonviolence, kindness, sharing and inclusivity).³³

We cannot talk about our faith adventure as a people without also explaining the way *the Book of Mormon* has shaped us since the beginning. We can be embarrassed when caught out about it or we can start distilling it for essential peace and justice themes, actualizing it with Christian understandings of anti-imperialistic teachings today. The book is a utopian fable and a dystopic parable at the same time (Bolton 2009), a long narrative about the imperial extensions of instruments of power with prescriptive tendencies: "That we may learn to be more wise than them."³⁴ Fanfiction is at its best when it borrows from the original literature and constructs parallel universes. Joseph Smith expanded the literary universe of the Jesus story from the New Testament, made it reach across the waters to a people made up of military generals and statesmen in need of redemption from their oppression of the Other – while, on the other hand, the fishermen and the shepherds in Galilee were in need of redemption from their search for a military messianic leader. No one is outside of the reach of a gentle Saviour and all are invited to his table for communion, abusers and abused alike.

Ultimately, the main reason for using *the Book of Mormon* today in spite of the fantastic story of its provenance, in spite of the man who brought it forth, lies in its message to the rich and

³³ Matthew 22:21

³⁴ Mormon 4:97

powerful ‘Gentiles’³⁵, that they must repent and follow the way of Jesus of Nazareth. In the midst of questioning American identities at a time when three existential threats cast doubt on the wisdom of continued world dominion, if we recognize it for what it is, *the Book of Mormon* can help us appreciate and amplify the biblical themes in the Jesus story that speak up against imperialisms.

³⁵ Mormon 2:51

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