Voices in the Book of Mormon

Discovering Distinctive Witnesses of Jesus Christ

John Hilton III

Contents

Contents

Introduction

We hope you will enjoy this chapter. You can purchase *Voices in the Book of Mormon* at Deseret Book, or Amazon.

In the Book of Mormon we hear the voices of many people. Nephi speaks, Laman and Lemuel complain, Jacob quotes Zenos, Korihor mocks, Alma exhorts, and Giddianhi threatens. Altogether, 149 dif-ferent individuals or groups are portrayed as speaking in the Book of Mormon. These include the voices of God the Father and Jesus Christ, angels and prophets, wives and mothers, anti-Christs and missionaries, and many others.[1]

These are real people with important lessons to teach. Identify-ing their voices can provide new perspectives on the Book of Mor-mon. What insights might we gain from examining their distinctive voices? What meaning can studying unique voices of the past lend to our lives today?

I am excited to explore these questions with you. In this book we will carefully examine some of the unique voices in the Book of Mormon through two approaches: first, a study of select individual voices; and second, an analysis of how later Book of Mormon speak-ers draw on the voices of their predecessors.

---

1   See the appendixes for a detailed list of these voices.

Part 1: Unique Voices

Because the Book of Mormon contains writings from different people, unique writing styles should be found within its pages.[2] In part 1 I will highlight some of the distinctive voices that are heard throughout its pages. The first chapter provides an overview of identifying voices in the Book of Mormon and discusses how distinguishing between these voices can deepen our understanding of this sacred text. In the following four chapters, I discuss five individual voices: Jacob, Alma, Abinadi, $Nephi_2$ (the son of Helaman),[3] and Jesus Christ.[4] Examining their individual voices not only illustrates the complexity of the Book of Mormon but also illuminates spiritual insights uniquely emphasized by these speakers.

Part 2: Voices in Harmony

In part 2 I explore how later individuals in the Book of Mormon harmonize their voices with those of earlier Book of Mormon speakers by utilizing their unique words and phrases. After an overview of intertextuality in chapter 6, the following six chapters provide extended examples of textual connections within the Book of Mormon. I show how later Book of Mormon prophets use both Jacob's and Abinadi's words in their teachings, including the surprising connections between Abinadi and King Benjamin. We will see how Alma uses words from both Lehi and Abinadi as he counsels his son Corianton. Finally, we will discuss unique ways in which Samuel the

---

2   This assumes that unique voices can be detected after the processes of redaction and translation. This will be discussed further in chapter 1.

3   When possible, I avoid subscripts when naming Book of Mormon people to maintain simplicity. In this volume I use "Nephi" to refer to the son of Lehi, "Alma" to refer to the son of $Alma_1$ (Alma the Elder), and "Moroni" to refer to the son of Mormon. For clarity when introducing new figures whose names are shared by others, and in mixed contexts and tabular matter, I use subscripts.

4   Other key voices I could have examined include Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni. But since Grant Hardy has already extensively analyzed their unique voices, I have focused on other speakers in this volume. See Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Lamanite quotes from Nephite prophets in his sermon atop a wall and examine the Savior's use of Nephi's words.

Therefore, What?

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland remarked that President Boyd K. Packer would often say, after hearing a presentation, "Therefore, what?"[5] The implication was that while the presentation might introduce interesting details or facts, the questions "Why does this matter?" and "What should we do as a result?" remained.[6] Thus I want to pause now, and at the end of each chapter, to consider how this information might be relevant in our lives.

Collectively, the chapters in this book illustrate the textual complexity of the Book of Mormon, adding evidence that it was not the product of Joseph Smith. But perhaps more importantly, these chapters add another layer of insight into our understanding of who the speakers in the Book of Mormon were and what they can teach us. For example, what words did Jesus Christ emphasize, and how can this affect our lives today? What does Alma's use of Lehi's and Abinadi's words teach us about counseling those who are struggling? How can modern-day parents and teachers emulate the ways in which Samuel used the words of previous prophets?

Elder Neal A. Maxwell wrote, "The [B]ook [of Mormon] is like a vast mansion with gardens, towers, courtyards, and wings. There are rooms yet to be entered, with flaming fireplaces waiting to warm us. The rooms glimpsed so far contain further furnishings and rich

---

5   Jeffrey R. Holland, "Therefore, What?" (address given to religious educators at a symposium on the New Testament, Brigham Young University, August 8, 2000), 3.

6   President Dallin H. Oaks wrote, "A few years ago I showed one of my senior brethren a talk I had prepared for future delivery. He returned it with a stimulating two-word comment: 'Therefore, what?' The talk was incomplete because it omitted a vital element: what a listener should do. I had failed to follow the example of King Benjamin, who concluded an important message by saying, 'And now, if you believe all these things see that ye do them' (Mosiah 4:10)." Dallin H. Oaks, "Following the Pioneers," *Ensign*, November 1997, 72.

detail yet to be savored."[7] This book will provide a glimpse into one such room—a room focused on the voices heard within the pages of the Book of Mormon. Carefully studying these individual voices and hearing them harmonize has deepened my appreciation for the Book of Mormon and its doctrine. It has strengthened my testimony of scripture, God, and his choreography in our lives. I sincerely hope it does the same for you.

✳ ✳ ✳ Author's Note ✳ ✳ ✳

In this book I operate on the assumption that the Book of Mormon is a literal translation of ancient voices.[8] While Joseph Smith may have had some leeway in the translation process, the fact that unique voices appear throughout the Book of Mormon argues for some degree of "original voice" remaining throughout redaction and translation processes (discussed further in chapter 1).

Throughout this book I use the 2013 version of the Book of Mormon. I have compared textual details with Royal Skousen's *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* and note significant differences when they occur.

---

7   Neal A. Maxwell, *Not My Will, but Thine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 33.

8   This is sometimes referred to as a "tight translation." See Royal Skousen, "How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 (1997): 22–31. For a discussion on different translation possibilities, see Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), or, more briefly, Nicholas J. Frederick and Joseph M. Spencer, "The Book of Mormon and the Academy," *Religious Educator* 21, no. 2 (2020): 173–75.

Chapter 1
Voices in the Book of Mormon

Our voices are more than the sound we make when we communicate. They are a complex mixture of our past experiences, our present purposes, and our future hopes. They reflect personal idiosyncrasies and passionate ideologies. We can learn much from a study of voices, especially when it comes to the narrative voices of prophets of old and particularly the Savior himself.

Identifying the distinctive voices in the Book of Mormon can be a useful lens to gain more spiritual insights from its pages. Doing so illuminates and emphasizes specific gospel teachings. It also helps answer questions regarding what themes specific figures in the Book of Mormon talk about most frequently and how the teachings of one Book of Mormon prophet differ from or complement the teachings of another. This can shed important light on the messages of the individual voices in the Book of Mormon.

In addition, the different voices in the Book of Mormon provide a type of evidence about the book's truthfulness. Consider the unique voices of some of your closest friends. Are there distinctive words or phrases they frequently use that could help you identify their voices? Because several different people write or are quoted in the Book of Mormon, their unique voices should be found within its pages. If there were no differences in voices, it could suggest that the Book of Mormon was authored by one person, but that is

not what the text indicates. In fact, there are discernible differences in the voices present in the Book of Mormon. As a simple way of visualizing some of the distinctive voices in the Book of Mormon, compare the following three word clouds.[1]

Figure 1.1. Jacob's word cloud

Figure 1.2. Alma's word cloud

---

1   "A word cloud is a collection, or cluster, of words depicted in different sizes. The bigger and bolder the word appears, the more often it's mentioned within a given text." "Word Clouds and the Value of Simple Visualizations," Boost Labs, https://boostlabs.com/what-are-word-clouds-value -simple-visualizations/. In creating these word clouds, I eliminated commonly used words (such as *the*, *it*, *or*, and *and*) so that differences in more significant words could be more easily visualized.

Figure 1.3. Jesus Christ's word cloud

A cursory look at these three word clouds shows different words that are emphasized by each of these speakers. Jacob speaks of *brethren*, Alma says *now*, and Jesus honors the *Father* with distinctive frequencies. Each of these words (and many others) will be discussed in further chapters; I mention them here to illustrate that one can literally see differences in the words used by different speakers in the Book of Mormon.

A more refined approach scholars have used to explore Book of Mormon authorship is through stylometry, which is a statistical analysis of individual writing styles. One application of stylometry that has received attention in Book of Mormon scholarship is sometimes referred to as "wordprints." This branch of stylometry suggests that just as everyone has a unique fingerprint, authors likewise have a distinct voice and style. Contrasted with a subjective recognition that various authors have a similar theme or tone in their writing, stylometry uses quantifiable metrics and statistical techniques to inform the analysis. Stylometry, or wordprint analysis, has been used by scholars to determine the authorship of many disputed texts, including some of the *Federalist Papers*, writings purportedly authored by Shakespeare, *Wuthering Heights*, and several other works of literature.

I first heard about wordprints in my teen years; I learned about them in connection with the "Unabomber"—a twentieth-century terrorist who planted sixteen bombs that killed three people and in-

jured nearly two dozen others.[2] From 1978 to 1995 the Unabomber was one of the most wanted criminals in the United States but managed to evade local and state police—even the FBI. In 1995 the Unabomber demanded that a paper he had written about the dangers of technology be published in major newspapers. The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* agreed to publish it, hoping that somebody could identify his writing style, and that's exactly what happened. The Unabomber's brother recognized the style of prose and tipped off the FBI; on April 3, 1996, the Unabomber was arrested.

Just before the Unabomber's brother contacted the FBI, the FBI had begun working with a BYU statistics professor who specialized in wordprints. They wanted him to do a stylometric analysis on the Unabomber's essay and compare it with their list of suspects. The professor they contacted was John Hilton (the first)—my grandfather! I remember the excitement I felt when I learned that my grandfather's work was contributing to fighting crime.

As fascinated as I was with the work my grandfather did with the FBI, I was even more intrigued when I learned of the work he and others were doing on wordprints and the Book of Mormon. Their initial studies on wordprints in the Book of Mormon looked at sample sizes of at least five thousand words and examined "the use of the small function words, i.e., *the, and, but, of,* etc.," in an effort to determine whether "different authors did indeed write the various strands within the Book of Mormon."[3] The idea was that the ways speakers used these small words could indicate unique writing patterns. My grandfather and his colleagues found that "it is statistically

---

2   See "The Unabomber," Federal Bureau of Investigation, https://www.fbi.gov /history/famous-cases/unabomber.

3   Roger R. Keller, *Book of Mormon Authors: Their Words and Messages* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1996), xii. See also Wayne A. Larsen and Alvin C. Rencher, "Who Wrote the Book of Mormon? An Analysis of Wordprints," in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds, Religious Studies Monograph Series 7 (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1982), 157–88; and John L. Hilton, "On Verifying Book of Mormon Wordprint Studies: Book of Mormon Authorship," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (1990): 89–108.

indefensible to propose Joseph Smith or Oliver Cowdery or Solomon Spaulding"[4] as authoring text attributed to Nephi or Alma. Although two wordprint studies disputed these findings,[5] the most recently published study on Book of Mormon wordprints concluded that "the Book of Mormon displays multiple writing styles throughout the text consistent with the book's claim of multiple authors and that the evidence does not show the writing styles of alleged nineteenth-century authors to be similar to those in the Book of Mormon."[6]

If the Book of Mormon were proven to have only one author with no unique voices, that could potentially be problematic, although it could be argued that distinctive voices might disappear in the processes of redaction and translation. However, while a redactor certainly could eliminate original voices, Mormon often tells readers that he is using the direct words of another person (for example, Alma 35:16), and some authors are clearly speaking in their own voice without redaction (for example, Nephi and Jacob). This suggests that at least some individual voices should remain intact. Moreover, while academic research on the relationship between stylome-

---

4   Hilton, "On Verifying Book of MormonWordprint Studies," 101.

5   See David I. Holmes, "A Stylometric Analysis of Mormon Scripture and Related Texts," *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, Series A (Statistics in Society)* 155, no. 1 (1992): 91–120; and Matthew L. Jockers, Daniela M. Witten, and Craig S. Criddle, "Reassessing Authorship of the *Book of Mormon* Using Delta and Nearest Shrunken Centroid Classification," *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 23, no. 4 (2008): 465–91. Multiple weaknesses in the Holmes study were identified by John B. Archer, John L. Hilton, and G. Bruce Schaalje, "Comparative Power of Three Author-Attribution Techniques for Differentiating Authors," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6, no. 1 (1997): 47–63. In response to the Jockers et al. article, researchers identified several flaws with its methodology. See Bruce G. Schaalje et al., "Extended Nearest Shrunken Centroid Classification: A New Method for Open-Set Authorship Attribution of Texts of Varying Sizes," *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 26, no. 1 (2011): 71–88.

6   Matthew Roper, Paul J. Fields, and G. Bruce Schaalje, "Stylometric Analyses of the Book of Mormon: A Short History," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 21, no. 1 (2012): 43.

try and translation is ongoing, several studies suggest that individual voices can still be heard after the process of translation.[7]

Although multiple stylometric studies clearly show distinctive voices in the Book of Mormon, some might wonder, "Is it possible for a clever author to create distinctive voices within a text?" The answer is yes, it is possible. For example, when Dorota M. Dutsch examined Roman literature written by notable Roman playwrights Plautus and Terence, she found that the female characters of these authors had distinctive patterns of speech relative to male speakers.[8]

More recently, scholars Paul Fields, Larry Bassist, and Matt Roper used stylometry to show that famous nineteenth-century novelists were able to create a distinct voice for multiple fictional characters, including the narrators, in their stories.[9] However, these scholars also found that "the level of voice diversity among Book of Mormon characters surpassed the diversity among fictional characters created by the 19th-century novelists. The Book of Mormon's voice diversity value was more than *twice* that of the average for the 19th century novelists."[10]

This research suggests that while it is technically *possible* for sophisticated authors to create multiple voices for different characters, the distinctive voices in the Book of Mormon go beyond what would likely be created by one sophisticated author. This finding is

---

7   See, for example, Jan Rybicki, "The Great Mystery of the (Almost) Invisible Translator: Stylometry in Translation," in *Quantitative Methods in Corpus-Based Translation Studies*, ed. Michael P. Oakes and Meng Ji (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2012), 231–48; and Richard S. Forsyth and Phoenix W. Y. Lam, "Found in Translation: To What Extent Is Authorial Discriminability Preserved by Translators?," *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 29, no. 2 (2014): 199–217.

8   See Dorota M. Dutsch, *Feminine Discourse in Roman Comedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 51.

9   These authors were Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), and James Fenimore Cooper. This research, which still has not been formally published, was reported at "Book of Mormon Evidence: Voice Diversity," updated November 22, 2021, Evidence Central, Charis Legacy Foundation, https://evidencecentral.org/recency/evidence/voice-diversity.

10   "Book of Mormon Evidence: Voice Diversity."

particularly striking when we acknowledge that Joseph Smith was twenty-three years old and had very little formal education at the time of the Book of Mormon translation. While I am certainly not advocating basing one's testimony of the Book of Mormon on wordprints, at a minimum, the different voices in the Book of Mormon demonstrate a level of complexity clearly beyond Joseph's capabilities.[11]

This textual intricacy is enhanced when we recognize that stylometry is not the only useful approach for examining different voices in the Book of Mormon. Roger Keller examined individual voices by studying "content words," or words that "are theologically, culturally, and historically significant."[12] He created related groups of words and analyzed them to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in how they were used. For example, Keller identified a group of 109 words related to the ancient Near East, such as *Babylon*, *Egypt*, *Jeremiah*, and *Moses*. Keller found that "the authors who are most distant in time from the Ancient Near East context use the words of this group the least, while those nearest in time [for example, Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob] use them the most."[13] This led Keller to argue that the Book of Mormon is in fact a multi-authored work, noting that "there are clear and recognizable differences in the content words used and the meanings attached to them by the authors within the Book of Mormon."[14]

Other studies have shown unique writing patterns of Book of Mormon authors by examining words or phrases they use in distinctive ways. For example, in his book *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, Grant Hardy shows that Mormon's narrative style is different

---

11   Among many other excellent books and articles illustrating the textual complexity of the Book of Mormon, the idea that Hebrew elements remained a key part of the book even through translation can be found in Donald W. Parry, *Preserved in Translation: Hebrew and Other Ancient Literary Forms in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2020).

12   Keller, *Book of Mormon Authors*, 4.

13   Keller, *Book of Mormon Authors*, 8. Keller also notes two exceptions to this general pattern—namely, $Nephi_2$ and Mormon in his sermonic materials.

14   Keller, *Book of Mormon Authors*, xiii.

from Nephi's: "[Mormon] does not offer much scriptural exegesis, and he has little interest in House of Israel connections or messiah theology—the word *messiah* occurs twenty-three times in Nephi's writings but only twice in Mormon's work."[15]

John W. Welch has focused on the different names for Jesus Christ used by Book of Mormon authors. He wrote, "The many personal testimonies of Jesus Christ . . . differ in their emphasis and style. Most interestingly, the attributes of Jesus Christ emphasized by the various prophets are often the attributes with which each prophet especially identified because of his own spiritual experiences, callings, and individual circumstances. . . . *Each Book of Mormon prophet related to and testified of Jesus in his own individual way.*"[16] Collectively, these and similar studies suggest that, based on unique words, phrases, and emphases, the Book of Mormon was in fact written by multiple authors—just as it claims.

The Origin of This Book

I first began an in-depth exploration of the voices in the Book of Mormon in 2011. I was a brand-new assistant professor in ancient scripture at Brigham Young University; I had been hired at the same time as Shon Hopkin and Jennifer Brinkerhoff Platt. The three of us had a mutual friend in Randal Wright, an institute teacher in Texas who suggested we all work together on a project to identify the different voices in the Book of Mormon. We hired an extremely capable BYU student named Jana Johnson as a research assistant and began the process of determining who was speaking in any given Book of Mormon passage.

---

15 Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 91. Hardy also notes that Moroni's writing style is distinctive from both Nephi's and Mormon's. Because Hardy primarily focused on Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni in his book, in the present volume I focus on the distinctive characteristics of other major Book of Mormon speakers.

16 John W. Welch, "Ten Testimonies of Jesus Christ from the Book of Mormon," in *A Book of Mormon Treasury: Gospel Insights from General Authorities and Religious Educators* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2003), 316; emphasis added.

The five of us first independently read the Book of Mormon, notating who was speaking in each verse. We then reviewed our individual findings and examined more closely passages in which we disagreed on who was speaking. After creating an integrated version of the Book of Mormon parsed out by the person speaking, we compared our work to other scholars who had made similar efforts, and in some cases we adjusted our original speaker designations.[17]

It was often straightforward to identify which Book of Mormon figure was speaking. For example, Nephi begins his record saying, "I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents . . . ," making it clear who the first speaker is (1 Nephi 1:1). Nephi goes on to introduce his father's story, and in verses 12–13, Nephi writes, "As he [Lehi] read, he was filled with the Spirit of the Lord. And he [Lehi] read, saying: ['] Wo, wo, unto Jerusalem, for I have seen thine abominations!['] Yea, and many things did my father read concerning Jerusalem."

However, in some instances, discerning the differences between the various voices could be tricky. As Latter-day Saint historian Richard Bushman commented, Mormon "quotes other prophets

---

17   We compared our work with Robert Smith's critical text, which was based on John L. Hilton and Kenneth D. Jenkins, "A Full Listing of Book of Mormon References by Author and Literary Form," FARMS Preliminary Report (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1983). However, they identified only major speakers and called minor speakers "Misc." My colleagues and I identified (where possible) every speaker. In addition, we examined Alvin C. Rencher's speaker divisions, which were the basis of Larsen and Rencher, "Analysis of Wordprints," 157–88. We also consulted the use of quotation marks in Grant Hardy's *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003) to identify how he chose where to begin or end quotes. For Isaiah passages we consulted John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, Word Biblical Commentary 24 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985); and Watts, *Isaiah 34–66*, Word Biblical Commentary 25 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987). Separately, I want to highlight two people who had been making efforts to split apart the text like my colleagues and I were doing. We did not compare our work to theirs, as theirs was unpublished at the time. However, in 2016 they published their work as *A New Approach to Studying the Book of Mormon*. Those interested in a printed copy of the Book of Mormon separated by voices could consult this study edition of the Book of Mormon. See Lynn A. Rosenvall and David L. Rosenvall, *A New Approach to Studying the Book of Mormon* (Olive Leaf Foundation, 2016).

and sometimes quotes them quoting still others. Moroni injects a letter from his father, and Nephi inserts lengthy passages from previous scriptures. Mormon moves in and out of the narrative. . . . Almost always two minds are present, and sometimes three, all kept account of in the flow of words."[18]

The Book of Mormon's "editorially complex narrative structure"[19] and constant change of speaker made it difficult, at times, to determine precisely who was speaking in any given passage. This isn't surprising when the person that is speaking changes more than seventeen hundred times! An example from Jacob 5 illustrates the layers of quotations that can be more closely examined through a study of individual voices. In the following passage, notice how Jacob quotes Zenos, who in turn quotes the Lord (who portrays the voice of the master of the vineyard):

Jacob
1 Behold, my brethren, do ye not remember to have read the words of the prophet Zenos, which he spake unto the house of Israel, saying:

Zenos
2 Hearken, O ye house of Israel, and hear the words of me, a prophet of the Lord.
3 For behold, thus saith the Lord,

The Lord
I will liken thee, O house of Israel, like unto a tame olive-tree, which a man took and nourished in his vineyard; and it grew, and waxed old, and began to decay.
4 And it came to pass that the master of the vineyard went forth, and he saw that his olive-tree began to decay; and he said:

The Master of the Vineyard
I will prune it, and dig about it, and nourish it, that perhaps it may shoot forth young and tender branches, and it perish not.

---

18 Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 119.

19 Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 156.

In assigning specific voices to individual passages, especially in the more complicated sections, my colleagues and I made a critical methodological assumption—we chose to take the Book of Mormon authors at face value. For example, when Nephi writes, "Laman said unto Lemuel and also unto the sons of Ishmael: *Behold, let us slay our father, and also our brother Nephi, who has taken it upon him to be our ruler and our teacher, who are his elder brethren*" (1 Nephi 16:37), we assigned the italicized portion of this verse to Laman.

This assumption certainly imposes limitations. The possibility (indeed likelihood) exists that since Nephi was writing some thirty years after the event occurred, he was paraphrasing Laman's words rather than providing a word-for-word account of what Laman actually said. Nephi is not the only historian who faced such challenges. Thucydides, a Greek historian living in approximately 400 BC, wrote of the difficulties of maintaining an accurate history, saying, "With reference to the speeches in this history, some were delivered before the war began, others while it was going on; some I heard myself, others I got from various quarters; it was in all cases difficult to carry them word for word in one's memory, so my habit has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said."[20]

As I will discuss later in this chapter, there clearly are times in the Book of Mormon when a narrator is likely creating dialogue as Thucydides did—that is, with the intent of adhering to the general sense of what was being said but not necessarily providing a direct quote. However, in other instances, it appears that words may have been recorded with more precision. For example, at the beginning of Alma 5, Mormon records, "These are the words which [Alma] spake to the people in the church which was established in the city of Zarahemla, according to his own record," and then proceeds to include Alma's first-person voice (Alma 5:2; see Mosiah 2:8; 17:4;

---

20 Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley, book 1, chap. 1, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7142/7142-h/7142-h.htm. I thank Ben Spackman for pointing this out to me.

Alma 35:16). Thus in many cases we can be confident that the words we are reading belong to the person reported to have said them.

Who Speaks in the Book of Mormon?

Although 149 different voices are present in the Book of Mormon, many of these are people who speak only a few words, including people from Amnor to Zeram.[21] The fifteen people who each account for at least 1 percent of the Book of Mormon are listed in table 1.1 (see the appendixes for a list of all the voices in the Book of Mormon). Collectively, these fifteen voices account for 87 percent of the words spoken in the Book of Mormon. Throughout this book I will refer to these fifteen figures as "major speakers" in the Book of Mormon.

Table 1.1. Book of Mormon speakers attributed with more than 1 percent of the text[22]

Rank	Speaker	Words spoken	Words as a percentage of text
1	Mormon	97,591	36.4%
2	Nephi	28,166	10.5%
3	Alma	20,051	7.5%
4	Moroni$_2$	19,513	7.3%
5	Jesus Christ*	14,161	5.3%
6	The Lord*	11,971	4.5%
7	Jacob	8,486	3.2%

---

21 Amnor and Zeram are quoted as speaking together, along with Manti and Limher, in Alma 2:24–25.

22 Additional speakers who account for at least 1,000 words include the lord (master) of the vineyard (2,428 words, 0.9% of the text); Ammon, the son of Mosiah (2,280 words, 0.85% of the text); Nephi, the son of Nephi (2,213 words, 0.8% of the text); an angel speaking to Nephi (1,973 words, 0.7% of the text); Zeniff (1,815 words, 0.7% of the text); the Father (1,501 words, 0.6% of the text); Limhi (1,383 words, 0.5% of the text); and King Mosiah$_2$ (1,178 words, 0.4% of the text). All other speakers account for fewer than 1,000 words.

8	Isaiah	8,118	3.0%
9	Helaman$_2$	5,042	1.9%
10	Lehi$_1$	4,662	1.7%
11	King Benjamin	4,201	1.6%
12	Amulek	3,162	1.2%
13	Samuel the Lamanite	3,054	1.1%
14	Moroni$_1$	3,050	1.1%
15	Abinadi	2,786	1.0%

* Reasons for separating these speakers will be discussed in the following section.

The number of words spoken by some of these speakers is in many cases no surprise. For instance, because of their key roles as primary Book of Mormon narrators, Mormon and Nephi obviously have the top two positions. Some may not have realized, however, that Alma's voice is heard more than that of Nephi's brother Jacob or Mormon's son Moroni. Certain individuals speak more (or less) than might be expected. For example, because of Helaman's[23] lengthy epistle in Alma 56–58, we hear his voice more than Lehi's, the prophet who taught in Jerusalem and traveled to the promised land.

Once we identified the different voices in the Book of Mormon, we worked with the developers of the software program Word-Cruncher[24] to develop a database we called "Voices in the Book of Mormon."[25] This database can be used to determine who spoke

---

23 Three individuals named Helaman appear in the Book of Mormon. The first is a brother of Mosiah (see Mosiah 1:2); he does not speak in the Book of Mormon. The second is the son of Alma, and the third is Helaman, the son of Helaman, who speaks in Helaman 5:6–12. The only Helaman who speaks with sufficient frequency to examine his words is Helaman, the son of Alma. For simplicity in the present volume, I will refer to him simply as Helaman.

24 This software is available at http://wordcruncher.com.

25 More details on this database, including instructions for downloading and using it, can be found at https://johnhiltoniii.com/voices-in-the-book-of -mormon/.

a particular word or phrase in the Book of Mormon. Traditional electronic database searches show *where* a specific word appears in the Book of Mormon. For example, using a traditional database to search for occurrences of the word *Gentiles* provides the results listed in table 1.2.

Table 1.2. Occurrences of the word *Gentiles* organized by book

Book	Number of occurrences of *Gentiles*
1 Nephi	56
2 Nephi	31
Jacob	0
Enos	0
Jarom	0
Omni	0
Words of Mormon	0
Mosiah	0
Alma	0
Helaman	0
3 Nephi	35
4 Nephi	0
Mormon	0
Ether	10
Moroni	11

While this is interesting information, it is not immediately clear which individuals most frequently talk about Gentiles. Thus, a database that can identify not only *where* passages appear but *who* says them can be a useful tool in analyzing the text of the Book of Mormon. The Voices in the Book of Mormon Database makes this explicit, as demonstrated in table 1.3.

Table 1.3. Occurrences of the word *Gentiles* attributed to major speakers[26]

Speaker	Times used per 1,000 words spoken	Times used	Percent of total uses of *Gentiles* in the Book of Mormon	Percent of total words in the Book of Mormon attributed to speaker
Jesus Christ	2.7	38	26.0%	5.3%
Nephi	1.5	43	29.5%	10.5%
The Lord	0.8	9	6.2%	4.5%
Moroni$_2$	0.6	11	7.5%	7.3%
Jacob	0.4	2	1.4%	3.2%
Isaiah	0.2	1	0.7%	3.0%
Mormon	0.2	16	11.0%	36.4%

While table 1.2 indicates that *Gentiles* is used fifty-six times in 1 Nephi and thirty-five times in 3 Nephi, it may be more interesting to discover that Jesus Christ is represented as using the word thirty-eight times, while the primary author of the Book of Mormon, Mormon, uses it only sixteen times. When one accounts for the total number of words spoken, Jesus Christ proportionally uses the word *Gentiles* nearly twice as often as any other major speaker.[27]

The idea of "proportionally using" a word will be used throughout this book. This is an important concept because if words in the Book of Mormon were randomly distributed, we would expect Jesus, who speaks 5 percent of the text, to account for 5 percent of the usage of a specific word. When we see that he accounts for 26 percent of *Gentiles*, or 30 percent of *baptize* (see chapter 5), it suggests an unusual speech pattern that bears further investigation. In this book I will often use the measurement of the number of times a word appears

---

26 Other speakers who use *Gentiles* include the angel speaking to Nephi (eighteen times), the Father (seven times), and Nephi's brethren (one time).

27 See John Hilton III et al., "Gentiles in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 33 (2019): 267–88.

per one thousand words a person speaks. This provides a proportional measurement that accounts for the different number of words spoken by the various figures in the Book of Mormon.

The findings we have discussed thus far depend on the accuracy with which my colleagues and I identified the voices in the Book of Mormon. Because this is such a crucial point, I next briefly discuss the methodology we used when assigning voices to passages in situations when the speaker wasn't completely clear.

Difficult Choices in Assigning the Voice

As I previously mentioned, for much of the text, identifying the speakers in the Book of Mormon was straightforward. Some areas, however, were quite difficult. These included labeling the voices of Deity, discerning between real and hypothetical quotations, dealing with potential allusions, and handling statements that may not have been said.

The Lord, the Father, and Jesus Christ

One challenge we faced was how to attribute the various titles given to God when he speaks. For example, "the Lord" speaks in 1 Nephi 17:53, "the Lord God almighty" speaks in 2 Nephi 28:15, and "the Lord of Hosts" speaks in Jacob 2:29. Five quotations (all by Jacob) are attributed to "God."[28] In some cases these terms appear to be used interchangeably. For example, in 2 Nephi 28:32 we read, "Wo be unto the Gentiles, *saith the Lord God of Hosts*! For notwithstanding I shall lengthen out mine arm unto them from day to day, they will deny me; nevertheless, I will be merciful unto them, *saith the Lord God*, if they will repent and come unto me; for mine arm is lengthened out all the day long, *saith the Lord God of Hosts*." Although quotations in this verse are attributed to "the Lord God" and "the Lord God of Hosts," it seems most probable that they refer to the same being. Thus, we grouped all nonspecific quotations by Deity as being attributable to the Lord.

The titles for Deity described above stand in contrast to the very specific designations of the Father and Jesus Christ. At times the Father or Jesus is explicitly quoted as speaking. For example, in 2 Nephi 31:10–13 Nephi writes:

---

28   See 2 Nephi 10:8–19.

Nephi

Can we follow Jesus save we shall be willing to keep the commandments of the Father? And the Father said:

> **The Father**
> Repent ye, repent ye, and be baptized in the name of my Beloved Son.

Nephi

And also, the voice of the Son came unto me, saying:

> **The Son (Jesus Christ)**
> He that is baptized in my name, to him will the Father give the Holy Ghost, like unto me; wherefore, follow me, and do the things which ye have seen me do.

Nephi

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, I know that if ye shall follow the Son . . .

In this passage, Nephi clearly delineates the voice of the Father and the voice of Jesus Christ. Several other passages give similar explicit identifications of either the Father or Jesus Christ as the speaker. While good arguments could be made for combining the voices of Jesus Christ, the Father, and the Lord into one voice, my colleagues and I determined that if a statement was specifically attributed to the Father or Jesus Christ, or if context made it very clear that they were speaking (for example, 3 Nephi 11:7), we categorized that statement as coming from them. Generic references to Deity (for example, "Lord" or "God") were assigned to the Lord.

When we analyzed the text based on these conventions, we found that the voice of Jesus Christ has distinguishing characteristics, indicating there are real textual differences in words explicitly attributed to Jesus Christ. Many of the insights we can gain from this identification are described in chapter 5.

Hypothetical statements

In some instances, people in the Book of Mormon appear to make statements attributed to the hypothetical phrases of others. For example, Samuel the Lamanite prophesies of a curse that will come upon the wicked, stating, "Yea, in that day, ye shall say: *O that*

we had remembered the Lord our God in the day that he gave us our riches” (Helaman 13:33). To whom should the italicized words be attributed?

In instances like this one, we determined that while it is certainly possible that future individuals would in fact speak these exact words, it was more likely that the prophet was speaking hypothetically, as in “These are the kinds of words that will be spoken in a future day.” Thus in these situations we attributed the words being spoken to the original speaker (in this case Samuel), *not* a future hypothetical speaker.[29]

Potential allusions

At times speakers in the Book of Mormon appear to allude to what others had previously said. For example, Alma, when speaking to Corianton, says, “And behold, again *it hath been spoken*, that there is a first resurrection, a resurrection of all those who have been, or who are, or who shall be, down to the resurrection of Christ from the dead” (Alma 40:16). In this case, Alma acknowledges that he is drawing on a previous source, although he does not identify who this person is. Because of the difficulty in correctly attributing allusions, we did so only in cases when the speaker explicitly cited another individual as the source of the statement. Thus, in this case, we counted the words as coming from Alma, even though they could be reasonably attributed to Abinadi.[30]

Statements that may not have actually been said

Although we chose to take every statement ascribed to an individual as actually having been stated by that person, this was problematic in some cases. For example, it sometimes appears unlikely that the source authors would have had access to the actual conversation that took place. One instance of this is when Mormon reports on the five who run to the judgment seat to verify Nephi’s prophecy of the death of the chief judge. We read that

---

29 For additional examples, see Alma 5:16 and 3 Nephi 14:22.

30 It appears that Alma is using Abinadi’s words (see Mosiah 15:21). This is discussed further in chapter 9.

when Nephi had spoken these words, certain men who were among them ran to the judgment-seat; yea, even there were five who went, and they said among themselves, as they went: ["]Behold, now we will know of a surety whether this man be a prophet and God hath commanded him to prophesy such marvelous things unto us. Behold, we do not believe that he hath; yea, we do not believe that he is a prophet; nevertheless, if this thing which he has said concerning the chief judge be true, that he be dead, then will we believe that the other words which he has spoken are true.["] (Helaman 9:1–2)

Book of Mormon scholar Brant Gardner points out:

The fact that five messengers went to investigate was no doubt part of Nephi's record, but it seems unlikely that Nephi would also have recorded the conversation, since it occurred "among themselves, as they went." Even if they reconstructed this conversation later, possibly in reporting it to Nephi, it was not a word-for-word report. While oral cultures demonstrate a proficient memory for certain types of practiced texts, that does not translate into remembering conversations that they had not expected to need to know.[31]

Another example of this kind of difficulty concerns Alma and Amulek's speech to the people in Ammonihah. Did someone acting in the function of "court reporter" transcribe the conversations that took place, or did Alma write a retrospective account? If Alma recorded what transpired at Ammonihah six months after it occurred, how literally should we take the words he attributes to himself, Amulek, Zeezrom, or Antionah?

Because there is no way to arrive at conclusive answers to these questions, we retained our convention of assigning voices to the

---

31 Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, vol. 5, *Helaman through 3 Nephi* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 137. It could be argued that this line of reasoning diminishes the value of this study since many instances of what I term "voices" in the Book of Mormon could have been invented dialogue. However, the insights described throughout this book lead me to believe there is significant merit in distinguishing the various speakers in the text, particularly those individuals whose words account for 1 percent or more of the Book of Mormon text.

person attributed in the text. Thus, the identification of 149 voices does not necessarily indicate a belief that the final editor of the ancient text (usually Mormon) was always quoting the original speakers' words verbatim. Nevertheless, for many of the major writers of the Book of Mormon, we have enough of their words to make the case that we can hear their distinctive voices.

Therefore, What?

The Book of Mormon is a rich text that bears close exploration. Hugh Nibley observed, "The Book of Mormon is tough. It thrives on investigation. You may kick it around like a football, as many have done; and I promise you it will wear you out long before you ever make a dent in it."[32] Examining the Book of Mormon by the person who is speaking provides new ways to investigate the fulness of what the Book of Mormon offers.

In this chapter, we have seen an overview of the diverse speakers in the Book of Mormon. Although there are some limitations, most of the time we can clearly identify individual speakers. Carefully analyzing individual Book of Mormon voices has helped me better understand the unique viewpoints, speaking patterns, and personalities of those who speak in the Book Mormon. This has led to spiritual insights that I would have otherwise missed, bringing a greater appreciation for this sacred record.

In addition, annotating the text of the Book of Mormon with names of the individuals who speak makes it easier to see its intricacy. This complexity strongly suggests that the Book of Mormon is a multiauthored work and that Joseph Smith did *not* write it. While not required for deep spiritual conviction, this type of intellectual evidence can strengthen our faith. As Austin Farrer wrote, "Though argument does not create conviction, the lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument

---

32 "A Twilight World," in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, vol. 5, *Lehi in the Desert / The World of the Jaredites / There Were Jaredites* (Provo, UT: FARMS; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 149.

does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish."[33]

Before his call to the Quorum of the Twelve, David A. Bednar was a university professor. While working as a professor, he and a colleague wrote a textbook together. On one occasion he shared how writing this book deepened his understanding of how Joseph Smith could not have written the Book of Mormon:

> One of the books I authored with a colleague . . . [is] 650 pages long, . . . contains 17 chapters, and . . . took us two years to write. The colleague with whom I wrote this book also has a Ph.D., which means that we . . . [have] more than 16 years of formal higher education between the two of us. It is a remarkable experience to receive a box of these brand-new books from the publisher. . . . I opened up the box and thumbed through one of the books. As I did so, I looked out the window of my office and asked myself the question, "Why did you write this book?" When you really think about it, investing so much time and effort in a project that so quickly becomes obsolete is rather foolish. As I . . . was pondering [that question], the thought came to me, "Because now you know by experience that Joseph Smith could not have written the Book of Mormon. . . .
>
> With eight years of university training, with two years of very dedicated work, with an editorial staff, with personal computers, with spell checkers and thesauruses on-line, with the Internet and the other resources that are so readily available, when I picked up the book that I had written and opened it up, I still found mistakes. And within a matter of twelve months, this book upon which I had worked so hard and so long was obsolete and had to be revised. . . .
>
> . . . Intellectually I know the Book of Mormon is true; and I know it through personal experience as an author. And that type of knowledge is nice. But what is most important is the witness of the Spirit. And I know by the witness of the Spirit, I know intellectually,

---

33 Austin Farrer, "Grete Clerk," in *Light on C. S. Lewis*, comp. Jocelyn Gibb (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1965), 26; cited in Neal A. Maxwell, "Discipleship and Scholarship," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (1992): 5.

and I know as an author and by personal experience that Joseph Smith could not and did not write the Book of Mormon.[34]

My hope is that this chapter has strengthened your interest in and testimony of the Book of Mormon, the good people that grace its pages, and the validity of this book of scripture. I also hope the following chapters will offer you additional understanding—not only in seeing the Book of Mormon's complexity but also in identifying life-changing doctrines taught by specific individuals with unique voices. This will be seen in the following chapters, beginning with analysis of Jacob's distinctive voice.[35]

---

34   David A. Bednar, "Come unto Christ," BYU—Idaho devotional, January 29, 2000, https://www.byui.edu/devotionals/president-david-a-bednar-devotional-winter-2000.

35   As noted previously, Grant Hardy has extensively analyzed Nephi's voice, so I begin with Jacob. See Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 12–86.

We hope you've enjoyed this chapter. You can purchase *Voices in the Book of Mormon* at Deseret Book, on Amazon, or from many other bookstores.