

202 | Reimagining the Book of Mormon | John-Charles Duffy

Project Zion Podcast

Josh Mangelson 00:17

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

Brittany Mangelson 00:33

Hello, Project Zion listeners, This is Brittany Mangelson. I will be your host today. And I'm actually sitting in the middle of Nauvoo, Illinois with the one and only John Charles Duffy. So, John, whose house are we sitting in?

John-Charles Duffy 00:49

This is the Jeremiah and Rebecca Wright house. Okay. You probably haven't heard of them. They're not particularly prominent people in the history. The story, as I understand it, is that they joined the movement while the Saints were in Nauvoo. The story is that Jeremiah traveled 100 miles from where they were living to Nauvoo to meet Joseph Smith, Jr., was favorably impressed, and so he and Rebecca moved here. And this is their home. It somehow became Community of Christ property.

Brittany Mangelson 01:17

Yeah. And so, you live here during the summer. We'll maybe get into this when we introduce you, right now. So, this is a residential house from what I can tell.

John-Charles Duffy 01:31

I live in this upper apartment here and the downstairs is available for other folks. Right now, we have Ron and Ann Romick, who are here from Independence as volunteers. They're living there right now.

Brittany Mangelson 01:40

Got it. Got it. All right. So, I'm here for reunion, the historical reunion that's going on right now. Several people actually have requested that we have you on the podcast to chat about a variety of things. But today, we're specifically going to talk about the Book of Mormon. So, I'm excited, maybe a little anxious, we'll see where this goes. But before we dive into that, why don't you give us an introduction to yourself? Who are you and how did you get to be here?

John-Charles Duffy 02:13

Okay, so I'm John Charles. My parents were both converts to the LDS church. They converted separately as teenagers and then met at Brigham Young University and got married. I was raised in the LDS Church, the first generation of my family to be raised in the church and served a mission in the Dominican Republic, which was a good experience. Two years following my mission, my relationship with the LDS church fell apart, partly as a consequence of the academic freedom controversies that were going on at Brigham Young University in the early 90s and then, partly because I'm gay. So, after that, I spent about 10 years, maybe more than that, not really feeling I had a particular religious home. I was attending the Episcopal church for a long time during that period, but I came to think of myself as a Mormon in exile. I got connected with folks in Community of Christ via the intellectual/historical communities. Eventually, after orbiting Community of Christ for a while, I finally touched down a couple of years ago and went ahead into the plunge and I was confirmed. So that's my story in a nutshell.

Brittany Mangelson 03:23

Nice. I like it. And you have a blog? Is that correct? Where you post?

John-Charles Duffy 03:30

Yes. So, I have a blog called The Farthest Hills. If you just Google, The Farthest Hills, I think the blog is the first hit that shows up. And it's a place where for the past few years, not very regularly, but off and on, I post scripture-based materials I'm hoping that congregations or individuals in Community of Christ will find useful. A particular emphasis of mine has been helping people reconnect with the Book of Mormon, and with the early sections of Doctrine and Covenants, as opposed to the more later ones which are more common used to try and help folks reconnect with those particular resources in a way that is consistent with Community of Christ's current identity and theology.

Brittany Mangelson 04:13

Yeah, which I find really intriguing because, as our listeners are well aware of, I grew up LDS Mormon, too. And, you know, the Book of Mormon and church history, those were a big part of my deconstruction and my eventual exodus from the LDS church. And there are some things that I've been able to reclaim and re-evaluate and reimagine. But it can be tricky sometimes. So, I'm looking forward to this conversation, to hear your thoughts on the Book of Mormon because the Book of Mormon to be perfectly frank is one of those things that I've kind of put on the shelf. You know, I've read it multiple times as a Mormon, but I haven't revisited it a whole lot as a member of Community of Christ. I did read Dale Luffman's book, and when we talked about it in seminary, you know the Book of Mormon in seminary. I've treaded those waters a little bit, but I haven't necessarily taken it off the shelf and made it part of my worship or spiritual experience. So, yeah, I'm looking forward to hearing your thoughts on the Book of Mormon.

John-Charles Duffy 05:15

Sure. So why don't we do it this way? Why don't I start by retelling my story in terms of my relationship with the Book of Mormon? And then I would be curious to then invite you to do the same. I would like to hear your story, in terms of your relationship with the Book of Mormon, and then maybe we can talk about ways to reconnect with it. So, growing up LDS, I was very much immersed in the Book of Mormon. As a child, I grew up with Book of Mormon storybooks. The Book of Mormon had been quite important in my mother's conversion experience. She had a great love for the book. She had a tradition, which I believe she kept all the way up to the end of her life (she died a few years ago), where she would read the Book of Mormon during the two months leading up to her wedding anniversary. She was continually engaged with the book that way. I grew up in a family where we would do family scripture study around the dinner table after eating, and the Book of Mormon was a regular part of that cycle. All this is to say that by the time I graduated from high school, and I eventually went on my mission, I had read the Book of Mormon, a number of times. I was quite familiar with the characters and the story and key passages and so on. It was part of my culture, to use a kind of academic term, the universe of discourse that I inhabited. It's part of the language that helps articulate who I was religiously.

Then I went on my mission. And I think it's that point where my relationship with the Book of Mormon, I would say, became not just cultural, but actually spiritual. It became a really important way in which I felt that the Spirit was communicating with me. As an LDS missionary, part of the daily routine was to read the Book of Mormon for 30 minutes every day. That exercise was really spiritually meaningful to me. I would go to the book and find passages that I felt were inspiring me when I felt discouraged, or that were challenging me, when I was less disciplined than I should be in terms of my own spiritual life. These passages gave me ideas how to connect with people that we were trying to work with and how to nurture the

congregations we were working with. I felt that the book spoke to me in that way. Of course, as a missionary, I was constantly going around talking about the book with people, sitting in their homes, reading it with them, and trying to help them have positive spiritual experiences, encountering God speaking to them through the words of the book.

I came out of that mission experience, convinced that the Book of Mormon is a vehicle through which God touches people's lives. I will add that I came out of that experience, not searching what I thought about the historicity of the Book of Mormon. I spent my entire mission uncertain whether I thought that the book was actually an ancient record. As I would do my own Book of Mormon study, I would periodically notice passages that suggested that maybe it really was ancient, and I would also take note of passages that very much seemed to suggest a 19th century origin. I would note that, but that wasn't really decisive in terms of my relationship with the book. What mattered was that wherever it came from, God was speaking to me through it in the here and now.

I remember near the end of my mission, one of my friends, also in that mission, showed me his parents copy of John Sorensen's book, titled something like *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*. John Sorenson was a BYU anthropologist who wrote this rather lengthy book trying to link the Book of Mormon to particular locations in ancient Mesoamerica. He gave me the book and I leafed through it. When I gave it back to him, I said, "It's interesting, but I'm kind of thinking that it makes more sense to me to think of the Book of Mormon as fiction, but God's fiction." That was the place I was at in my mission. And the point of that is to say that, when I finally broke with the LDS church, that didn't necessarily change my relationship with the Book of Mormon. I didn't really have a faith crisis over the question of Book of Mormon historicity. Coming to believe that the Book of Mormon was not historical, did not affect my spiritual relationship with the book.

So even after I broke in with the LDS Church, the book remained important to me. I found new ways to connect with it. For a while after leaving the church, I went back to the Dominican Republic with a Catholic organization, doing educational work in an isolated village. I took my Book of Mormon with me and the organization, the Catholic organization, was very much inspired by liberation theology, which is a kind of Christian thought that says that the task of Christians is to side with the poor and the oppressed and helping to make structural change in our world. And, you know, as I would go back to the Book of Mormon, I found passages that sort of resonated with that, that liberation ideal. And so, the book continued to be meaningful to me, although the way I read it now is not the way I used to read it. But I remain convinced that God speaks to me through the book. And my hope, when I do things like *The Farthest Hills* is to try to offer people bits and pieces of the book that I'm hoping will still be able to speak to them.

Brittany Mangelson 10:29

Yeah. Which I think is really admirable, I guess, my situation with the Book of Mormon, is similar, but it's a little bit different, too. My family was not necessarily big into community scripture study. There was a lot of kids, all spread out. There were a lot of activities and things that were being done, but it was the expectation that we would have personal scripture study. If I remember right, I read the Book of Mormon, I think, three times by the time I graduated high school. I remember having a goal and I can't remember if it was either three or five times, but I was gonna finish it before I graduated high school X amount of times. I hit that goal. But for me, the Book of Mormon was always tied to the LDS church. I remember getting to the end and doing that challenge in Moroni. You're taught as a Mormon to pray if the LDS church is true or if the Book of Mormon is true, but then it's implied that means the LDS church is true. They kind of go hand in hand.

Growing up, we watched the living scriptures videos with all the cartoons. They're a little bit problematic. Sang the songs in primary, the armies of Heleman, all those things culturally enriched the Book of Mormon, in a way that tied it directly to the LDS church. I never really separated that. I live in Utah, so I was aware that there were other religions, particularly fundamentalist religions, that still tied back to the Book of Mormon, to our common roots, but I still [thought] there was only one way to look at the Book of Mormon and that meant that if it was true, that meant the LDS church was true. And by true, I mean, it was a historical record. It was divinely transcribed and translated. And that story was the point of the LDS church.

So, in my early adult life, I guess in my early 20s, was when that was kind of starting to fall apart a little bit. That came crashing down with my testimony of the LDS church. Book of Mormon historicity was a big deal for my both my husband and I, learning more about the origins of the book, and then the contents of the book that show all the anachronisms and those things. They were really, really damaging to my testimony, my very Mormon testimony. When I started learning Community of Christ history and realizing that you did not have to have a testimony of the Book of Mormon in order to be engaged in Community of Christ, to be accepted, all those things, it was like, "Great, I'm just gonna throw this out the window." I didn't have much of a desire to reclaim it because it was so just so tied up in my LDS testimony. All my experiences with the book were paralleled hand-in-hand with my testimony of the LDS church.

And so, I don't feel like I had a whole lot of desire, or maybe tools, to reclaim that again. As I said, I studied Dale's book and that made me feel a little bit better on what the book's significance was to the overall movement, the start of this faith tradition, [how people got] converted to a book. Let's look at how the book would have spoken to them at the time. So that was really helpful, but I still I don't know. I know that there are people like Elray [Hendriksen]. Are you familiar with Elray? (John-Charles: No.) He was a part of the nonviolence resolution for conference, and he has done a few blog posts about the Book of Mormon being a peace text and showing that peace is the way, and that nonviolence is the way and so he and I . . .

John-Charles Duffy 14:51

I would imagine that the story of the Anti-Nephi-Lehis burying their swords was crucial for him.

Brittany Mangelson 14:55

Yes, crucial for him. Yes, yes. And ultimately that is God's Dream for the world and that violence is not the answer. I've talked with him a little bit and you know and heard rumblings of liberation theology throughout the book. I have one friend who has never been LDS. He and his husband were reading the Book of Mormon and came to the conclusion that this is an awesome book. The LDS church doesn't follow it because he saw it as a liberation text. I fully understand that that perspective is out there, I just haven't explored it much. So that's kind of where I'm at with the book.

John-Charles Duffy 15:36

I have a hunch that for a lot of Latter-day Seekers, their relationship with the book is very much like one you described, and this is an unfortunate part of how the book gets used within LDS culture where coming to have a testimony that the Book of Mormon is "true" becomes the basis of your commitment to the LDS Church's institution. And so, it makes sense that when people lose that commitment to the LDS institution, the Book of Mormon ceases to be relevant. Or vice versa, if you stop believing that the Book of Mormon is the entire record and the LDS church insists it has to be to be meaningful, it makes sense that you would lose your faith in the LDS

church, as well. They do go hand in hand. It dawned on me, as I was thinking back about the story I had told you about my relationship to the to the Book of Mormon, I never used the word testimony, because I didn't think of my relationship to the book in that way. That was actually one of the things that was an early sign that I think the LDS church was not going to work out as the place for me to be when I tried to have the kind of testimony experience where you read the book, and you pray, and then you feel I didn't really have those. And so, when I was on my mission, when I was talking to people about the Book of Mormon, I would avoid deliberately using the expression, "I know the Book of Mormon is true." I didn't really know what that meant anyway. But I can certainly tell people, I know that when I read this book, I feel God's Spirit touching me and teaching me and inspiring me and challenging me. That I could certainly talk about and that the book was very much pastoral. And it was very much about my relationship with God, and much less to do about my relationship with the church. I think within the Community of Christ, one thing that happens, too, which I think has to do with why the Book of Mormon is so not used now, has to do with the fact that I think for a lot of folks in Community of Christ, it is linked to the kind of fundamentalist, little "f," not polygamist, theologically conservative sort of RLDS identity that they are moving away from. And it is true, I suspect, that the folks within Community of Christ today who are more interested in the Book of Mormon probably tend to be more theologically conservative, probably tend to be folks who do believe that the Book of Mormon is an ancient record, for whom that is its significance. And so, for folks in Community of Christ who are on the more liberal end of that theological spectrum, it makes sense that there's a retreat from the book. But the challenge then is okay, so how do we, how do we detach the book from that kind of conservative theology? Yeah, I think it can be done. I'm actually curious, you know from you. I haven't gone through a Community of Christ seminary and so I'm really curious to know what instruction are you given in Community of Christ seminary about the Book of Mormon?

Brittany Mangelson 18:20

The Book of Mormon is covered in Community of Christ History I and II and I know from the new Director that they're reprogramming how that particular course is going to look. I took Community of Christ History, Theology, Scripture, part one and part two. We had readings from Dale Luffman's book, and we had a lot of readings from Dick Howard's book, *Restoration Scriptures*. What's that book called? [*Restoration Scriptures: A Study of Their Textual Development*]

John-Charles Duffy 18:51

I think it's *Restoration Scriptures*. That's about the textual history. Yeah, yeah.

Brittany Mangelson 18:56

And you know, in the Community of Christ seminary, they don't necessarily try to lead you to one conclusion or another, but to show the significance of the text to the church at the time, and give an overview of the relationship of the book over the course of the decades so you can trace how the Book of Mormon was used in the 60s and 70s and that kind of thing. It's not like the Book of Mormon was read cover to cover or drawn to one conclusion about it. It was a brief history of how it came to be and the significance that it had to the people at the time. And here's the evolution of our relationship with it.

John-Charles Duffy 19:47

Interesting. So, it becomes a piece of Community of Christ history, but it isn't necessarily a text that you are learning to engage with in the here and now in the same way that I assume you're being taught to engage with the Bible, for example..

Brittany Mangelson 20:00

There was some writing prompts and papers and things, options that you could choose to engage with the Book of Mormon. I have to be brutally honest, in Community of Christ seminary, you have a variety of papers that you can choose to write, and I would always just avoid the topics that had to do with the Book of Mormon. So, I might not be giving it a fair representation of how you can engage with the Book of Mormon at seminary, because I leaned, when I was taking those two classes, I leaned more towards just the historical stuff, as opposed to the evolving theological stuff, because it was still, like I said, just kind of on that shelf. I'm just gonna leave this alone for now. So, some of my peers probably had different experiences, which is the great thing about Community of Christ seminary. There's options and different places, you can go with it. But . . .

John-Charles Duffy 20:53

Let me offer some principles that shaped my effort to engage with the Book of Mormon, in a Community of Christ context. One of those principles is, it's not about where the Book of Mormon came from. It's ultimately not about what the Book of Mormon says to us today. It's about what the Spirit says to us today through the Book of Mormon. Maybe that's a really fine distinction. But the point is, it's not about the authority of the text. It's about the text as an instrument through which the Spirit may speak to us now.

So, forget the historicity question. I assume it's an 18th century construction. I assume Joseph Smith, Jr. wrote it, although if someone wants to make a really good case for the Solomon Spalding manuscript, I'll hear them out. But the point is, it's a 19th century text as far as I'm concerned. If someone wants to argue it's ancient text, or someone wants to engage with it with the assumptions it's ancient text, sure, I think that can be done. But at the end of the day, it's not about where the text came from, it's about how we're using the text today. The text is a language through which God speaks to us. Just as there's French, and there's Spanish, and there's Hindi, and there's Japanese, and all these languages that people use to communicate with each other, which have their own vocabulary, their own grammar, the Book of Mormon becomes a kind of language. It's a set of stories, a set of symbols, certain phrases, which can then be instruments through which the Spirit communicates with us. That's sort of my basic understanding.

Engaging with the Book of Mormon in that way, though, means being prepared to say, this part of the text here, I don't think the Spirit has anything to say to me, that part of the text right now at this point in my life. That just reflects a theological understanding that was meaningful to people at a certain period in our church's history and it is not meaningful to me now and I'm just gonna ignore it for now. Although, I always do that with the assumption that just because the Spirit isn't speaking to me through that part of the text now, doesn't necessarily mean that I might not find at some future moment in my life, that the Spirit will have something to say to me. Thomas Jefferson is famous for having taken the four Gospels, and literally cutting them up with scissors to take out the parts that he thought were just legend and leave only the parts that he thought Jesus had said and done. It's a much smaller book. I've never done that, because I always assumed that the text is the text. It's our cultural legacy. Parts of it don't speak to me now, but maybe they will, and I have to be humble enough to keep engaging with it that way. But at the same time, there's that willingness to say, I'm gonna ignore that part of the text now. I'm going to focus on this part, which speaks to me.

As I work with the text, sometimes I do it different ways. So sometimes I will confine myself to. There have been times in my life when I had copies of the book and I marked them and do notes on them, and so on. Now, I tend to do a lot of stuff digitally. Let's do this really concrete

example. A couple of years ago, for my blog, I did an Advent reflection, a series of Advent reflections based on Samuel the Lamanite's discourse in the Book of Mormon. He's a prophet who appears, I think, five years before Jesus is born, and gives a sermon on a wall about how Jesus is coming. So, I created a whole Advent series based on parts of that sermon. The first thing I had to do is construct the text that I was going to be reflecting on. So, I take the Book of Mormon text, and I start pulling out the lines that I find meaningful, and just setting to one side for the purposes of this particular Advent series, setting to one side the parts I'm interested in. Sometimes when I do that, I can find myself to working with the text, as it is. I'll take this bit, I'll take this, but I don't do any changes to the language. I don't try to modernize it. I don't try to update it. I just pull up the parts where I think the Spirit has something to say to me, and then I'll start thinking about it.

Other times, though, I will work with text. I'll take the text, and I'll take this sort of antiquated King Jamesish sort of language and I'll start trying to figure out how to rearticulate that in modern language, which is a really great exercise in terms of helping me think carefully about what these words mean or could potentially mean. Merriam Webster is a good standby. The Oxford English Dictionary is a good standby to tease out new meanings of English words. But also, since the Book of Mormon is King James language, I will have open an online version of Strong's Concordance of the King James Bible. I will go and say, alright, so there's this word or this phrase that gets used in the King James Bible, which shows up in the Book of Mormon. Let's actually go back and see what the Hebrew or Greek that's translating and let's start teasing out new meanings from that. And I find that really fruitful, too.

One thing I was thinking it might be useful to do, is, rather than just talk about this would be to actually sit down and do it, pick a passage that you are kind of interested in and work with it, and show you how you might engage with that passage in a new way. Is there a particular Book of Mormon passage that you remember, either because you liked it or maybe because you really disliked it?

Brittany Mangelson 26:21

Oh, boy. That's the million-dollar question. Well, shoot, let me pull out my Kindle on my computer, and see what we can work with. You know this is one thing that I didn't say. I got a new set of scriptures when I was baptized at eight and I have the whole thing pretty much underlined. I ended up bringing my scriptures to church one day, and I got scolded by a Sunday school teacher a little bit who challenged me on my enthusiastic highlighting. They said if you highlight the whole thing, you'll never be able to keep things straight. How will you remember what you found meaningful if the whole thing is a rainbow of colors? I think I probably had some childish key to how I was highlighting them and what their significance was. But all that is to say, I don't have descriptors that I had when I was baptized with me in this moment. I just have my Kindle version of the Revised Authorized Version that I must confess I grudgingly purchased from Community of Christ, [thinking] I should have that on my computer if I'm going to seminary.

John-Charles Duffy 27:42

I have to make a dark confession. I use the free version on centerplace.org, basically, a restorationist resource.

Brittany Mangelson 27:50

Okay, well, so this is one story that I remember. I don't know if challenging is the right word, but maybe challenging, the story of Abinadi. It was always awkward to me, because I felt that if you died for your testimony, this is me as a little kid, I thought if he would have just lied and denied

what he was teaching and preaching, then he could have gone into hiding and he could have converted a bunch more people.

John-Charles Duffy 28:22

Like Alma ended up doing in the same store, right?

Brittany Mangelson 28:24

Yes, so the idea of being a martyr was something that I struggled with through my time in Community of Christ seminary, because we talked about a lot of the early Christian martyrs, and I thought that Abinadi was an idiot. Why don't you just tell one little lie? It could have spared your life and you could have spread the gospel to all these other people. Okay, so I don't know if that's something we can look at.

John-Charles Duffy 28:52

Yeah, let's do that. So let me say by way of empathy that I remember [that] on my mission, my parents had sent me a calendar of CS Lewis quotes, one for every day. I would save the piece of paper as I read them off the calendar and then I would write on the back my own little proverbs and insights that came to me. One of them actually had to deal with the issue of martyrdom. I forget why I was thinking about this. This is gonna sound really abstract, but there was a more practical reason why I was thinking about it. I remember thinking about the Abinadi story and having some thoughts. I think one of the proverbs I wrote for myself was something along the lines of martyrs don't actually build the church. Okay, maybe there's a place for martyrdom, but we don't all have to be martyrs. Right. There's something to be said for not necessarily giving that extremely. Actually, the Abinadi story you mentioned, that's one that I've been currently working with recently.

Here at the site a couple years ago, there was some kind of a youth group meeting up in the Red Brick store, and afterward, a teenager said to me that she had begun reading the Book of Mormon and my first thought was, "Oh, God, no," because I would have assumed that someone [would say] that they started reading the Bible. I'm like, you really need to be guided through that. I'm not sure what people will make of it when you just pick it up fresh. I've been working ever since then on an abridgment of the Book of Mormon, where I'm pulling out parts that I think are a good place to start engaging with. One of them that I've been working on recently was the Abinadi story. I'm trying to pull up my version of it here. Well, let's do this. This issue of martyrdom, let's talk about that.

So, we have this story about a person who goes into a hostile situation and bears a very public and very confrontational witness against them and is arrested. He does go into hiding for a while, but then he comes back. But I really love the part where he comes back in disguise so he can get back among them. And then one verse later, he's like, I'm Abinadi. And he's pulling back the disguise right away. Right. So, what was the point of that? He stands in front of the king and the high priests and does this whole sort of sermon. Then they finally give him one last chance to recant, and he says, "No, I'm not gonna do it" and then he dies.

I think this is a good way to engage with the Book of Mormon. So, when a story bothers me, I'm prepared to set it aside and say, okay, you know what, that story reflects a theological understanding that is not my own at this point in my life. And that's fine. I'm prepared to do that. But I'm also prepared to sit with it and say, Well, is there something to take from that? Is there some value from it? And so, you mentioned that you are studying the martyrs is part of your seminary training. Are there stories of martyrdom that are meaningful to you?

Brittany Mangelson 32:14

Hmm, I feel like the mic has been turned on me now and I don't know. Um, well, as far as liberation theology goes, we see "martyrdom" in contemporary times, assassinations, etc., but they're not necessarily in the same vein to me, like Martin Luther King, Jr. You can't put that in the same camp as Abinadi. He was murdered. Well, he was murdered for his beliefs. Ah, I don't know. I feel like I'm put on the spot, trying to think of something but I can't think.

John-Charles Duffy 33:02

Oscar Romero comes to my mind. And you're right. It's not quite the same situation, right. It's not like Oscar Romero gets arrested and arraigned in a public trial. But Oscar Romero, the Catholic bishop of El Salvador, during their dirty war, [where] you've got a right-wing government in place that is suppressing leftist or suspected leftists, which eventually involves things like killing nuns. He gives a last sort of public address. He gives a sermon and because he's the Archbishop is broadcast by radio around the country. He says, as part of his sermon to soldiers in the army, he says, for the love of God, stop the repression. If you are asked to engage in human rights abuses, if you are ordered by your superiors to engage in human rights abuses, do not do it. And the next day, while he's celebrating Mass, he gets shot. I like to think of the Abinadi story if I'm going to make a positive meaning about it. I can think of Abinadi as a kind of Oscar Romero. And so, we have this story in our tradition which tells us that there may be times and places where it becomes necessary to stand up in public and say publicly the thing that is going to get you killed and be prepared to do that. That becomes a positive meaning I can make out of it. But the story also says that not everyone has to do that. Alma doesn't do that. He runs, he goes into hiding. He starts his clandestine congregation, off in the wilderness, and when the king seems to catch them, they flee. Not everyone stays around as a martyr. That's not everyone's call.

Brittany Mangelson 34:49

Yeah, Dietrich Bonhoeffer is one that comes to mind as somebody who, you know, recognizes that maybe running and hiding was not ultimately his call. So, I guess maybe you could make an argument that he would be an Abinadi figure.

John-Charles Duffy 35:06

If you're trying now to take the Book of Mormon and teach it to a congregation, teach it to a youth group, teach it to children, I could see myself now doing the Abinadi story. Kids would find it sort of interesting and gory, in the way that kids can find death gory. But, you know, you move from Abinadi, saying we've got the story in our sacred text about this man who stood up and spoke the truth and ended up dying because he spoke the truth and told the society what they were doing wrong. And then you could talk about other real-life examples of that today. You could talk about Oscar Romero. You could talk about Dietrich Bonhoeffer. And if that's too gloomy and heavy, you could then talk about the fact that there are other ways to stand up and be counted people. Not everyone who does that gets killed. There's Rosa Parks, for example and this idea of having the courage at times to stand up and do the thing you know is right, even when you know the consequences might be severe. That's one way which I might try to link the Book of Mormon to the kind of theological understanding that seems today to be guiding Community of Christ.

Brittany Mangelson 36:07

That makes a lot of sense, actually. Because, you know, we talk about following Jesus all the way to the cross. And those are stories and tangible ways that people or characters in a story have done that and so I can give you that one. That was really a challenging one for me as a kid, like I said. Yeah, I just remember thinking, man, that guy's an idiot. Why? Why didn't he just

lie and keep being a missionary? I guess, maybe that was my own insecurity with death, and, you know, all that stuff as a kid, but it's interesting. So, what are some of your favorite passages from the Book of Mormon stories?

John-Charles Duffy 36:51

One thing I really liked about the Book of Mormon is some of the teachings on the incarnation. So King Benjamin, for example, in his address, let me actually pull it up here. King Benjamin gives his address, and he tells his people he had been visited by this angel. And the angel says, and this is my read or paraphrase of it. This is me engaging with the text and phrasing in new ways. The angel tells him the time is not far off when the Almighty Lord and Ruler, the Eternal One, will come down from heaven to live among human beings in a body made of the ground. I like that. That's that kind of incarnational theology that really speaks to me. In fact, I've come to the realization recently that while I am in a Trinitarian church, I'm not actually a Trinitarian. I think I'm what is called a monarchian modalist. I'm talking about Jesus as the Son of God. I mean, yeah, there's a place for it. But I really like to think of Jesus as God, God in the flesh. And there's certainly biblical precedent for that and Book of Mormon precedent for that. Abinadi makes a very similar comment in some of his sermons. He talks about God himself is going to come down. In the book of Alma, Alma, the younger gives a sermon where he says God is going to come down in the flesh, and God will suffer. Let me pull up my version of that one. So, Alma says he will go out suffering pains, afflictions, and temptations of every kind. That's where we see fulfilled the saying that he will take onto himself the pains and sicknesses of his people, which is an allusion to Isaiah 53:4. He will take onto himself death so that he can unknit the cords of death that bind his people. He will take onto himself their frailties, so that in his body, he can be filled with compassion, so that he can know by his own physical experience how to aid his people in their frailties. I like that. And that's actually the way I've been teaching my Children Sunday school about Jesus, that Jesus is God, come down in the flesh, to be with us and to suffer the way that we do, and to work with to help make the world the way that God wants it to be. That's the way I would certainly like my congregation, its children, to think about Jesus. So, I like that. And I like the fact that the Book of Mormon has that really strong incarnational theology to it.

Brittany Mangelson 39:40

Yeah, that's one thing that I didn't really realize coming into Community of Christ, that was actually in the Book of Mormon. So, it was kind of a jump for me to figure out how Community of Christ could be Trinitarian or could have a different model of God because I know that even the Trinity is widely debated within the church and what that means. What model are we looking at, the idea that somebody could believe in a God that was not a physical male father that was an exalted man version? That's how much the Book of Mormon was ingrained in my identity as an LDS person. The source of that theology, for me, was just all one in the same. It was all tied into the Book of Mormon. I wouldn't have even known what the King Follett version or sermon was. I do now. But for me, that's the lens that I was looking through. It was almost like a weird way of proof texting the Book of Mormon, to have everything be funneled through this Mormon lens. So, to realize that there's language in the Book of Mormon, that portrays God in a very different way than what I grew up with, that was a little bit jarring, but then maybe comforting as well, because I wasn't necessarily a fan of that model of God. We have done a whole podcast on it before. So, I appreciate that you're lifting up this idea that there are different ways to encounter God within the Book of Mormon that are maybe different from what we hear wherever we go to church on a Sunday morning,

John-Charles Duffy 41:27

I think that's another advantage to engaging with the Book of Mormon and early sections of the Doctrine and Covenants, because Joseph Smith, Jr. was not a consistent theologian. He ran with whatever caught his attention at the moment. I guess another principle of how I engage with these texts is, I don't assume that they are theologically consistent. You're going to find multiple theologies embedded in it and those multiple theologies then become part of our heritage, part of the toolbox. We can say, okay, let's pull this particular image of God for this purpose, but then there's this image for this purpose. I just highlighted these passages that are very incarnational, but there are also passages in the Book of Mormon that are much more focused on Jesus, not as the incarnation of God, but on Jesus as the Son of the Father. You get that language, too. To the extent people find that language useful for certain purposes, it's there.

When it comes to communion, there are two different stories in the Book of Mormon where Jesus comes down and does communion and he gives a sermon in each case about it. Each of those sermons has a different theology of communion. In one of them, which is the one that then becomes the basis for the communion prayers, it's very much about this is a symbol that you're doing to remember me. The second story comes a chapter later. There is a really intriguing passage where Jesus says when you eat this bread, you are eating my body to your soul and when you drink this wine, you are drinking my blood to your soul. You can take your pick. If you like the idea of communion as a symbol in remembrance of Jesus, there's language that does that. If you're into a sacramental real presence kind of thing, there's language that allows you to justify that theology, as well.

I like the fact that you have these diverse theologies at work in the same text. It isn't necessarily trying to flatten everything out to say, this is our theology, end of story. It's like, there are different ways of thinking about these things, which different people may connect with, or may connect with at different points in their lives or may connect with for different purposes. I like that.

Brittany Mangelson 43:41

That is something that I had never really thought of. I know that Joseph's theology was not consistent and changed, but the fact is that some of those inconsistencies could end up in the text. I don't mean to like put words in your mouth, but that's what I'm hearing you say, or what is resonating with me right now.

John-Charles Duffy 44:01

And those inconsistencies don't have to be seen as a problem. Yeah, For someone with a very kind of Orthodox theology who expects, if the book is true, we'll have one consistent theology, those inconsistencies become problematic. What I'm saying is we don't have to see them as problematic. We can see them in fact, actually as a gift.

Brittany Mangelson 44:18

Hmm. I'm liking this. If you're, you're making me want to pull my Book of Mormon off that shelf and take another look at it.

John-Charles Duffy 44:27

Now, let's have a frank talk, though, about some of the things that are problematic about the Book of Mormon, because I will say that my relationship with the Book of Mormon at this moment in my life is a love-hate relationship. And we've been talking so far more about the love, but there's the hate, and maybe that's useful to confront, as well.

I will say that the Book of Mormon is an infuriatingly patriarchal text, and it is patriarchal on steroids. It is more patriarchal than the Bible. The Bible's patriarchal, too, but at least there are a lot of named women characters who do interesting things, and some of them are pretty damned strong. Whereas in the Book of Mormon, I think there's three women named. There are other women characters who don't even get a name and they're always in the background. You have to dig hard to find them. That's a challenge. I haven't, in my own work with the Book of Mormon pushed to it to deal with that challenge in a serious way, but I think if one wanted to do that, it would be a question of not just of finding ways to really dig in and pull out the female characters who are there, but I think probably as a community, we need to start rethinking some of these stories, re-interrogating some of these stories, and asking, where are the women? and what would the story look like if we had to start imaginatively filling in more about the women?

Jews have done this. Jews have been engaging with their scriptures for thousands of years. You have these Talmudic texts and these Midrashic texts, where people basically go in and start inventing new stories based on the stories of the Bible. I think it may be necessary for folks who want to engage with the Book of Mormon in a way that is attentive to gender, to start doing that. Maybe we have to start inventing our own names for some of these unnamed figures. Christians and Jews have done that. We've come up with traditions for naming certain characters not named in the Bible. Maybe we need to do that.

Take the story of Lehi and his family, or as I prefer to say, Sariah and her family, traveling through the desert on the way to the promised land. We know there are women with them. They're alluded to here and there. You start by making up new stories about those women or the things that they're doing. We can have our own sort of Midrash, accompanying the Book of Mormon. You have the Book of Mormon text, the official text passed down through the generations, and we are inventing our own Midrashic text to accompany. Maybe that's something that has to be done. That'd be really interesting to do. The dominant theological impulse of the Book of Mormon is Jeremiah-like, The people stand up to give sermons. And it's usually a Jeremiahad, meaning it's usually repent or you will be destroyed. I think there's a place for that, but there are other ways you can talk with people, there are other ways you can get with people about God. That gets really tiring. And so. to engage with the text sometimes means going out of your way to find those little nuggets where it is different, or where you can take a bit, like cut out the whole Jeremiah part, and look at what's left, which has a more positive message to it. But [you] need to be willing to sometimes slash and burn to find parts that really work for you.

Race is a problem. Although, race is a problem in the Bible, too, so it's not necessarily an insurmountable problem. But that is a really problematic issue that needs to be faced up front and addressed. The book is antisemitic in certain ways, which is also true parts of the Bible, the Gospel of John, for example, some of Paul's letters. Again, this has to be a thing squarely confronted and faced. So, there are things that have to be really wrestled with. In your case, where are some of the areas of the Book of Mormon that you found problematic?

Brittany Mangelson 48:34

I don't know if I can add to the list that you just gave. I did see the absence of women in the text when I was growing up. The issue of race was huge. The idea that if you were righteous, you'd be blessed with a literal white skin and if you were not, you would be cursed with a literal dark skin. I find that completely inexcusable to have as a text and when I see the harm that has been done, particularly in the LDS church, with blacks in the priesthood, the priesthood ban, the temple ban. It's been called various things at various times; but there's a lot of racism and sexism that I think are justified from Scripture. And like you said, it spills over into the Bible.

Certainly, the Book of Mormon's not alone in that. Those are probably, when growing up, the two biggest ones that I saw, and then the idea of the prosperity gospel that you see in the Book of Mormon. If you're righteous, you'll be blessed. That was always difficult for me. There was tons of poverty in the world and world hunger and suffering that was not caused by one person. That never really made sense to me either under this overarching theme of, if you are righteous, you're blessed. That seemed like a really unfair God when I looked at the reality of what was happening in the world. So those three things would probably be my biggest three that I noticed as a kid and teenager.

John-Charles Duffy 50:17

The prosperity thing. Yeah, there's no question that someone could very easily go to the Book of Mormon and find justification for a very simple kind of prosperity gospel. And that can be really pernicious. Those are the kinds of things one has to be really open-eyed about as one approaches the text. In the case of the prosperity gospel question, one would have to really emphasizing the parts of the Bible that speak to the need to care for the poor, and to not turn away the poor and say, Oh, it's your fault that your poor. King Benjamin has a great address on that. One has to really drive hard home those parts of the text. That said, the emphasis on prospering is one of the things that I found useful about the Book of Mormon when I was trying to read it through a liberation theology lens. There are plenty of parts in the text that are very much focused on going to heaven and being happy there, but there is also a strong emphasis in the text that God wants you to be prospering. God wants you to be doing well in life. And while that can take a pernicious form, when people start imagining that it means that you, as an individual, live righteously, and God magically pours blessings on you, that's not helpful. But if that emphasis on prosperity, prompts you to say, alright, so part of our task as Christians is to create a world where people are prosperous, where people are flourishing, where people have their material needs met, that could be potentially [meaningful], as well.

Brittany Mangelson 51:45

Yeah, that's fair. That is fair.

John-Charles Duffy 51:53

So, by way of self-promotion, I would say if people are interested in figuring out how to engage with the Book of Mormon and looking for models, The Farthest Hills, on wordpress.com would be a place to go. I really need to do a better job one of these days of reorganizing the website so people can find things more easily. In Advent 2017, I did this whole reflection on Samuel the Lamanite's sermon. People might find that interesting as a starting point. The year before that, Advent 2016, I had done a series of Advent and Christmas reflections, where the pattern was always to take a Book of Mormon passage, pair with a biblical passage, and then have a short reflection afterward. In that case, I think the theme was promoting communities of joy, hope, love, and peace. That was how I organized it. There are places on the blog where I've taken entire stories, like the Abinadi story, and certain other stories and have done this abridged version. I do a greatly condensed version, working with the Book of Mormon text, but very tightly edited with commentary, trying to pull out themes I find useful, often having to do with liberation theology. So those are the kinds of things people could see as ways to start thinking about this text again.

Brittany Mangelson 53:06

Yeah, I think that's really helpful. And we'll for sure, put the link to your blog in the description of this episode so you can easily find it. Do you have any other thoughts? We've been chatting for about an hour now.

John-Charles Duffy 53:21

My final thought would be, approach it as this text is a gift from God to our community. And it's up to us now to figure out how to use that gift in a way that works for us in the situation that we're living in the here and now. Go to the text prepared to say there are things in this text that do not speak to me at this moment in my life but look for the parts where you feel that the Spirit is speaking to you through these words, whether it's inspiring you, whether it's challenging you, whether it's comforting you, find those places that speak to you. Reclaim this piece of our religious culture. Don't let the fundamentalists, the Orthodox own it. It's ours, too. God wants to speak to us through this book, as well.

Brittany Mangelson 54:04

I really appreciate that. And I feel like in a way you just gave me and all of us permission to do that because I think, maybe, that's a key of what was missing in so many of our growing up years, RLDS, as well. If you tied this book to the one truth, the truthfulness of your one true church, when you break that apart, it's like you haven't had permission to view it any other way. But what I hear you saying is that we actually can view it another way. It doesn't have to be all or nothing, throw the baby out with the bathwater. There are ways to reengage with the text that are really meaningful and pull together our identity message, mission, and belief today in order to bridge that historical and theological gap that we might be feeling with the text. So, I really appreciate this. This has been great. Thanks so much.

Josh Mangelson 55:04

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