

A Voice Crying from the Dust: The Book of Mormon as Sound

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The Book of Mormon opens with a provocative conundrum: how can the sensory world of revelation most effectively be rendered in language? After introducing himself and his process of making scripture, the prophet-narrator Nephi recounts his father Lehi's throne theophany and calling to be a prophet.¹ This calling entailed two dramatic audio-visual encounters with the divine. In the first, Lehi prayed, and in response a pillar of fire appeared on a rock in front of him. By means of the pillar, somehow, "he saw and heard much" with such intensity he quaked, trembled, and was ultimately incapacitated by the experience (1 Nephi 1:6–7). The second immediately follows while he remained "overcome with the Spirit" and draws on a variety of sensory modes: "he *saw* the heavens open, and he *thought he saw* God sitting upon his throne," surrounded by angels he heard "*singing and praising*." He then "*saw* One descending" from heaven to earth, along with twelve followers, who gave him a book from which he read aloud, prophesying the fall of Jerusalem (1:8–14, emphasis added). Nephi vacillates in his verbiage, alternately describing these experiences as things Lehi *saw* (1:9–14, 16) or *saw and heard* (1:6, 18, 19). This tension between the visual and the sonic, between things seen and things heard, plays a critical role throughout the Book of Mormon.² Yet all too often, such audio-visual encounters with the divine are rendered simply as "visions," stripped of sound and other sensations, an absence I hope to address here.

Yet as Nephi's opening affirms alongside countless other passages that follow, the Book of Mormon, like all scripture, is a deeply sonic

text. The claim may seem counter-intuitive: scripture is by its very name writing. And yet that veneer of writerly inscription obscures an underlying sonic world that ranges throughout scriptural traditions, whether in their form, content, or process of creation and revelation. Other scriptures of the Abrahamic tradition highlight these sonic qualities in particular. In the Hebrew Bible, the central law emanates from a thundering mountain: sound as scriptural medium. In the New Testament, John the Baptist is characterized as a voice in the wilderness (born to a temporarily deaf-mute father, no less), while Jesus becomes the Word, whose birth/utterance is attended by choirs of angels: sound as scriptural message. Or even more centrally, the Qur'an, literally "a recitation," was delivered and promulgated orally, and despite being written down in the decades after its revelation, it continues to be understood as most complete when intoned aloud: sound as scriptural process.³

At first blush, the Book of Mormon might appear scripturally out of place, given its repeated fixations with its own textuality, its preservation as a book, and its incredible (in all senses of the word) origin story as engraved gold plates discovered in the nineteenth century. But closer inspection suggests that perhaps the book doth protest too much—it simultaneously revels in, fears, and aspires to the condition of sound, despite its apparent obsession with writing and, by extension, visuality. What I call the aural logics of the Book of Mormon can be heard on three levels: first, in the book's repeated self-characterization as "a voice crying from the dust," casting itself not (just) as message but as a sonic medium; second, in the larger narrative of the book—its message—in which processes of sounding and hearing consistently undermine the stability of writing; and third, in the process of producing the book in the 1820s, including Joseph Smith's dictating practices (i.e., "translating"), various acts of witnessing, textual inscribing, and finally disseminating the book from 1830 onward.⁴

Focusing on the acoustic registers of the Book of Mormon thus highlights the book's own theory-of-self as sound, an explanation of how certain events within the book unfold—from silence and disembodied voices after Christ's death to shaking prison walls and other architectural details—and critically, the sonic ecology of the

book's own production, a process of particular interest since the recent publication of images of Joseph Smith's seer stone. The voice plays a particularly important role in all of these different aspects, pointing to a rough foundation for a Mormon theory of voice, encompassing not only God and humankind, but also angels and even terrestrial objects (like buildings), as key mediums for sonic transmissions that pass between the heavenly and the earthly realm.

Following the lead of Nephi's Lehi, we might also imagine a literally sonic reading of the book, reanimating parts of the text such as the (in)famous phrase, "And it came to pass," which I consider briefly in my conclusion. More substantively, the conundrum raised by Nephi's choice of verbs ("see" and/or "hear," plus "read") and their limitations underscores one of the central operations of scripture broadly—the transformation of sonic activity into writing and, more broadly, of a massive set of sensory data into a very finite, inscribed form.

This transformation leaves Nephi ill at ease, as he makes clear in his farewell (2 Nephi 33, discussed below), because it robs the sonic of its spiritual and emotional weight while still failing to contain the entirety of semantic discourse (i.e., his teachings). However, this mismatch between the communicative potential of sound and of writing—sometimes foregrounded in the Book of Mormon, sometimes repressed—gives its readers a critical point of entry. For devotional readers, it emphasizes the importance of seeking out traces of verbal power and multi-sensory effect that must be excavated from beneath the surface of the text; for scholarly or ecumenical readers, it offers a remarkably self-aware case study on how scripture makes literal *sense* of the encounter with the divine. In either case, scripture sheds its status as (merely) "holy writ," becoming an audio-visual medium in which writing alone frequently fails to adequately transmit the powerful, affective orality (and entangled aural) of divine utterance.

Book as Sonic Medium I: Nephi Crying from the Dust

Even before Nephi tells of his father's calling, he gives a brief prologue about why and how he chose to make a record of his life,

testifying that “the record which I make is true” (1 Nephi 1:1–3). Such self-reflexive commentaries about the elaborate writing/engraving practices of the Book of Mormon appear repeatedly throughout its narrative. In the current version of the book, whole chapters are devoted to this type of writing-about-writing, including four chapters (5–6, 9, 19) within the opening book of 1 Nephi alone, not to mention an extended episode about obtaining the brass plates (chapters 3–4), an explicit scriptural model for the book’s prophet-narrators. The theme of writing emerges in bursts throughout the rest of the Book of Mormon, as in the string of shorter books (Enos, Jarom, Omni) that conclude the “small plates” that make up the opening of the book, followed immediately by the Words of Mormon, another editorial statement by the namesake editor/compiler of the book, Mormon. Another burst of interest in writing and record-making comes toward the end of the book: the same Mormon concludes his abridged account and passes the plates to his son, Moroni, who writes a brief conclusion (which unsurprisingly includes more of the same writing-about-writing), then inserts a whole narrative about finding an additional record on plates from an earlier civilization, the Jaredites, and then finally (and once again) concludes his record. Such textual practices have prompted Richard Bushman to describe the book as “almost postmodern in its self-conscious attention to the production of text,”⁵ while Terryl Givens turns to a number of literary-theoretical terms from Mikhail Bakhtin to make similar assertions about the book’s “polyphonic structure” and penchant for “dialogic” revelatory practices in which the ritual posing of questions to God drives the revelatory process.⁶

While this rough overview of the Book of Mormon’s graphophilic tendencies highlights the book’s awareness—narrated incessantly—of its own production-as-media, it simultaneously obscures a related fact: that the book’s existence as a written medium is deeply bound up in sound, and especially voice. Indeed, the metaphor of a voice from the dust appears frequently in the writings of two of the book’s narrators—and notably, both key protagonists in the book’s writerly obsessions—Nephi and Moroni. Their usage bookends the scriptural macro-narrative, with each

exploring the idea in different ways: both at times identify themselves with the voice, but Nephi uses it to explore what writing means, especially relative to orality, while Moroni posits a holy discourse network with several different voice-ear/sender-receiver combinations, including himself, the book, martyred saints, and readers of the book. God plays a critical, multivalent role as both (a hissing!) voice and a witnessing ear.

Nephi first introduces this metaphor in recording the final words of his father, Lehi, to his son Joseph. Lehi sets up his commentary with reference to none other than Moses, the example par excellence of a prophet whose revelatory capacities are bound up in his (lack of) ability to communicate through speech. In a complex chain of narratives and media commentaries, Nephi transcribes Lehi's spoken commentary about how prophets speak and write, as spoken to Joseph, which is itself a quotation of text from the prophecies of Joseph (the son of the patriarch Jacob) as written on the brass plates, a special version of the Hebrew Bible that Lehi takes with him on his journeys. Quoting this apocryphal text, Lehi states: "And the Lord hath said: I will raise up a Moses; and I will give power unto him in a rod; and I will give judgment unto him in writing. Yet I will not loose his tongue, that he shall speak much, for I will not make him mighty in speaking. But I will write unto him my law, by the finger of my own hand; and I will make a spokesman for him" (2 Nephi 3:17). Thus Moses is the receiver of revelation-in-writing, which he then writes down for future generations (or as it inimitably appears in the text, "he shall write the writing of the fruit of thy loins, unto the fruit of thy loins"), to be conveyed in person by his spokesman (presumably his brother Aaron), who "shall declare it" (3:18).

This message, written by the hand of God and re-written by Moses, then shifts to further emphasize its existence as a medium in multiple meanings of the word, both as a form of communication (e.g., writing, speech, etc.) and also as an intermediary that speaks for the dead: "And it shall be as if the fruit of thy loins had cried unto them from the dust. . . . *And they shall cry from the dust*; yea, even repentance unto their brethren, even after many generations have gone by them. And it shall come to pass that

their cry shall go, even according to the simpleness of their words” (2 Nephi 3:19–20, emphasis added). Significantly, the focus here seems to be the cry itself more than the content of the speech. It calls to repentance but does so with “simpleness of words,” relying apparently on the sound of the cry and its spiritual-sensory power rather than rhetoric or eloquence for its impact.

As he so often does, Nephi later expands on this revelatory utterance of his father’s in his own writing. After quoting extensive, near-verbatim passages of Isaiah (2 Nephi 12–24, corresponding to Isaiah 2–14), he sets up his heavily amended, midrash-like citation of Isaiah 29 (cf. 2 Nephi 27) by meditating on the fate of his own descendants. Nephi launches his midrash a chapter earlier, in 2 Nephi 26, with a close reading of Isaiah 29:4, in particular. The verse in Isaiah (in the King James Version) reads as follows: “And thou shalt be brought down, and shalt speak out of the ground, and thy speech shall be low out of the dust, and thy voice shall be, as of one that hath a familiar spirit, out of the ground, and thy speech shall whisper out of the dust.” Nephi’s exegesis transforms Isaiah as follows:

[A]nd after they shall have been brought down low in the dust, even that they are not, yet the words of the righteous shall be written, and the prayers of the faithful shall be heard, and all those who have dwindled in unbelief shall not be forgotten. For those who shall be destroyed shall speak unto them out of the ground, and their speech shall be low out of the dust, and their voice shall be as one that hath a familiar spirit; for the Lord God will give unto him power, that he may whisper concerning them, even as it were out of the ground; and their speech shall whisper out of the dust. (2 Nephi 26:15–16)

Both versions emphasize the supernatural aspect of summoning the dead (“a familiar spirit”) to speak here, but Nephi inserts his own commentary on the sensory processes of transmission: words shall be written, prayers shall be heard, and his descendants shall not be forgotten. Although Nephi will expand this graphocentric interpretation in the following chapter, from the outset, the language here is one of sound, pointing to the act of speaking, vocal

qualities (a low voice, whispering), and the uncanny strangeness of experiencing a voice “out of the ground” or dust.

Nephi continues his expanded reading of Isaiah in the following chapter, referencing this disembodied voice in several places: “the Lord God shall bring forth unto you the words of a book, and they shall be the words of them which have slumbered” (27:6); “the words of the book, which are the words of those who have slumbered in the dust” (27:9); and, “for the Lord God hath said that the words of the faithful should speak as if it were from the dead” (27:13). Nephi turns the entire chapter into a reflection on this book (i.e., the Book of Mormon) that will come forth, yet even in his aggressive biblification of the voice from the dust, he too must concede that the metaphor of the voice is not entirely metaphorical. Indeed, the book—the physical object of the plates which he has created—will vanish, leaving a voice with no inscription:

Wherefore, at that day when the book shall be delivered unto the man of whom I have spoken [i.e., Joseph Smith], the book shall be hid from the eyes of the world, that the eyes of none shall behold it save it be that three witnesses shall behold it, by the power of God, besides him to whom the book shall be delivered. . . . And there is none other which shall view it, save it be a few according to the will of God, to bear testimony unto the children of men; *for the Lord God hath said that the words of the faithful should speak as it were from the dead.* Wherefore, the Lord God will proceed to bring forth the words of the book; and *in the mouth* of as many witnesses as seemeth him good will he establish his word. (2 Nephi 27:12–14, emphasis added)

In other words, according to Nephi, the reason the actual book (again, Joseph Smith’s gold plates) would only be seen by a handful of witnesses was apparently to preserve its voice-from-the-dust qualities. The book itself (i.e., the plates) would be seen by a few, while “the words of the book” would be made available to—that is, heard by—all. The word “for” here is critical: no one else will see the plates *for* (i.e., because) God has decreed that the words need to speak from the dead. Taken at face value, then, the plates were (conveniently, critics note) taken away precisely

in order to allow them to speak from the dead via their witnesses. Furthermore, those who *do* have the privilege of seeing the actual material object must affirm its existence orally: it will be confirmed “in the mouth” of these witnesses. In the aural logics of the Book of Mormon, testimony, like scripture, is first and foremost oral.

After concluding his extended exegesis of Isaiah, Nephi concludes his writings by once again embracing the metaphor of the voice from the dust within a larger meditation on voice and writing. Much like the preceding instance, Nephi remains deeply concerned with writing, but here he explicitly concedes the limited capacities of writing, especially when compared to vocality and sound. Beginning in chapter 31, he sets up an extended comparison between these two modes of communication:

And now I, Nephi, make an end of my prophesying unto you, my beloved brethren. And I cannot write but a few things, which I know must surely come to pass; neither can I write but a few of the words of my brother Jacob. Wherefore, the things which I have written sufficeth me, save it be a few words which I must speak concerning the doctrine of Christ; wherefore, I shall speak unto you plainly, according to the plainness of my prophesying. (2 Nephi 31:1–2)

For Nephi, “writing” here appears to privilege the words of others: he specifically comments on his inclusion of Jacob (2 Nephi 6–10, which also quotes Isaiah extensively) and implicitly seems to refer to his expansive citation of Isaiah. But “speaking” seems to align with his own prophetic utterance, even though it is addressed not to an audience of his contemporaries—and by audience here, I mean quite literally, those who might listen to him—but rather to “his beloved brethren” yet to come. He further elaborates on speech, noting that God likewise relies on speaking for revelatory communicating: “For the Lord God giveth light unto the understanding; for he speaketh unto men according to their language, unto their understanding” (31:3). This divine tongue—as both speech and language—may or may not be meant literally, but as Nephi continues his farewell speech-in-writing, the role of vocalized, audible speech becomes increasingly important.

After discussing baptism by water, Nephi describes baptism by fire as an expansion of vocal capacity: “yea, then cometh the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost; and then can ye speak with the tongue of angels, and shout praises unto the Holy One of Israel” (2 Nephi 31:13). Nephi follows up these observations with an impressive aural confirmation: the voices of the Son and the Father successively affirm the same promise (31:14 and 15, respectively). The newly baptized are thus granted the capacity for angelic speech and holy shouting, two practices that might seem out of place in the staid confines of twenty-first-century Mormon worship. He again emphasizes this sonic gift of the spirit, speaking with the tongue of angels, a few verses later (32:1–3).

After discussing prayer as a particular kind of utterance, Nephi then returns to this broad doctrine of the tongue of angels. But this time he personalizes it, airing his own anxieties about the shortcomings of writing as a medium relative to the voice: “And now I, Nephi, cannot write all the things which were taught among my people; neither am I mighty in writing, like unto speaking; for when a man speaketh by the power of the Holy Ghost the power of the Holy Ghost carrieth it unto the hearts of the children of men” (2 Nephi 33:1).⁷ Nephi’s speaking apparently taps into the register of angelic speech; his writing is less mighty, however. His aspirations to the tongue of angels, as well as the anxious disappointment about not fully attaining it, foreshadow the yearning of a later prophet/narrator, Alma, to possess an angelic voice—“that I might go forth and speak with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth” (Alma 29:1). Interestingly, Alma seems to suggest that the dissemination of revelation and scripture (translated) in all languages obviates the need for the angelic voice (29:7–8), as though the angelic voice offered a pre-linguistic expressive medium, a kind of acoustic relic left from before the communicative breakdown of Babel.

Ultimately Nephi acknowledges that angelic tongues are not enough even outside of writing, requiring him to turn to other vocal practices as well: “For I pray continually for [my people] by day, and mine eyes water my pillow by night, because of them; and I cry unto my God in faith, and I know that he will hear my cry”

(2 Nephi 33:3). These comments echo the lamenting moments in his earlier “psalm,” in which he associates crying to God, praying mightily, and sending his voice “upon high” with night visions and angelic ministrations (2 Nephi 4:23–24). In other words, although Nephi struggles to conjure the tongue of angels in writing, he is (apparently) generally able to do so in person; but if even that fails, his vocal repertoire also includes several other emotive forms of oral expression—prayer, weeping, crying-out, and so on—which can apparently call down real angels with real angel voices.

These reflections on various human, godly, and angelic voices set up Nephi’s final farewell, which he punctuates with a now-familiar refrain: “And now, my beloved brethren, all those who are of the house of Israel, and all ye ends of the earth, I speak unto you as the voice of one crying from the dust: Farewell until that great day shall come” (2 Nephi 33:13). Whereas previous deployments of this metaphor have focused on books and writing, by the end of his final utterance, Nephi seems to have refocused on voice rather than book, acknowledging what he seems to find a painful concession: that writing pales in its affective prowess and holy persuasion compared to sound and voice. Yet on some level, he has long since conceded this point. As he previously wrote, the voice, after all, is paradoxically both the message of the book (27:12–14) and the medium that transmits its truest power (33:1).

But Nephi adds something significant here, applying the voice-dust metaphor to himself; up to this point, the identity of the “one crying from the dust” was not made explicit or was ascribed to a whole group. Here in his final statement, hampered by the perceived constraints of writing, Nephi lays claim to that disembodied, or post-embodied, voice. Even after bidding farewell, he cannot quite leave the question of voice alone, adding an intriguing post-script: the voice—or more precisely, words as they “proceed forth out of the mouth of the Lamb of God” and his prophets (2 Nephi 33:14)—must be respected at risk of eternal condemnation. Unlike most words, however, which vanish as soon as they are spoken, his have the power to “seal” (33:15), a practice/belief that gives earthly utterances binding force in the hereafter.

The voice from the dust, if not quite angelic in its sensory power, is nevertheless a speech act preserved for posterity.

Book as Sonic Medium II: God Hissing from the Dust

While Lehi and Nephi introduce this sonic imagery of a voice crying from the dust, its most poignant application comes from its other major appearance at the close of the Book of Mormon. Shortly after the downfall of the Nephite people and the death of his father Mormon, Moroni, the final prophet-narrator of the book, weighs in with his own application of this imagery. As the sole Nephite survivor of a massive internecine war among the descendants of Lehi, Moroni appends what he expects to be his valedictory thoughts at the end of the book of Mormon, one of the last books of the Book of Mormon. He opens, predictably enough, with reference to writing on the plates, but quickly pivots from his lack of metallic ore to his lack of anyone or anything else. The polyphonic plates are his sole companion:

Behold I, Moroni, do finish the record of my father, Mormon. Behold, I have but few things to write, which things have been commanded by my father. . . . Therefore I will write and hide up the records in the earth; and whither I go it mattereth not. Behold, my father hath made this record, and he hath written the intent thereof. And behold, I would write it also if I had room upon the plates, but I have not; and ore I have none, for I am alone. My father hath been slain in battle, and all my kinsfolk, and I have not friends nor whither to go; and how long the Lord will suffer that I may live, I know not. (Mormon 8:1, 4–5)

Like Nephi, Moroni will set up his descriptions of crying from the dust within the context of the physical plates and the act of writing. And although his position is perhaps more anguished than Nephi's, having witnessed (in person, as opposed to in vision) the mass destruction of his family, friends, and nation, he also finds special relevance in Isaiah, whose writings become a touchstone for another extended meditation on voices crying from the dust:

Search the prophecies of Isaiah. Behold, I cannot write them. Yea, behold I say unto you, that *those saints who have gone before me, who have possessed this land, shall cry, yea, even from the dust will they cry unto the Lord*; and as the Lord liveth, he will remember the covenant which he hath made with them. . . . And behold, their prayers were also in behalf of him that the Lord should suffer to bring these things forth . . . and it shall come in a day when it shall be said that miracles are done away; *and it shall come even as if one should speak from the dead*. (Mormon 8:23, 25–26, emphasis added)

For Moroni, these voices crying and speaking from the dead are directed at multiple audiences. Like Nephi, Moroni suggests that on some level, the voices are aimed—via the Book of Mormon (i.e., “these things” in 8:25)—at future readers. But he also makes explicit something Nephi only hinted at in his final usage of the metaphor: that the voice is intended to reach God’s ears and perhaps bind God to some particular course of action. Moroni first states that the voices of the deceased “shall cry, yea, even from the dust will they cry unto the Lord” (Mormon 8:23). In a rather morbid articulation of this metaphor, Moroni repeats this same relationship between the voices of the dead and God, singling out not simply the dead saints who “cry unto the Lord,” but specifically “the blood of saints” that will do so (8:27). Here the voices and blood crying to the Lord are not just attempting to communicate but to prompt a kind of divine response, whether to remember a covenant (similar to Nephi’s mention of a sealing voice) or to call for justice against “secret combinations and the works of darkness” (8:27). Moroni builds into a white-hot frenzy of righteous indignation on the point, criticizing the greed of his future audience (again, readers of the book) with threats that the mourning of widows and orphans will join with the cries of the blood of the saints from the ground to bring about God’s vengeance (8:40–41), a kind of post-mortem vigilante chorus.

As Moroni continues, his tone calms and he resorts (much as Nephi did) to characterizing *himself* as the voice from the dead: “Behold, I speak unto you as though I spake from the dead; for I know that ye shall have my words” (Mormon 9:30). This brief

insertion comes before a request for forbearance from readers for the “imperfection” found in the book’s narrators, followed by a reminder of the unusual linguistic choices Nephi describes in the first verses of the book. Moroni writes: “we have written this record according to our knowledge, in the characters which are called among us the reformed Egyptian, being handed down and altered by us, according to our manner of speech” (9:32). Once again, the spoken word undermines a stable writing apparatus; whatever the affordances of “reformed Egyptian,” it was subject to (ongoing) revision according to the realities of spoken, sounded language.⁸

In the final verses of the entire Book of Mormon, Moroni returns one last time to the imagery of the voice from the dust, but this time, the source and signal flow of the voice changes: “And I exhort you to remember these things; for the time speedily cometh that ye shall know that I lie not, for ye shall see me at the bar of God; and the Lord God will say unto you: Did I not declare my words unto you, which were written by this man, like as one crying from the dead, yea, even as one speaking out of the dust?” (Moroni 10:27). According to Moroni, the words in question (“Did I not declare my words. . .”) belong to God, channeled through the voice of Moroni, “crying from the dead” and “speaking out of the dust.” Unlike the crying blood above, which cried out *to* God, this signal originates *from* God, passes through Moroni as prophet/speaker/writer, and reaches its audience.

But the signal flow becomes even more complex still, especially in relation to God: the next verse once again highlights God’s role as a sound source embedded in a network of other speakers/voices, both living and dead, but here, the directionality between God and prophet is reversed. Whereas God was previously the source of the signal and Moroni the transmitting medium, now God is re-stating Moroni’s words: “I declare these things unto the fulfilling of the prophecies. And behold, they shall proceed forth *out of the mouth* of the everlasting God; and his word shall hiss forth from generation to generation” (Moroni 10:28, emphasis added). Here God’s own orality comes to the fore: he is a being who not only has a mouth from which things proceed, an idea with potentially radical implications that arises elsewhere in the book too, but who also will

(at least on occasion) take verbal cues from prophets, reciting or re-uttering those prophets' words himself. Furthermore, his voice does not simply speak—it hisses forth. It, like all voices, contains some sonic qualities—"grain," inflection, timbre, urgency—that go beyond the pure semantic register of the message.

What initially appears to be a process of divine ventriloquism (i.e., God speaks through the mouths of the prophets) becomes something more dialogic, to return to Givens and Bakhtin. But here the dialogism is rather literal: sometimes God speaks through the prophet, and sometimes the prophet speaks through God. That is, a prophet's words may be the phonetic fodder for God's own speech, suggesting that (to some degree) even God is subject to Bakhtin's maxim of heteroglossia: "The word in language is half someone else's. . . . [I]t exists in other people's mouths."⁹ This shared orality—which presumes a strong sense of aurality as well—lies at the heart of this network of voices and ears hissing from the dust. In particular, it serves as the mechanism by which this hissing can be preserved "from generation to generation," transmitted by a cyborg chain of prophets, saints, plates, books, readers, and God, not to mention the technologies Joseph Smith used in producing the book (seer stones, a printing press, etc.). Ultimately for Moroni, the hiss of God, the declaration of prophets, the mourning of widows and orphans, and the crying of saints' blood all join together in the broader revelatory project of the Book of Mormon: none are present to the reader, all rely on the book-as-medium, and yet all are stubbornly vocal. I have opted to call this trope of a voice crying from the dust a metaphor, and yet on some level, it speaks (almost literally) to the instability of the book-as-message, to the now-vanished engravings on the gold plates, and to the nature of the Book of Mormon as a medium for sound. In other words, the trope highlights what in other media contexts might be termed the book's "lossiness"—its propensity for discarding certain portions of the data (i.e., sensory and spiritual experience) its narrator-prophets set out to represent during its encoding (i.e., "engraving"/writing). As stated above, the book aspires to the condition of sound while emphatically being reduced to text. If taken slightly literally, this media description also raises an aural quandary: What does a

voice crying from the dust sound like? Does the Book of Mormon intend to conjure actual prophetic voices, like the so-called Witch of Endor (1 Samuel 28), who summons an annoyed Samuel to answer Saul? Is hearing such a voice only a metaphorical proposition? These questions are perhaps unanswerable, but the Book of Mormon text itself—the message, rather than the medium—does offer some clues to these questions through its handling of sound and voice within its own narrative world.

Book as Sonic Message: Prison as Acoustic Archive

While Nephi and Moroni emphasize the way the Book of Mormon functions as a sonic *medium*, other narrators recount a sonic *message*: a rich world of acoustic religiosity in which teachings are spoken from high towers for amplification, prophets impersonate others' voices or strike them dumb, and interventions from the voice of God and his angels shake cities and bring nations to tears. These narratives engage with sound on a level that is simultaneously narrower than the “voice from the dust” trope—the contents of the book rather than the entirety of the book itself—and also much more expansive, taking on the sprawling question of what comprises the sensory nature of religious practice. As such, the Book of Mormon contains numerous events in which sound plays a crucial role in formulating, transmitting, and representing sacred knowledge and action. It frequently becomes a site of contestation between believers and non-believers. But perhaps most importantly, it functions as a key marker of divinity and an object of aspiration, as prophets and other believers aspire to attain a sonic existence more like that of God and his angels.

The entire narrative of the Book of Mormon could be reconstructed as a kind of sacred sonic drama, from the opening audiovisions of Lehi and Nephi's impersonation of Laban's voice in order to gain access to the brass plates, the model for sacred record-keeping and source of Nephi's “voice from the dust” musings; on down through the discourse of King Benjamin from atop a tower so his voice could be heard, alternating in call-and-response with his people as they take on new names to be called by God on

the last day; with a tangential history of a people called Jaredites whose sacred history dates back to that great sonic scrambling of language at the Tower of Babel, inscribed in a text that also requires translational technologies to be readable; continuing forward with the extensive ministry of Alma the Younger, whose conversion came by way of an angel's voice that shakes the earth, and who dreams of having that same kind of voice, even while smiting an "anti-Christ" deaf and mute; with sonic cityscapes that would become ground zero for preaching, whether in prisons shaken by divine voices or on city walls used as makeshift pulpits; to the death of Jesus Christ in the old world, which precipitates massive destruction followed by a howling throughout the land, in turn silenced by a voice from heaven chastising its hearers and announcing Christ's visit in the Americas; and on several centuries further to a conflagration of perpetual war (never a quiet affair), prompting the final narrator-prophet, Moroni, to meditate once again on voices—and blood—crying from the dust. From Babel to the burial of plates that cry out and hiss forth, this religious history emerges time and time again in and through sound.

A number of key themes arises from this acoustic chronicle and its attendant religious thought and practice. Those might be aphoristically summarized as follows: Voices matter—it's best to have a divine one, if possible. The world resonates (with and against voices). Intense quiet and intense loudness can both be divine. Some forms of vocalization are too sacred to be written.

Beyond the realm of aphorism, many of these issues touch on broader issues of sound and culture that resonate with contemporary concerns (scholarly and otherwise) about sound outside Mormonism. For example, Alma the Younger's near-erotic longing to possess an angelic voice would fit well in post-Lacanian psychoanalysis of the voice, especially in the context of opera.¹⁰ The alternating bouts of widespread lament, disembodied divine voice, and silence that presage Christ's coming could be understood as a mix of soundscape theories since John Cage and notions of the "acousmatic" voice—something heard but not seen—that dates back to Pythagoras and his students yet takes on new relevance in a world of phonographic recording and playback.¹¹ Even the

seemingly niche question of towers as communication technologies (from Babel to King Benjamin to the Rameumptom prayer-tower) is, if not inherently modern, an important part of understanding contemporary media, from the Twin Towers to those used for radio, television, and cell phone.¹²

While all of these aphorisms and contemporary themes warrant further attention, this question of towers and media points to one of the most salient, and perhaps surprising, themes in the Book of Mormon: sound and architecture. In the book's narrative, the built environment becomes an active sonic participant in the narrative (i.e., the message) and occasionally in the inscribing of that narrative (i.e., the medium). Sometimes it constrains sound, as with the Rameumptom (Alma 31), where participating in the sonic rites of communal prayer is an exclusive privilege. Sometimes it amplifies sound, as with King Benjamin or Samuel the Lamanite, who preach from a temple tower (Mosiah 2) and a city wall (Helaman 13), respectively, with the explicit aim of making their voices heard. Sometimes it does both, as when a later Nephi prays from a tower in his garden, ostensibly hoping to commune with God alone but instead, because of his intense mourning, attracts a large crowd of spectators (Helaman 7).

On a few occasions, the built environment also writes or inscribes sound, as in one of the stranger moments in the book, a communal epiphany in a prison, recounted in Helaman 5. It draws together many of the themes above—God's voice, angels, silence, and speechlessness—and situates them within architecture that, while part of the book's text (i.e., message), also remind us of its ongoing engraving of sound (i.e., medium).

One generation before Samuel, the brother-prophets Lehi and Nephi (of garden-tower fame), the sons of Helaman (not to be confused with the father-son duo at the beginning of the Book of Mormon), find themselves imprisoned because of their preaching activities. Like several generations of missionaries had tried before them, they were attempting to convert Lamanites and were thrown into prison—as fate would have it, a prison that had been used in an earlier encounter between Nephites and Lamanites. But the prison would not last much longer. Just as their captors

are preparing to execute them, Nephi and Lehi are “encircled about as if by fire” but without being burned (Helaman 5:23). Their Lamanite captors are unable to do anything to them, being “struck dumb with amazement” (5:25). Nephi and Lehi tell their captors not to fear, after which “the earth shook exceedingly, and the walls of the prison did shake as if they were about to tumble to the earth; but behold they did not fall” (5:27). Not yet, anyway.

A cloud of darkness encircles the captors, freezing them in place with fear, and a voice is then heard “as if it were above the cloud of darkness, saying: Repent ye, repent ye, and seek no more to destroy my servants whom I have sent unto you to declare good tidings” (Helaman 5:29). A disembodied voice advocates the very-much-embodied voices of its (his?) emissaries. What follows next shares much of the same language of other divinely acousmatic moments, like the disembodied vocal interlude from the heavens between Christ’s death and visit to the Americas, or Elijah’s encounter with Jehovah’s “still small voice” (1 Kings 19:11–12). But here, architecture plays a key role too:

And it came to pass when they heard this voice, and beheld that it was not a voice of thunder, neither was it a voice of a great tumultuous noise, but behold, it was a still voice of perfect mildness, as if it had been a whisper, and it did pierce even to the very soul—And notwithstanding the mildness of the voice, behold the earth shook exceedingly, and *the walls of the prison trembled again*, as if it were about to tumble to the earth. (Helaman 5:30–31, emphasis added)

The voice returns a second time calling them to repentance again, and then once more: “And also again the third time the voice came, and did speak unto them marvelous words which cannot be uttered by man; and the walls did tremble again, and the earth shook as if it were about to divide asunder” (5:33). Again, these tropes are not unfamiliar: unexpected qualities of voice (perfect mildness but piercing and earth-shaking); language which is unutterable by humans (and thus well beyond the pale of being inscribable in writing); and the centrality of architecture itself as a way of more clearly perceiving sound. Furthermore, while architecture is presumably

unnecessary to amplify this voice literally, the shaking walls—the aural architecture in crisis—adds a material exclamation point to the power of the voice’s sound itself.

The prison walls hold for the moment and an unexpected group conversation next emerges between “the voice,” Nephi and Lehi, and their captors—and the walls, in a certain sense. Nephi and Lehi “lift their eyes to heaven . . . in the attitude as if talking or lifting their voices to some being whom they beheld” (Helaman 5:36). The Lamanite guards, otherwise frozen in dread, are able to move their bodies to look at—but not hear—this conversation. One of them, an apostate Nephite named Aminadab, states, “They do converse with the angels of God” (5:39). He encourages his Lamanite comrades, who want to be unstuck, to “repent, and cry unto the voice”—interestingly, not to God, but simply to the voice—and they will be freed from the cloud of darkness holding them in place.

So they do: “they all did begin to cry unto the voice of him who had shaken the earth; yea, they did cry even until the cloud of darkness was dispersed” (Helaman 5:40–41). Soon everyone is encircled by holy flames, and the holy spirit of God descends upon them such that “they were filled as if with fire, and they could speak forth marvelous words” (5:44–45). A quiet-like voice comes again—“yea, a pleasant voice, as if it were a whisper”—presumably from God the Father, who extols their faith in his “Well Beloved” (5:46–47). When they look up to find the source of this voice, they see instead the heavens open and angels descending down to minister to them (5:46–47).

Once again familiar sonic elements appear, including whispering, God’s voice from heaven, visceral orality, and angelic mediums, but I am particularly interested in the interaction between sound and shaking walls here. In other prison stories, like that of Alma and Amulek, the prison collapses (also “with great noise,” Alma 14:29), but here, the prison stays in one piece, while its walls register the impact of this whispering voice—a kind of architectural visualization of sound or reverse seismograph, where this voice is transduced into physical shaking. The walls bear witness to the sonic intensity, shaking but not buckling, holding fast to allow the communal conversion that follows.

In addition, the voice, rather than simply being acoustically disembodied (as in, say, 3 Nephi 8–11), almost becomes incarnate despite its apparent immateriality. The Lamanite guards can simply pray *to the voice*—no need to worry about its source. Even when it is ascribed to some person (“him who had shaken the earth,” 5:45), they still pray to the voice itself, a kind of Lacanian “object voice” with some recognizable substance beyond its semantic message.¹³ These attributes of the voice—its ability to shake walls and the apparent legitimacy of its functioning as an object of prayer—suggest a substantial and doctrinally orthodox materiality to this voice, despite the lack of a visible body.¹⁴ That materiality is further heightened by its apparent mobility: it comes and goes, initially accessible and audible to some but not all, much like the kind of voice we might expect to be attached to a body; meanwhile, the prison guards—and their voices—are rendered immobile, reversing the normal arrangement of the prison broadly (i.e., the captors are now captive) as well as of the various voices in the prison.

As at Jericho, walls become a marker and a monument for divine intervention through sound. But more critically, like King Benjamin’s tower, which was then augmented with messengers who could write up his sermon and disseminate it to the parts of his audience unable to hear his voice, the prison wall becomes a part of a process of registering sound and preserving it—and then setting into motion the dissemination of that sound. Critically, the prison did *not* fall, allowing the guards to survive (unlike their counterparts in Alma 14), become converted, and then preach, “declaring throughout all the regions round about all the things which they had *heard and seen*”—yet another Lehi-Nephi audiovisual epiphany—“insomuch that the more part of the Lamanites were convinced of them, because of the greatness of the evidences which they had received” (Helaman 5:50, emphasis added). The walls and the prison guards become co-witnesses, or “evidences,” of the “greatness” of this event. The witnessing of this joint human-architectural archive leads to arguably the largest scale conversion in the Book of Mormon, which changes the entire racial and national trajectories of the Lehitites for generations.

And lastly, Nephi engraves on plates his recollection of the experience—a plate-based inscription of audiovisual impressions left in walls and their human occupants.¹⁵

Book as Sonic Process I: Translation as Dictation

The aural logics of the Book of Mormon extend beyond the text itself—they also include its process of *becoming* a book from Joseph Smith's accounts of angelic visitations to the dictation, handling, and printing of the Book of Mormon text. Once again, visual paradigms have traditionally held sway, and not without reason: Joseph Smith told of seeing angels, witnesses emphasized having seen the gold plates, and the act of “translation” entailed a variety of supernatural devices for viewing.¹⁶ Yet throughout it all, sound was not only present, but an integral part of how the book came into existence as such.

A convenient place to locate the beginnings of the process of creating the Book of Mormon is Joseph Smith's visions of the angel Moroni. The canonical account of these visions begins with Joseph Smith “calling upon God” for forgiveness for his sins on the evening of September 21, 1823 (Joseph Smith—History 1:28–29). Before he could finish praying, an angel appears whose appearance and corporeality captivate Joseph. Joseph gives a catalog of the angel's unclothed, or “naked,” body parts, culminating in the homoerotic statement, “he had no other clothing on but this robe, as it was open, so that I could see into his bosom” (1:31). But in addition to (or more likely, heightening) the erotics of the moment, “seeing into the bosom” of an angel also functions as a kind of pulling-back-the-curtain on the physical apparatus of his voice (lungs, diaphragm, throat), as though Joseph is wondering where the vocal thunder comes from. (After all, he had a “countenance truly like lightning,” 1:32.)

After an initial moment of fear, Joseph recovers and the two converse quite extensively, with the angel declaring (in an apparently normal voice) that Joseph has been called of God, that people will speak ill of him, and that there are gold plates buried nearby, along with other ancient artifacts to be used to translate the book.

Somewhat paradoxically, the angel Moroni then launches into a recital of scripture, “quoting the prophecies of the Old Testament” (Joseph Smith—History 1:36ff). Although written well after the fact in 1838, this account even emphasizes that Moroni *revised* scriptures as he quoted them, recounting them “with a little variation from the way it reads in our Bibles” (Joseph Smith—History 1:36ff), a practice Smith would employ throughout his prophetic career.

After the scripture session runs its course, the angel continues “conversing” with Smith about the plates, prompting him to have a vision “opened to [his] mind” to see their location (Joseph Smith—History 1:42). Following this first angelic “communication” (1:43), Moroni departs, then returns twice more and repeats the message verbatim “without the least variation” (1:45), apart from additional material he appends to the end of the messages. The next day Joseph Smith collapses while working outside with his father, coming to when he hears “a voice speaking unto me, calling me by name,” only to see the same messenger, who relates the same message with some new instructions (1:49). While Book of Mormon angels are not all of the thundering variety, it is striking that Moroni’s vocal arsenal is not only non-thundering but draws its oral repertoire so extensively from extant King James scripture—with emendation as needed. The recursive nature of scriptures, as (so often) a chain of things uttered then written then recited (or otherwise re-cited), takes on a whole new meaning when one of those original speakers comes from the dead to enact such performative speech.

Once Joseph obtained the plates, he began “translating” them, a much contested practice that entailed a lively sonic process of dictation. This process may have involved Joseph’s looking at the gold plates themselves, but more likely only entailed looking into his various prophetic prostheses: the urim and thummim, two ancient stones he found with the plates, or more frequently, his own modern “seer stone.”¹⁷ Critically, Joseph did not write for himself; all accounts of the translation process indicate that he dictated aloud to scribes, including his wife, Emma, Martin Harris, and above all, Oliver Cowdery throughout the intensive three-month period in 1829 when most of the book was produced.¹⁸ In looking at their accounts of the process, historians and other scholars tend—again—to privilege the

visual and textual. But these accounts are replete with details about the orality and aurality of the process as well. Emma recounted in an 1856 interview, “When my husband was translating the Book of Mormon, I wrote a part of it, as he dictated each sentence, word for word, and when he came to proper names he could not pronounce, or long words, he spelled them out, and while I was writing them, if I made any mistake in spelling, he would stop me and correct my spelling, although it was impossible for him to see how I was writing them down at the time.”¹⁹

As Royal Skousen has pointed out, this process entails four steps: Joseph Smith sees the English text in some way; he reads it to the scribe; the scribe hears the text; and the scribe reproduces the text in writing.²⁰ Yet the spelling out of proper names, if Emma’s memory serves, reminds us of the kind of multisensory reading (and attendant difficulties) suggested by Lehi’s theophany-by-book. It reminds us that Joseph did not simply read the text to the scribe—he vocalized it, intoning and pronouncing each word or even letter, a reading-aloud that required conscious effort, accompanied by prosodic rhythm, cadence, and pauses in its sonic flow. Both Emma and David Whitmer commented on Joseph’s inability to correctly pronounce even common biblical names.²¹ In a later interview, Emma recalled that at the time, “Joseph Smith could neither write *nor dictate* a coherent and well-worded letter; let alone *dictating a book* like the Book of Mormon.”²² She continues, “I am satisfied that no man could have dictated the writing of the manuscripts unless he was inspired; for, when [I was] acting as his scribe, [he] would dictate to me for hour after hour; and when returning from meals, or after interruptions, he would at once begin where he had left off, without either seeing the manuscript or having any portion of it read to him.”²³

Emma highlights the difficulty of dictation (at least for Joseph) and the labor of vocalization: it was not an intuitive task for him, lasted for hours on end, and required focus to pronounce correctly. Oliver Cowdery emphasized (twice!) this same power of orality in his account: “I wrote, with my own pen, the entire Book of Mormon (save a few pages,) as it fell from the lips of the Prophet Joseph Smith, as he translated it by the gift and power

of God, by means of the Urim and Thummim, or, as it is called by that book, ‘holy interpreters’. . . . I wrote it myself as it fell from the lips of the Prophet.”²⁴ However self-serving Cowdery’s account may have been (“I wrote it myself. . .”), his repetition of the phrase “fell from the lips of the Prophet” underscores the fundamental orality of the translation/dictation process, as well as, again, the erotics of the mouth and voice throughout the bringing forth of the plates.

The implications for such orality go beyond the simple fact of its existence, that orality was central to the process. Much of Royal Skousen’s work in creating a critical edition of the Book of Mormon focuses on the impact of this peculiar orality. He posits a number of points that shed light on the translation process based on his analysis of original manuscripts, a few of which relate closely to sound and pronunciation: “The original manuscript was written from dictation” (a point made most clear by scribal errors, such as the conflation of “and” with “an”). “Joseph Smith was working with [i.e., viewing and in turn dictating] at least twenty words at a time” (a quantity that at times appears to have created transcription difficulties for his scribes). “Joseph Smith could see the spelling of names” (though he apparently also pronounced names fully, yet another variable that sometimes led to scribal inconsistency with a name like “Amalickiah,” sometimes written “Ameleckiah,” suggesting that Smith accented the first syllable). And finally, “The scribe repeated the text to Joseph Smith.”²⁵ As noted above, Terry Givens has described the Book of Mormon text as having a “polyphonic structure,”²⁶ but Skousen’s assessment suggests that its very writing/translation was literally polyphonic as well—the product of multiple voices in conversation with one another, dictating and reading back, “translating” and proofreading.

Furthermore, an even more emphatically sonic position is available—indeed, perhaps necessary—for less “believing” readers and critics. Skousen takes for granted the existence (and textual nature) of both the gold plates and Joseph’s translating devices (urim and thummim, seer stones). A more skeptical viewpoint might eliminate one or both of those writerly objects, thus rendering Joseph’s initial oral performance of the text of *the*

original Book of Mormon, complete with its idiosyncratic diction and linguistic particulars. At the same time, Joseph's scriptural dictations bear striking similarities to episodes and statements in the book's narrative about dictation, including (yet again) King Benjamin's speech, dictated in real-time (Mosiah 2:8), and various commands from Jesus about how and when to produce scripture by writing down his utterances and those of previous prophets (3 Nephi 16:4, 23:3–14).²⁷ Such similarities could be regarded as Joseph Smith's self-projection and/or a generalizable principle, following the book's own text, of how scripture is fundamentally a dictation of godly speech (2 Nephi 29:11–12). But for believer and skeptic alike, the proto-Book of Mormon dictated by Joseph Smith should not be understood as anomalous; it clearly fits well in the book's own narrative of such dictations, voices from the dust, and the salient interest in utterances coming "from the mouth" of God and prophets.

The translation process was punctuated by sound in other ways as well. After an initial period dictating primarily to Martin Harris, Joseph Smith reluctantly agreed to let Harris take home the 116 pages they had produced to show to his wife and some close family members. The manuscript got lost during this period, leading to one of the more poignant—and sonic—outbursts we have on record from Smith when he found out. Joseph's mother, Lucy Mack Smith, recounts: "Mr. Harris pressed his hands upon his temples, and cried out in a tone of deep anguish, 'Oh, I have lost my soul! I have lost my soul!' . . . 'Oh, my God!' Said Joseph, clinching his hands. 'All is lost! All is lost!'. . . He wept and groaned, and walked the floor continually."²⁸ Lucy's attempts to comfort her son failed, and "sobs and groans, and the most bitter lamentations filled the house. . . And he [Joseph] continued pacing back and forth, meantime weeping and grieving, until about sunset."²⁹ This incident can be read in a number of ways (devotional or otherwise), but the anguish and audible lamentation, lasting from a little past noon until sunset, show the raw emotions of this process as well as some of its acoustic side effects. While posthumous prophets like Moroni recite scripture with composure, their human counterparts are left to weep and wail.

Book as Sonic Process II: Dissemination

As the process of dictated translation drew to a close, Joseph Smith inaugurated a critical phase in the dissemination of the Book of Mormon, inviting eleven witnesses to see the plates in the summer of 1829. Unsurprisingly, their experiences involved a broad range of sensory modalities beyond just sight. In June, Joseph had received a revelation (now Doctrine and Covenants 17) addressing Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris, promising to show them the plates. Once again, Lucy Mack Smith offers scintillating details about the occasion on which the witnesses would see the plates. She recounts the ritual practices that started this day—and by implication, most other days as well—for Joseph Smith: “The next morning, after attending to the usual services, namely, reading, singing and praying, Joseph arose from his knees, and approaching Martin Harris with a solemnity that thrills through my veins to this day,” telling him to humble himself and to join with Cowdery and Whitmer to see the plates.³⁰

Joseph and these “Three Witnesses” went to a nearby grove and prayed, with Harris eventually excusing himself. They then report that an angel appeared to them: “In his hands,” Joseph recounts, “he held the plates which we had been praying to have a view of.”³¹ But this “view” was complicated by sound: first, the angel spoke briefly to David Whitmer, encouraging him to keep the commandments; then, “immediately afterwards, we *heard a voice* from out of the bright light above us, saying, ‘These plates have been revealed by the power of God, and they have been translated by the power of God. The translation of them which you have seen is correct, and I command you to bear record of what you now see and hear.’”³² Smith then joined Harris, who had left the group, and experienced the same thing again, this time punctuated by Harris crying out “apparently in an ecstasy of joy, ‘Tis enough; ‘tis enough; mine eyes have beheld; mine eyes have beheld;’ and jumping up, he *shouted*, ‘Hosanna,’ blessing God, and otherwise rejoiced exceedingly.”³³ In their formal testimony, included with the published Book of Mormon, they are explicit that they not only saw the plates but that they were translated by

God's power, "for *His voice* hath declared it unto us. . . . [And] *the voice* of the Lord commanded us that we should bear record of it."³⁴

While the other eight witnesses have a much more straightforward experience, with Smith simply showing them the plates, they are allowed to touch them: "we did handle [them] with our hands . . . for we have *seen and hefted*, and know of a surety that the said Smith has got the plates of which we have spoken."³⁵ After this tactile and proprioceptive moment of handling and hefting, these eight similarly agreed to "give our names unto the world to witness unto the world that which we have seen,"³⁶ signifying their witness with that oldest of sonic identifiers, their names. In so doing, they also complied with the Book of Mormon injunction (mentioned above) that "in the mouth" of such witnesses would God's word be established and testified of, enabling "the words of the faithful . . . to speak as if it were from the dead" (2 Nephi 27:13–14).

The printing process likewise entailed significant sonic entanglements. Although written long after the fact, an 1892 statement penned by John Gilbert, the compositor (i.e., typesetter) for the printing of the Book of Mormon, offers a few insights into that process and its own oral/aural logics. Of the Book of Mormon manuscript, he writes:

The manuscript was supposed to be in the handwriting of Cowdery. Every Chapter, if I remember correctly, was one solid paragraph, without a punctuation mark, from beginning to end. Names of persons and places were generally capitalized, but sentences had no end. The character or short &, was used almost invariably where word *and*, occurred, except at the end of a chapter. I punctuated it to make it read as I supposed the Author intended, and but very little punctuation was altered in proof-reading.³⁷

Scholars like Royal Skousen have scoured these statements to better understand the process of dictation and transcription, as well as to formulate a critical edition of the text. But the issue of punctuation deserves comment in its own right. While punctuation (or orthography, more generally) is not necessarily sonic in and of itself, it functions as the articulatory system of language, allowing a string of words or characters to be inflected with prosody and speech style.³⁸

In short, punctuation serves as an inscription system for the realm of speech that extends beyond the semantics of individual words themselves. Thus Gilbert can be seen as re-sonifying the Book of Mormon text to closer approximate the dictated version given by Joseph Smith (or what he imagined that version to be)—a task he paradoxically needed to carry out on behalf of Oliver Cowdery, who took the dictation in the first place and was, as Gilbert notes, present for much of the printing process.³⁹

The printing offices of E. B. Grandin, where the book was published, became a more general site of sonic contestation as well. Lucy Mack Smith recounts one such instance, relatively early in the process, when “clouds of persecution again began to gather” against the project in an unholy alliance of local “rabble” and “a party of restless religionists” that had begun meeting together. She recounts: “About the first council of this kind was held in a room adjoining that in which Oliver [Cowdery] and a young man by the name of Robinson were printing. Mr. Robinson being curious to know what they were doing in the next room, applied his ear to a hole in the partition wall, and by this means overheard several persons expressing their fears in reference to the Book of Mormon.”⁴⁰ According to her second-hand, eavesdropped account, the meeting was a lively back-and-forth between a speaker and collective exclamations. (For example, after some fear-mongering on behalf of local clergy, the speaker “then inquired, whether they should endure it. ‘No, no,’ was the unanimous reply.”⁴¹)

One of the group’s resolutions was to send a delegation of ministers to visit Lucy and her family, which led to a fairly tense standoff in which she told one Deacon Beckwith, “if you should stick my flesh full of fagots, and even burn me at the stake, I would declare, as long as God should give me breath, that Joseph has got that Record, and that I know it to be true.”⁴² This kind of macabre testimonial—echoed later in Brigham Young’s affirmation of Orson Pratt, that if “Brother Orson were chopped up in inch pieces, each would cry out Mormonism was true”⁴³—highlights a striking relationship between body, breath, voice, and violence. Until (or even after!) one’s breath is extinguished, the declaration of testimony is a duty incumbent upon believers, violence (or

threats thereof) notwithstanding. With a similar anti-authoritarian air, Lucy's son Samuel responded to the same delegation, opting for angel Moroni's strategy of reciting aloud passages of Isaiah (56:9–11) to them. His spontaneous recitation included the stinging indictment: "His watchmen are blind: they are all ignorant, they are all dumb dogs, they cannot bark; sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber."⁴⁴ Blind, ignorant, and mute: such were the sensory incapacities of the delegation.

On a more mundane note, the sounds of operating a printing press must have generated a fascinating sonic environment in its own right. From Gilbert's statement, we learn details of the press itself: "The Bible [i.e., the Gold Bible, or the Book of Mormon] was printed on a 'Smith' Press, single pull, and old fashioned 'Balls' or 'Niggerheads' were used—composition rollers not having come into use in small printing offices."⁴⁵ Although the sonic particulars of Grandin's office can only be imagined, technical clues such as these give some sense of what the actual printing of the book on a Smith Improved Printing Press in Palmyra in 1829–1830 might have sounded like. Regular, repeated steps in this process would have included: selecting and setting the proper metal sorts/letters, inking the sheepskin ink balls and "beating" them to ink the type, positioning paper, feeding the paper by means of the rounce, "pulling" (i.e., turning) the platen down onto the type, and eventually cutting the paper. This space, resonant with the encounters of partially-mechanized actions and their human instigators, points again to the mediations in and through sound that marked the book's materialization.

And so the Book of Mormon was born to sound—and re-sound, both among its adherents and its adversaries. Benjamin Winchester's 1841 account characterizes the earliest responses to its publication as a sonic feud: "No sooner had the Book of Mormon made its appearance, than priests and professors began to rage, Madam Rumour began with her poisonous tongues; epithet upon epithet, calumny upon calumny, was heaped upon the few that were first engage[d] in the cause; mobs raged, and the people imagined a vain thing; a general hue and cry was raised and reiterated from one end of the country." The slander of the clergy, he continues,

and “the pen of the learned” have joined forces against the book, and even “the drunkard and the swearer have caught the sound and have joined with the professor in crying ‘delusion,’ &c.”⁴⁶

On the flipside, Winchester compares the believers’ limited ability to respond with the familiar vocality of angelic tongues to still this “hue and cry” against the book: “had we the tongue of Michael the arch-angel it would have been as impossible for us to reason with the uproarious multitude, as it would have been for any man to reason with the Jews while Christ was before Pilate, and they were crying ‘away with him,’ ‘crucify him.’”⁴⁷ Even the voice of angels is apparently not enough against an opposition when it reaches a certain level of loudness, even if figurative.

Yet on a deeper level, as Terry Givens has pointed out, the Book of Mormon was not simply being treated as a static text by either side. He writes that “the history of the Book of Mormon’s place in Mormonism and American religion generally has always been more connected to its status as signifier than signified. . . . The Book of Mormon is preeminently a concrete manifestation of sacred utterance.”⁴⁸ Once again, these metaphors are perhaps more suggestive when taken literally; conceiving of the book as a generic or figurative “utterance” too easily leads us to believe there is nothing particularly verbal or audibly uttered by or about the Book of Mormon. But closer attention to the book’s aural logics demonstrates that the book is always an uttering signifier: as a medium, as a message, and as a process of dictation and production.

Conclusion: How to Read A Voice from the Dust?

The Book of Mormon, as I described above, opens with a set of visions, culminating in the prophet Lehi reading a book. Nephi makes a special point in designating reading as a special category of sensory experience (1 Nephi 1:19), demanding multisensory sensitivity to the intertwining of the visual (i.e., looking at a book) with the sonic (i.e., speaking its contents aloud). In his book *A History of Reading*, Alberto Manguel makes a similar assertion: in earlier times, reading was more an “aural hallucination” than a visual experience, while in sacred texts, “where every letter and the

number of letters and their order were dictated by the godhead, full comprehension required not only the eyes but also the rest of the body: swaying to the cadence of the sentences and lifting to one's lips the holy words, so that nothing divine could be lost in the reading."⁴⁹ The history of the Book of Mormon's reception could be told in similar terms, as a collective struggle to figure out how to read the book—and especially how to read a book that claims to be a scriptural chronicle of “dialogues with the dead,” to borrow John Durham Peters's term, in an era already deeply obsessed with the possibility of communing with the deceased.⁵⁰

Even before the book was published, it began prompting questions about how (if at all) to read it. Philologist Charles Anthon allegedly told Martin Harris, “I cannot read a sealed book,” confirming for believers the prophecies of Isaiah by way of Nephi, while suggesting that reading this book might not be an entirely straightforward venture.⁵¹ Some nineteenth-century readers, like Parley Pratt, found the text entrancing, unable to stop reading even to eat or sleep, while others, like Mark Twain, found just the opposite to be true: the book was tedious to the point of inducing slumber.⁵² In the twentieth century, the most overt, extended discussion within LDS circles of not just reading the book but of how to think *about* reading the book may well have come from LDS apostle and later president Ezra Taft Benson. In several of his highest-profile sermons, he spoke repeatedly about the book, advocating particular reading strategies, even encouraging “owners of cassette players to play Book of Mormon cassettes from time to time and to listen to them at home and while walking, jogging, or driving.”⁵³ In fairness to Benson, this was just one of a whole litany of reading techniques he proposed, but it helpfully gestures toward the problem I explore here: how can a reader of the Book of Mormon come to hear its aurality?

Setting cassette tapes aside for the moment, this question closely resembles the title of John Foley's book *How to Read an Oral Poem*.⁵⁴ Foley's interests roam from Homer to slam poetry sessions in North America, but his underlying premise is clear from the title: reading (originally) oral poetry calls for different approaches than reading written poetry. The Book of Mormon

makes (with very few exceptions) no pretension of being poetry, more often embracing a style of “exceedingly great plainness of speech” (Enos 1:23), or what Twain called “a prosy detail of imaginary history.”⁵⁵ But whether prose or poetry, Foley’s reading strategies are suggestive of how one might more productively encounter a sonic text, Book of Mormon or otherwise. He calls attention, for example, to the need for considering special linguistic codes, the role of special formulas, figurative language that may function differently from contemporary usage, appeals to tradition (in this case, other Judeo-Christian scripture), and the complex role of repetition.

One of Foley’s aphoristic “proverbs” for reading oral poetry states: “The art of oral poetry emerges *through* rather than *in spite of* its special language.”⁵⁶ Or, as Dell Hymes writes in his “first principle” on how orality works, “oral narratives consist of spoken lines, which need not be equivalent to written sentences.”⁵⁷ As with other sturdier genres of oral prose—Northern European saga, mixed-genre narratives of West Africa, or American folktale traditions in white Appalachia or a Native American reservation—the sonic Book of Mormon requires a recognition of how its “special language” is working. Presuming that all its utterances function like “written sentences” in a novel or even a history book all but ensures that the book will disappoint on some level. Such a book must be heard, or at least conceived of, sonically.

Concretely then, one might consider all kinds of features of the Book of Mormon as sonic first—as “spoken lines,” broadly—and writing secondarily.⁵⁸ Thus, extended citations of the King James Bible become not copying or plagiarism but recitation and remix, age-old strategies for reviving and reusing not just the text cited but the broad network of associations built into that particular tradition of verbal art. This is what Foley calls “immanent art,”⁵⁹ though his insights should be obvious to any post-hip-hop-generation reader of the Book of Mormon: the sample, remix, or repeated refrain is not a deficit of culture but a newly fashioned production of culture itself. Furthermore, these layers of citation are remixed again in the book’s reception, memorization, formal and informal quotation (including misquotations!), and other contemporary

verbal referencing. Other examples abound in the book, including the direct address to an audience, the frequent self-testifying, and the beginning verses (as now subdivided) with conjunctions (especially “and”), all of which could readily be understood in a sonic/spoken universe much more readily than the writerly one most readers seem to presume.

All of this points to the ultimate Book of Mormon-ism, the phrase, “And it came to pass.” Twain wrote of this phrase: “‘And it came to pass’ was [Joseph Smith’s] pet. If he had left that out, his Bible would have been only a pamphlet.”⁶⁰ Twain’s assessment is funny, scathing, and observant—yet it also misses the point. “And it came to pass” is rhythm, in an oddly Mormonish way. The phrase, in its hundreds of appearances, is *the* principal source of pacing in a massive historical chronicle. Brant Gardner suggests the phrase may well have served a functional purpose for Joseph Smith in dictating paragraphs,⁶¹ though he, like other Book of Mormon apologists, immediately uses this observation to burnish linguistic arguments about ancient Semitic/Mayan roots.

More interestingly to me, this strange phrase—“And it came to pass”—offers a clear, repeated moment where we can readily hear *the book* articulating Joseph Smith’s voice, and not the other way around. Whether or not one believes there was any writing in Smith’s seer stone or on the plates (or even that there were plates at all), the phrase offers (again and again!) moments of rhythmic punctuation that would have acted on and molded Smith’s speech, particularly the cadence and prosody of his dictation. While accounts of his spelling proper names might have some similar effect, they must have been less ubiquitous than this infamous phrase. “And it came to pass” is the ultimate oral-formulaic trace of the book’s dictation and publication in the nineteenth century, creating structure for a much larger work (i.e., the whole book) from the verbal tradition of its speaker(s), whether understood to be Joseph Smith, ancient prophets, or some combination of both.

Other examples of such sound-friendly reading strategies could be furnished, but that idiosyncratic phrase points to a bigger issue of the text’s orality. The text is often spoken aloud: a lay-preacher in a Mormon worship service quotes it in a homily (or “talk”);

a seminary student memorizes these verses aloud as “scripture mastery”; a blind member listens to the audiobook version⁶²; a missionary stands on a literal soapbox at a street-meeting reciting “Moroni’s promise”; a Mormon apostle reads from a teleprompter a verse (perhaps long memorized) which is then transmitted by satellite (with simultaneous translation) to Church audiovisual systems around the globe; or even the Mark Twains of the world jokingly restate parts of the text at its own expense. These sounding re-articulations of the text act as media “recursions,” expanded repetitions of an originary moment of meditation. Media theorist Geoffrey Winthrop-Young describes recursions as “repetitive instances of self-processing that nonetheless result in something different.”⁶³ In other words, these are moments where a technology or medium (e.g., the Book of Mormon) allows for a collapse of historical time (e.g., from the present to 1829 and/or millennia ago), making it possible to experience something unique to the operations of that medium. For example, it is bringing to pass again (and again) “it came to pass.”

Thus by eliciting the audible voice of a reader, the book channels the same medium operations that produced the book (i.e., Joseph Smith’s dictating aloud that same passage while “translating”), which in turn reiterates the book’s original function as sonic medium (i.e., conjuring the prophetic voices crying from the dust). In these moments, the reader’s voice (or to a lesser degree, one’s internal vocalizing while reading) is doing the same acoustic work as Joseph Smith’s voice, and, for a believer, as those prophets of old, who themselves somehow perhaps channeled God’s voice. These recursions, while connecting past to present through media configurations, may often appear quite prosaic—preaching sermons, memorizing verses, listening to audiobooks. In addition to these commonplace audible readings above with their more startling implications of media recursivity, one more bears mention: family scripture study. The ideal for such a practice might well look less like the conjuring of long-deceased prophetic voices and more like a Norman Rockwell painting, with families sitting around the kitchen table before breakfast, taking turns reading verses, or perhaps in an informal evening devotional in the

living room, led by a parent. It would be tempting to critique the bourgeois, heteronormative expectations projected through this imagery (itself propagated through Church magazines and other devotional literature), but its potential for tapping into the spirit of “And it came to pass” in a particularly striking way is undeniable. The phrase remains a marker of rhythm—of the temporal flow of word after word, verse after verse—but it also becomes a marker of a new kind of time, a genealogical time. As much as the “generations” of the book of Genesis transform history into (mostly sacred) lineage, so too can “And it came to pass” transform a mundane (perhaps even boring) act of reading aloud into a kind of intergenerational “welding link” (D&C 128:18), to use a term Joseph Smith would later adopt in describing his own project of religious rituals for the dead. The temporalities of transmitting the text thus expand from recreating prophetic dictations and rhythms to include a much bigger project of establishing sacred generations. “And it came to pass” marks a similar temporal passage in the Book of Mormon, extending from father to son—notably, and perhaps unfortunately, with even greater gender disparities in its voicing of such time than any other scripture—as much as it denotes the passage of some abstract chronicling. Sonic time in the Book of Mormon is both rhythmic and generational, “the times and the seasons,” event and *longue durée*, point and (spiraling?) line. To read aloud is to conjure and (re)create the former; to read aloud across generations brings to pass the latter.

I am not arguing here for a simplistic version of the voice as the ultimate, triumphing presence. Decades ago, Jacques Derrida warned us of precisely this fallacy.⁶⁴ On the contrary, as the strange acousmatic voice of 3 Nephi 11 reminds us, the relationship among voice, aurality, and presence (godly or otherwise) frequently undermines itself, demanding heightened attention to even perceive it, let alone understand it. Indeed, this recursive chain of mediated voices is not intended to call forth God’s presence but to elicit once again the same vocal acts of prophesying—literally of “speaking forth”—repeatedly.

But readers who treat the text as a silent attempt to inscribe truth, whether historical, linguistic, or imaginary, have already

missed the point. Much like William Graham wrote of other scriptural traditions, the Book of Mormon “is often not simply either discursive or esoteric. . . . It is also visceral and sensual, which is to say, nondiscursive, poetic, symbolic, or even aesthetic in nature.”⁶⁵ Even as “prosy” prose and “exceedingly” plain speech, the book’s aural life always goes beyond mere teaching, opening toward a different sensory register. Since its publication, the book has been sonically remediated in the form of hymns, pageants, an oratorio, operas, and even a Broadway musical (sort of). All these point to precisely the “visceral and sensual” qualities of the book, so oft forgotten in the mute hermeneutics of (so much of) Mormon and religious studies. To read—to understand—these voices from the dust, perhaps we need to listen more carefully.

Notes

1. I am indebted to many colleagues and friends who gave feedback on earlier versions of this article: Benjamin Pratt, John Durham Peters, Rosalind Hackett, Michael Hicks, Eunice McMurray, Terryl Givens, Kim Berkey, William Graham, and Zach Davis and Laurel Ulrich’s Second Sunday discussion group.

2. The entire episode contrasts strikingly with the account given in Isaiah 6 of his own calling and throne theophany, with God sitting on his throne while being praised by angels. As in so many instances, the Bible’s sonic qualities are much more present here than in the Book of Mormon account: angelic voices shake the temple, Isaiah’s voice and mouth must be cleansed with a hot coal, God converses with Isaiah, and even his prophetic calling is described in terms of the sensory capabilities of the people he will preach to. Nephi includes this chapter in his mass-citation of Isaiah (see 2 Nephi 16) but gives no direct commentary on it. For a more extensive discussion of Lehi’s theophany, see Blake Thomas Ostler, “The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi: A Form-Critical Analysis,” *BYU Studies* 26, no. 4 (1986): 67–87.

3. William Graham’s landmark book, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1987), points to several of the themes I explore in this paper in the context of Christian and Islamic scriptural traditions. He argues that “virtually every scripture has traditionally functioned in large measure as vocal, not silent discourse. . . . Too often lost to us is the central place of the scriptural word recited, read aloud, chanted, sung, quoted in debate, memorized in childhood, meditated upon in

murmur and full voice, or consciously and unconsciously used as the major building block of public and private discourse” (ix). While I am less interested in the oral uses of scripture he enumerates, I share his guiding insight—that scripture is sound as well as (or sometimes prior to and more emphatically than) writing.

4. A further reception history might then go on to consider the ways the book was preached, evangelized, quoted, memorized and recited, and often musicalized from some of Parley P. Pratt’s earliest hymn-texts to the spate of Mormon pageants that emerged beginning around 1930, and from art music oratorios and operas to the recent Broadway musical. For present purposes, I set aside this post-publication reception of the text, however intriguing the many sonic repurposings of this (already) sonic scripture may be.

5. Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 87.

6. Terryl Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 51, 209ff. Givens cites Bakhtin specifically in several other places in drawing on his formulations of “authoritative discourse” (80–81) and “internal persuasiveness” (176). Polyphony and dialogism, two of Bakhtin’s hallmark theoretical contributions to literary theory, go uncited by Givens, presumably because of how widespread their usage has become. I return to this point later, but these Bakhtinisms unfortunately pull Givens from a literal realm of sound into a metaphorical realm of theory. Thus polyphony (literally “many-voicedness”) and dialogism are denied their original sonic characteristics, unintentionally obfuscating the book’s insistence on its own aurality.

7. Hundreds of years later in the book’s narrative, the failure of writing-as-medium to transmit the sensory power of orality is noted again by another narrator-prophet named Nephi, when Jesus prays for the Lehite multitudes gathered at the temple. This Nephi vacillates in his assessment: he first notes that Jesus “prayed to the Father, and *the things which he prayed cannot be written*, and the multitude did bear record who heard him” (3 Nephi 17:15, emphasis added). But then drawing on the language of Paul’s epistles (themselves a citation of earlier scripture), Nephi’s account continues: “The eye hath never seen, neither hath the ear heard, before, so great and marvelous things as we saw and heard Jesus speak unto the Father” (3 Nephi 17:16; see 1 Corinthians 2:9). But not only have these sensations never been experienced, they cannot be reproduced in any medium: “*And no tongue can speak, neither can there be written by any man*, neither can the hearts of men conceive so great and marvelous things as we both saw and heard Jesus speak” (3 Nephi 17:18, emphasis added). The passage at first affirms the first Nephi’s point of view—Jesus’ prayed utterance, full of groanings (17:14), was

too powerful to be written; then, upon more reflection, it goes further, noting the impossibility of any kind of reproduction or transmission. The same human irreproducibility marks Jesus' next prayer, as well (19:32–34).

8. The Book of Mormon's descriptions of its writing systems offer yet another intriguing point of convergence with broader discussions of contemporary media theory, particularly interest in the complex relationship between sound and alphabetic character in the work of media theorists like Sybille Krämer, Friedrich Kittler, and more controversially, classicist Barry Powell. While most of those discussions focus on Greek, the non-verifiable nature of the Book of Mormon script offers an entry point into a more speculative world of voice-writing and sound-character relations, consciously appropriated and distorted over time. See Sybille Krämer, "'Schriftbildlichkeit' oder: Über eine (fast) vergessene Dimension der Schrift," in *Bild, Schrift, Zahl*, edited by Sybille Krämer and Horst Bredekamp (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2003), 157–76; Wolfgang Ernst and Friedrich Kittler, eds., *Die Geburt des Vokalalphabets aus dem Geist der Poesie: Schrift, Zahl und Ton im Medienverbund* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2006); and two books by Barry Powell, *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and *Writing: Theory and History of the Technology of Civilization* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

9. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 293–94. Bakhtin makes a similar point elsewhere, noting: "Our speech, that is, all our utterances (including our creative works), is filled with others' words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of 'our-ownness'" (Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, translated by Vern W. McGee [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986], 89). Once again, in Moroni's reformulation of the "voice from the dust," God seems to be a co-creator of this haunting speech with human beings (at least prophets).

10. See Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006) and Michel Poizat, *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992).

11. See John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961); R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (New York: Knopf, 1977); Pierre Schaeffer, "Acousmatics," in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, edited by Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Continuum, 2004), 76–81; and Brian Kane, "The Acousmatic Voice," in *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 180–221. Several instances in the episode between Christ's death and his appearance to the Lehites

are also suggestive of Roman Jakobson's "phatic function" of language, which serves to establish communication and ensure that a channel is open for sending transmissions (i.e., speech), in "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, edited by Thomas Sebeok (New York: Wiley, 1960), 350–77, especially 355. These particular events also echo other Christian narratives (e.g., Jesus' baptism in the New Testament, his transfiguration) and the official account of Joseph Smith's own First Vision (see Joseph Smith—History 1:17).

12. John Durham Peters writes, "Like calendars and clocks, towers mediate between heaven and earth: they point upward to the sky, but thereby gain more advantage over the earth's surface. . . . A tower is a fulcrum, providing mechanical advantage for the eye and favorable acoustics for the ear, and is thus a power technology par excellence." In addition to examples of radio, television, and cell phone towers, Peters also draws on examples of towers from the Tower of Babel and Aztec temples to lighthouses and meteorological outposts. See John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 233ff.

13. For Lacan, the "object voice" is "a remainder" after "the reduction of the voice that phonology has attempted," or in other words, after all signifying features of language are removed. See Dolar, *A Voice*, 35–36.

14. Two particularly strong treatments of the voice as a material force are Roland Barthes's classic essay, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image Music Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 179–89, and once again Mladen Dolar's *A Voice and Nothing More*, especially 34–57. Both deal extensively with questions of timbre, vocal production, and the body, along with its consequences for a broader idea(l) of "voice." But the Book of Mormon takes the materiality of voice farther, giving it power to affect the physical world directly.

15. Other episodes in the book emphasize sound as a communicative medium more overtly, such as King Benjamin's tower, real-time messengers, and the ensuing call-and-response with his people (a covenant *in* and *about* sound, and specifically names; see Mosiah 2–5); Alma the Younger's angelic narratives, including his accounts of being visited by an angel (Mosiah 27, Alma 36) and also his meditation on possessing an angel's voice (Alma 29); or the disembodied voices presaging Christ's visit to the Americas (3 Nephi 8–11). But the unusual set of sonic interactions in this prison account—among prophets, prison guards, angels, and architecture—offers a more striking illustration of how sound embeds itself in narrative, shaping events and human interactions.

16. For an overview of Joseph Smith's life and work in the 1820s, see Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 30–108.

17. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 71–73.
18. Givens, *Hand of Mormon*, 30–32.
19. Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents, Volumes 1–5* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2003), 1: 530.
20. Royal Skousen, “How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 (1998): 24.
21. Emma noted in the same 1856 interview, for example, that “even the word *Sarah* [or *Sariah*, in some accounts] he could not pronounce at first, but had to spell it, and I would pronounce it for him.” See Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1: 530. For similar accounts using the name *Sariah*, see Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 26. For Whitmer’s statements, see Lyndon Cook, *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Provo: Grandin Book Company, 1991), 124.
22. Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*, 26.
23. *Ibid.* See also Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 70.
24. Oliver Cowdery, “Testimonies of Oliver Cowdery and Martin Harris,” *The Latter-Day Saints’ Millennial Star*, vol. 21, no. 34 (August 20, 1859): 544.
25. Skousen, “How Joseph Smith Translated,” 24–27.
26. Givens, *Hand of Mormon*, 51.
27. For a more in-depth treatment of the significance of Jesus’ commentary about the teachings of Samuel the Lamanite, see Jared Hickman, “*The Book of Mormon as Amerindian Apocalypse*,” *American Literature* 86, no. 3 (2014): 429–61.
28. Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet, and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: S.W. Richards, 1853), 121.
29. *Ibid.*, 121–22.
30. *Ibid.*, 164.
31. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1902), 1:54.
32. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.
33. *Ibid.*, 55, emphasis added.
34. *Ibid.*, 56, emphasis added.
35. *Ibid.*, 57, emphasis added.
36. *Ibid.*

37. John Gilbert, personal statement, reproduced in Royal Skousen, “Worthy of Another Look: John Gilbert’s 1892 Account of the 1830 Printing of the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 21, no. 2 (2012): 71.

38. For a gripping account of punctuation and its discontents, see Jennifer DeVere Brody, *Punctuation: Art, Politics, and Play* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008).

39. Grandin in Skousen, “Worthy of Another Look,” 71.

40. Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 171.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*, 175.

43. Breck England, *The Life and Thought of Orson Pratt* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1985), 216.

44. Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, 148.

45. Gilbert in Skousen, “Worthy of Another Look,” 71.

46. Benjamin Winchester, “Introduction to the Subject of the Book of Mormon,” *Gospel Reflector* 1, no. 5 (March 1841): 99.

47. *Ibid.*

48. Givens, *Hand of Mormon*, 64.

49. Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 43–44.

50. Strikingly, for Peters, the deadness in question is sometimes not literal—communication at a distance can be difficult to distinguish from it, while the act of interpretation (e.g., of a text) shares the same paradigm and problems of communicating with the dead. See John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 149–50.

51. On the Anthon-Harris exchange, see Richard Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 64–65. For more on the verses in question, see Isaiah 29:11 and 2 Nephi 27:8–11.

52. Parley P. Pratt, *The Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt* (Chicago: Law, King and Law, 1874), 37–38. Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (Hartford, Conn.: American Publishing Company, 1872), 127ff.

53. Ezra Taft Benson, “Flooding the Earth with the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign* (Nov. 1988): 4. Other major talks by Benson on the Book of Mormon include “The Book of Mormon Is the Word of God,” *Ensign* (May 1975): 63–65, and “The Book of Mormon—Keystone of Our Religion,” *Ensign* (Nov. 1986): 5–7.

54. John Miles Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

55. Twain, *Roughing It*, 127.

56. Foley, *How to Read*, 133.

57. Dell Hymes, *Now I Know Only So Far: Essays in Ethnopoetics* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 234.

58. Although they approach the question from completely different directions, both Alberto Manguel and Friedrich Kittler conceive of reading historically as a sonic experience and, critically, one in which religious (and specifically Christian) reading practices played an integral role in the emergence of an interiorized, “silent” practice of reading. See Manguel, *History of Reading*, 41–55, and Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, translated by Michael Metteer with Chris Cullens (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992), 27–36, 148–64.

59. Foley, *How to Read*, 109ff.

60. Twain, *Roughing It*, 127–28.

61. Brant Gardner, “Does ‘And it came to pass’ Come to Pass Too Often?” *Meridian Magazine*, July 7, 2004, <http://ldsmag.com/article-1-207>.

62. According to a 1988 article in the Church-owned newspaper, the *Deseret News*, the first recordings of the Book of Mormon on tape were not for general distribution but for the visually impaired. See “Church is Offering Book of Mormon Tapes to Members at Low Cost,” *Deseret News*, October 22, 1988, <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/22790/lds-church-is-offering-book-of-mormon-tapes-to-members-at-low-cost>.

63. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, “Siren Recursions,” in *Kittler Now: Current Perspectives in Kittler Studies*, edited by Stephen Sale and Laura Salisbury (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 75.

64. Two of Derrida’s early books have particular relevance here: Jacques Derrida, *La Voix et le phénomène* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967) and *La Dissémination* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972). More recently, Jonathan Sterne’s “audiovisual litany” has reminded us of the facile assumptions that underscore many binary distinctions between sound and vision (e.g., hearing is spherical, immersive, interior, etc., while vision is directional, perspectival, concerned with surfaces, etc.). See Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 14–19, and “The Theology of Sound: A Critique of Orality,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 36, no. 2 (2011): 207–25.

65. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 113.