

# Looking Beyond the Mark

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ONE OF THE CENTRAL THEMES OF THE Book of Mormon is Jacob's eloquent expression in Jacob 4:14, that the blindness of the Jews "came by looking beyond the mark." Unfortunately, this phrase, along with its verse and chapter, tends to be overlooked between Jacob's oft-quoted sermon in chapter 2 and the allegory of the olive tree in chapter 5. Yet chapter 4 is much more than a transitional chapter.

In fact, the very position of this phrase near the center of his small book may be Jacob's attempt to draw attention to it. His words come at the center of verse 14, between an explanation of what the Jews wanted and a description of what they got. In addition, verse 14 itself is the thematic center of chapter 4, with verses 1–13 declaring that all the holy prophets had known and testified of Christ and with verses 15–19 listing the consequences of ignoring the testimonies of the prophets concerning Him. Furthermore, chapter 4 occurs near the middle of Jacob 1–6.<sup>1</sup> (Chapter 7

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appears to be a later addition to the first six chapters.<sup>2</sup>) Chapters 1–3 explain the sins of the Nephites and warn them that they need to turn to Christ. Chapters 5–6 allegorize and illustrate the consequences of sin for the history of the house of Israel and prophesy of the eventual redemption of the chosen people. If Jacob had wanted to draw attention to his expressive phrase, their “blindness came by looking beyond the mark,” he could not have done a better job without resorting to bolded, italicized, and highlighted words, something that would have been difficult on metal plates. In other words, as I shall explain, this short phrase in the middle of verse 14 and near the middle of Jacob 1–6 contains unique and important information in its own right, rich in significance both for Jacob’s audience and for Latter-day Saints.

One key to understanding Jacob’s expressive phrase is to be aware of the literary context within chapter 4, including the history of the house of Israel that is its backdrop. A second key is to examine the meaning of the English words. This latter point is important because the nuances of words change over time, even in the short interval between the publication of the Book of Mormon in 1830 and the current editions. With clarification of the literary context and word meanings, the message Jacob intended for his readers will become more apparent. And finally, this paper would not be complete without an application of Jacob’s message to us.

### **The Literary Context**

Chapter 4 itself provides the literary context to understanding verse 14. After a short digression about the difficulty of writing on metal plates, chapter 4 begins with Jacob reminding the Nephites that “all the holy prophets” who lived prior to their day “knew of Christ” (v. 4).<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, all the prophets and all those who believed on their words “had a hope of his glory many hundred years before” Jesus’s coming in the flesh (v. 4). Indeed, from Adam through Noah and down to Lehi, faithful people “believed in Christ and worshiped the Father in his name”; and, because of their faith in Christ, their obedience to the law they had been given was “sanctified unto [them] for righteousness” (v. 5).

In fact, one of the purposes of God’s laws, whether given to Adam or to Moses, was to direct its faithful adherents to Christ. As Nephi explained, “For this end hath the law of Moses been given; and all things which have been given of God from the beginning of the world, unto man, are the typifying of him” (2 Nephi 11:4). Or as the Apostle Paul succinctly stated, “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth” (Romans 10:4).

After this discourse on the relationship between faith, obedience, law, and other significant aspects of the plan of salvation, Jacob returned in verse 13 to his beginning theme of the chapter: “But, behold, we are not witnesses alone” of the plan of salvation and of Christ’s part in that plan, “for God also spake them unto prophets of old.” Nevertheless, as Jacob went on to say in the beginning of verse 14, many Israelites rejected the testimony of the prophets concerning Christ and refused to accept the gospel. Some of the prophets, such as Zenock, were even killed because they “testified of the Son of God” (Alma 33:17). Lehi himself was the target of an assassination plot in Jerusalem because he bore witness of Christ (see 1 Nephi 1:20). Jeremiah was imprisoned for his testimony (see Jeremiah 32:2). Those who rejected the testimony of the prophets thereby also refused to allow the law they had been given to direct their souls to Christ.

Jacob, though not having been an eyewitness himself, would certainly have heard his family talk about the circumstances that led Lehi to flee Jerusalem. Therefore, when he described the people in the kingdom of Judah as “a stiffnecked people,” who “despised the words of plainness, and killed the prophets, and sought for things they could not understand” (Alma 4:14), his information came directly from those who had witnessed it. In their rebellion against the gospel’s simple message and in their desire for a more complicated and arcane counterfeit, the Jews would, as Jacob prophesied, become blind, and in their blindness they would stumble. In hindsight, it is easy to see that because of their stumbling they would fall spiritually, socially, militarily, and politically.<sup>4</sup>

Jacob, however, was more interested in the spiritual causes and consequences of Judah’s rebellion. He stated that the reason the Jews were blind was that God took “away his plainness from them, and delivered unto them many things which they cannot understand” (v. 14). Why would a loving God give the Jews something that was complicated and difficult to comprehend? Did not God want them to have the plainness of His gospel? Had He not offered them the simple truths of the gospel on numerous occasions? The problem was that they had repeatedly rebuffed Him. Therefore, when they rejected His plain and precious gospel, He gave them exactly what they had insisted on; He gave them “things they cannot understand,” complicated and obfuscated ideas, “because they desired it.” The result was that they would “stumble” and fall. They would “reject the stone” (v. 15), the rock of their salvation (see Deuteronomy 32:15; compare Psalm 89:26), and forget their God (see Isaiah 17:10). The stone, or rock, that they would “refuse” was and would always be “the head stone of the corner” (Psalm 118:22). Nevertheless, with or without

their cooperation and acceptance, God had already, before the foundation of the world, laid “in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation” (Isaiah 28:16), and that “chief corner stone” is “Jesus Christ himself” (Ephesians 2:20).

To summarize the literary context, the phrase “which blindness came by looking beyond the mark” comes in the middle of a declaration that the Jews had largely rejected the testimonies of the prophets concerning their Lord and their God and would therefore reject Him again at His coming. Specifically, verse 14 explains that the Jews of Jacob’s day wanted things they could not understand and that God had granted them their unwise wish, thereby leading them to reject Christ as their sure foundation. With the literary context and historical background made clear, I can now turn to Jacob’s words.

### The Mark as a Metaphor

What precisely does “looking beyond the mark” mean, and what kind of blindness does it cause? The fact that Jacob recorded this phrase without commentary or explanation means that he expected his audience to understand what he meant. No doubt the Nephites knew from personal experience the real-life setting from which Jacob drew his metaphor, and they understood the symbolic significance of this phrase within the context of Jacob’s longer discourse. However, the plain meaning of the text often eludes contemporary readers, despite the Prophet’s excellent translation, mostly because the key word, *mark*, has shifted meanings since the Book of Mormon was published.

Of the many attested meanings for *mark*, the meaning Jacob intended can be narrowed down to a few possibilities by making some fundamental observations that will lead to

a simple question. Whatever a mark was to Jacob, it had to have been an object or a thing with which the Nephites would have been familiar. If not, Jacob would have had to provide an explanation of it. In addition, similar word usage in the Old Testament suggests that a mark must also have been a familiar object in the world of Jerusalem. Joseph's translation from the small plates assumes that a nineteenth-century American reader would also know exactly what a mark was. In other words, a mark must be something that was well known in ancient Israel, in early Book of Mormon times, and in Joseph Smith's day.

It is also obvious that looking at a mark was desirable; it was the right thing to do, whether one was an Israelite or a Lehite or, by extrapolation, nineteenth-century American. Therefore, whatever the object was, it was something that should be looked at, that was good to look at, and that, if not looked at, brought failure. The simple question then is, which of the many common objects in Nephite-Israelite or nineteenth-century American everyday life was the mark to which Jacob referred? As I will show, it is still a fairly common object in our day, but we use a different word for it.

It would seem at first that the most likely and direct place to begin looking for the meaning of the noun *mark* would be in a dictionary. This approach, however, can easily lead to confusion because all dictionaries contain a bewildering array of possibilities. Even Noah Webster's 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language* contains nineteen definitions among three entries for *mark*.<sup>5</sup> More recent dictionaries, which do not usually give the meanings of words in their historical context, can be just as confusing. Therefore, an indirect approach that takes advantage of historical context may prove more fruitful. For example, is *mark* used in the King James Bible, and if so, what does it mean? *Mark* occurs twenty-one times in the Old and New

Testaments. By limiting the search to the Old Testament (Jacob spoke of the Jews in Lehi's day) and by eliminating all occurrences except nouns, only seven verses contain the word *mark*. Three of those seven verses can be eliminated because they do not meet the criteria mentioned above, namely, that a mark was an object that, when used in its real-life setting, was supposed to be looked at and that it was desirable to look at.

With only four Old Testament verses left to consider, 1 Samuel 20:20, Job 7:20, 16:12, and Lamentations 3:12, the meaning of *mark* quickly becomes evident. In all four of these passages, *mark* as a noun consistently and exclusively denotes a target. The most straightforward example is 1 Samuel 20:20. In the context preceding this verse, Jonathan, Saul's son, had decided on a signal to let his friend David know, three days hence, whether it was safe for David to come to a feast Saul was giving. But Jonathan had to be able to let David know without anyone at his father's court realizing that Jonathan had contacted David. Therefore, Jonathan told David to hide himself three days later by a large rock known to both of them. Jonathan would then go out with his servant on that day as if to practice with his bow and arrows near the rock. He would then "shoot three arrows on the side [of the rock]," as though he "shot at a mark" (1 Samuel 20:20). The servant would then be sent to fetch the arrows. If Jonathan called to his servant that the arrows were between them, it meant it was safe for David to come to the feast. If Jonathan called to the servant that the arrows were beyond the servant, that was the sign for David not to appear at the feast.

From the context of this passage, it is clear that the specific meaning of *mark* is a target for bow and arrow practice. This meaning is confirmed by the *Oxford English Dictionary*.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the word *target* in its current meaning

is not attested in Modern English until a few decades before the translation of the Book of Mormon.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, the word *mark* already meant target in the sixteenth century, decades before the King James Bible was translated, as is evident in the 1535 Coverdale translation of Lamentations 3:12: “He hath bent his bowe, and made me as it were a marck to shute at.”<sup>8</sup> It is from this traditional meaning of *mark* that English has derived the noun *marksman*, the verbal phrase “mark your target,” and the expression “He is a marked man.” Therefore, when the Prophet Joseph used the word *mark* in the English translation of the Book of Mormon, his nineteenth-century readers would have known that a mark was something to aim at.<sup>9</sup>

In the context of Nephite culture, *mark* meaning a target in Jacob 4:14 also makes perfect sense. The Nephites would have been familiar with targets because their lives partly depended on their ability to hunt with bow and arrow. Even the children in the audience would have had experience with various marks they had used. That is why Jacob would have felt no need to explain what a mark was, or even to clarify why looking beyond a target would cause blindness. (It would be anachronistic to imagine that the Lehites or any other ancient people had bull’s-eye targets. In fact, I am unaware of the existence in our day any examples of ancient targets. In considering targets in Lehi’s day, including the biblical examples, it should be born in mind that any object can serve as a target, whether or not that object was ever intended to be used as a target. In fact, most readers can list many objects they might have used as targets that were only targets because they were singled out to be shot at. It would not have been any different in ancient times.)

Knowing the meaning of the key word in Jacob’s phrase also leads to an explanation of the “blindness” that came



by looking beyond the target. If a person looks beyond a target, the target becomes blurry. In fact, no matter where a person looks, if it is not at the target directly, the target will be, at best, fuzzy. Looking even farther afield means that the target may not be visible at all. In any case, with respect to being able to hit the target with an arrow, looking beyond the target means that the target is not in focus and that the archer will miss it. Thus, it is not that the Jews could not see at all. It is, rather, that the farther they looked beyond the mark, the more they became blind to what they should have been looking at and the less likely they were to hit it. Therefore, the blindness of the Jews was not total blindness; rather, it was a relative lack of seeing what they should be seeing.

### **The Symbolism of the Mark**

With the meaning of the metaphor and its setting in Jacob's world made clear, I can now turn to an explanation of the symbolic meaning of "their blindness . . . came by looking beyond the mark." The general topic of Jacob 4 is Jesus Christ. Specifically, as mentioned above, the message can be divided into two parts. (1) The Nephite prophets and "all the holy prophets" knew of Christ's mortal mission long before He was born. (2) Jacob's audience should not reject Christ as the Jews in Jerusalem would do, but rather, they should accept Christ and "be reconciled unto him through the atonement" (4:11).

Given that Jesus Christ is the general and specific subject of the chapter, *a priori* it can be expected that Christ and the mark are one and the same. Indeed, one verse in particular in chapter 4 seems to provide a hint on how to read verse 14. Jacob explained that his people worshiped the Father in Christ's name and that "for this intent [because we believed in Christ] we keep the law of Moses, it

pointing our souls to [Christ]" (4:5). The wording "the law of Moses . . . [pointed] our souls to Christ" appears to be borrowed from the vocabulary of aiming and shooting, whether for target practice or for food. Thus, the mark that the Jews, the Nephites, and all those who read the Book of Mormon today were meant to look at is Christ.

The phrase "[the law] pointing our souls to him" also confirms, as stated above, that the purpose of God's law was to direct their aim at the Savior, that is, to lead those who kept the law of God in the proper spirit to Jesus. In terms of the law of Moses, if the Israelites had allowed the law to point their souls to Christ, then the law would have been "sanctified unto [them] for righteousness, even as it was accounted unto Abraham in the wilderness to be obedient unto the commands of God in offering up his son Isaac, which is a similitude of God and his Only Begotten Son" (4:5). Similarly, Adam's obedience to the law of sacrifice after he left the Garden of Eden drew his attention to Jesus, in that the sacrifice he performed was intended as "a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father" (Moses 5:7). Clearly, from Adam through Abraham and Moses down to Jacob, all the performances and ordinances of the laws were designed to direct the participants to the target, Jesus Christ. He is the mark we need to focus on.

### **Applying Jacob's Metaphor in Our Day**

Jacob did not mention the "blindness" of the Jews so that the Nephites could cast symbolic stones. And neither should Latter-day Saints criticize the Jews. Rather than find fault, Latter-day Saints should do as Nephi, who likened "all scriptures unto [himself], that it might be for [his] profit and learning" (1 Nephi 19:23). Therefore, after coming to an understanding of the setting of the metaphor

and of how Jacob used it to symbolize what we should and should not be doing, the question remains, how does Jacob's teaching apply today in the life of Latter-day Saints?

Jacob described a specific situation, where the Jews were "looking beyond the mark." As he mentioned in the same verse, the things they were looking at were things hard to understand. Yet Jacob's choice of metaphor suggests that it is possible to look in all kinds of directions other than at the target, not just beyond it. Looking in front of the target would have the same overall result. Similarly, looking to either side leads to the same outcome. Looking 180 degrees away from the mark would be the most disastrous. When applying this symbolism to gospel living today, the question becomes, as it was for the Nephites, what could be so important that we would allow it to draw our attention away from the Savior?

The most obvious distractor from Christ is sin. It is hard to see straight and to stay focused when sin has turned our head and has clouded our vision. It may even be that the measure of a sin's seriousness is directly proportional to the number of degrees that that sin diverts our gaze away from Jesus. The solution, of course, is to look towards Christ, no matter how painful it is, and to focus on Him. As the Book of Mormon says, "If ye will turn to [Christ] with full purpose of heart, and put your trust in him, and serve him with all diligence of mind, if ye do this, he will, according to his own will and pleasure, deliver you out of [spiritual] bondage" (Mosiah 7:33). Only by focusing squarely on Christ is it possible to see the way out of sin; there is no other way.

But, it seems that Jacob also wanted to teach the important lesson that sins are not the only distractors that pull our vision away from Christ. That point can be illustrated

by appealing to a modern analog to the ancient metaphor introduced by Jacob, that is, by envisioning a contemporary bull's-eye target.<sup>10</sup> When scoring a session on such a target, various values are assigned to the concentric circles that compose the mark, with a hit in the center receiving the most points. Hitting an inner circle is better than hitting an outer circle. Hitting the outer circle is better than not hitting the target at all. But grouping all of the shots in the bull's-eye is the goal.

So it is in Jacob's metaphor. Christ is the bull's-eye, the mark. But there are other distractors, other circles, to look at, some not as far away from the mark as unabashed sin. Many of these lesser targets are noble, good, and worthy goals, such as being a 100-percent home or visiting teacher. In fact, not achieving desirable visiting and home teaching goals, or any other worthy Church objective, may be symptomatic of having lost focus on Christ.

Nevertheless, any virtue, such as being a 100-percent home or visiting teacher, when focused on exclusively, can divert attention away from Christ. In the article "Our Strengths Can Become Our Downfall," Elder Dallin H. Oaks issued the warning, and this was no doubt part of the warning Jacob intended for the Nephites and for us: "Weakness is not our only vulnerability. Satan can also attack us where we think we are strong. . . . He will approach us through the greatest talents and spiritual gifts we possess. If we are not wary, Satan can cause our spiritual downfall by corrupting us through our strengths."<sup>11</sup>

Jacob had previously warned the Nephites about taking pride in their achievements, whether in the form of accumulating wealth vis-à-vis their poorer Nephite neighbors or in self-declared righteousness in contrast to the "filthy" Lamanites. Jacob's warning, which is intrinsic in his metaphor, can be expressed differently. In "seeking for

things they could not understand” (and it is important to note that the things they could not understand may not have been evil per se), the Jews began looking away from Christ. With their gaze diverted away from Him they could then be led to commit an inherent evil: they would “reject the stone [Christ] upon which they might build and have safe foundation” (4:15).

In other words, if a person concentrates on something other than Jesus long enough, even though it may be a noble and desirable goal, that target may begin to loom larger and more important than the Mark that should draw our attention, often with unwanted and unexpected results. President Boyd K. Packer, in speaking of this danger, said, “Some members of the Church who should know better pick out a hobby key or two [on the gospel keyboard] and tap them incessantly, to the irritation of those around them. They can dull their own spiritual sensitivities. They lose track that there is a fullness of the gospel. . . . They may reject the fullness in preference to a favorite note. This becomes exaggerated and distorted, leading them away into apostasy.”<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, President Packer’s analogy hints at another symbolic lesson that can be gleaned from Jacob’s metaphor. Picking at one or two notes on the piano may lead the beginning piano student, who can see other black and white keys, to want to play the whole keyboard. To put this in terms of Jacob’s metaphor, if I can see the outer ring of the target, I could take aim and possibly hit it. But seeing the outer ring almost involuntarily leads my eye to follow the concentric circles to the bull’s-eye. Once seen and focused on, taking aim at the bull’s-eye is only natural. Likewise, the joy of achieving any gospel objective to the best of our ability will hopefully create in us the desire to experience the full range of joy that the gospel of

Jesus Christ has to offer. In other words, if I am looking in Christ's general direction, it could happen that my gaze would be drawn to Him. If I am not looking in His general direction, it is unlikely that I will see Him.

## Summary

Jacob's metaphor in the middle of Jacob 4:14 captures one of the salient messages of the Book of Mormon. Any strength or weakness that draws us away from focusing on Christ could lead to disastrous consequences. Conversely, if our focus is on Jesus, then all other strengths or weaknesses remain in proper check. Returning to the image of a modern bull's-eye, if the concentric circles are envisioned not as rings but as whole disks layered one on top of the other, with the bull's-eye on top, then hitting the bull's-eye also means hitting all the other circles. With an eye single to and a keen focus on the Mark, blindness will never be a problem. As Heber C. Kimball said, "I will try to keep my eye on the mark, that is, Christ, the Son of the Living God."<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

1. In the 1830 Book of Mormon, there are about eight pages in the book of Jacob before Jacob 4:14 and a little more than nine pages after it to the end of the present chapter 6.

2. This is not the place for a formal discussion of this point. Suffice it to say that the last verse of chapter 6 is clearly a farewell statement, concluding with "Amen."

3. The concept that prophets who lived before Christ knew of Him is not new to Christians. Paul in the New Testament taught something very similar when he said that Abraham was taught the gospel and therefore was counted as righteous because of his faith (see Galatians 3:6).

4. Within a short time after Lehi's departure from the kingdom of Judah for a new promised land, Nebuchadnezzar sent his forces for the third and last time against the old promised land, Judah, with devastating results. Judah's reliance on a strong military, on political alliances, and on false prophets, rather than on the Lord their God, would prove futile and fatal. Even though Jerusalem had been miraculously saved from the Assyrians a little over a hundred years earlier, this time nothing, not even the temple in Jerusalem, would be spared. And, as Lehi had prophesied, many of the inhabitants of Judah who survived the brutality of the victorious Babylon campaign were taken captive to Babylon.

5. Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language* (San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1987, reprint), s.v. "mark."

6. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, CD-ROM edition, s.v. "mark," 23a gives as one of its definitions for *mark* the word *target*: "A target, butt, or other object set up to be aimed at with a missile or projectile. Hence *transf.*, the thing that is or may be aimed at in shooting or throwing." Under the seventh definition of *mark* in Webster's 1828 dictionary, it states, "Any thing to which a missile weapon may be directed." It would seem that by 1828, *mark* in American English had lost its primary meaning of something to aim at. Yet *target* had not yet fully replaced it (see note 7).

7. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. *target* noun, 3a. The first attestation of *target* as something to aim at appears in English in 1757. The basic meaning of *target* as "light round shield or buckler," however, is used earlier. For example, the "target" worn by Goliath between his shoulders (1 Samuel 17:6) was a shield, not a mark to aim at. Webster's 1828 dictionary under *target* gives the "shield or buckler" definition but then states that a target is also "a mark for the artillery to fire at in their practice." It is interesting that Webster does not mention *target* as a mark for bow and arrow or for small arms, although *mark* seems to have already lost its primary meaning as something to aim at (see note 6).

8. Citation in *Oxford English Dictionary*.

9. This must have been the case despite the definitions given in *American Dictionary*, where, if given full credence, American English would not seem to have a regular word for a small arms target. (See notes 6 and 7 for evidence from the 1828 dictionary.) Not having such a word seems rather impossible, given the importance of hunting in America in Joseph Smith's day. Be that as it may, the fact that the Prophet's translation uses the older word, *mark*, and not the newer one, *target*, is another indication that the Book of Mormon translation reflects a more archaic style of English than might be expected from a book published in 1830.

10. I am unaware of any examples of concentric contrasting circles employed as targets in the ancient world. Nevertheless, the point being made follows easily from an analysis of Jacob's words.

11. Dallin H. Oaks, "Our Strengths Can Become Our Downfall," *Ensign*, October 1994, 12.

12. Boyd K. Packer, "The Only True and Living Church," in Conference Report, October 1971, 10.

13. *President Heber C. Kimball's Journal*, volume 7 of Faith-Promoting Series (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1882), 79.