

## “Retain All Their Oaths”

Lehitic Covenant and Secret  
Combinations in Alma 37

*Kimberly M. Berkey*

Alma 36 and 37 provide a window into a ritual that, although readers are meant to assume it has occurred many times in Nephite history, here occurs with unusual theological detail. These chapters narrate the transfer of Nephite records from one record keeper to another and hence form a prime opportunity to examine how these record keepers understood the purpose of the plates that would one day become the Book of Mormon. On those terms alone, this selection from Alma’s sermonic output warrants careful attention. But Alma’s words to Helaman on this occasion are additionally significant in light of the discovery, within Alma’s lifetime, of another record that will directly impact Helaman’s role as record keeper. With the discovery of twenty-four gold plates from the “land northward,” not only has a new book been added to the cache of which Helaman is taking possession, but, along with it, the Nephites must adapt their understanding of records and how they function in salvation history.

As he passes on the artifacts in his custody, Alma must explain for his son where these Jaredite plates came from, how to understand their divine function alongside the Nephite objects in the collection, and what this implies for Helaman's task of preserving these items.

This means, then, that Alma 36–37 functions as a window into Nephite theology about records at the precise moment when that theology undergoes a significant shift. Prior to this point, Nephite writers have understood their texts to be largely an isolated matter internal to Lehi's family alone, a way of bringing the future Lamanite remnant to a knowledge of their familial covenant. How, then, should they frame an encounter with plates produced by a noncovenant (Jaredite) people who are not part of that family story? What are they to make of the frightening specter of a nation's complete annihilation, a destruction so thorough that it fails to produce any remnant audience for its surviving record?

This paper examines the shifting Nephite theology of records in Alma 37 and asks how that theology influences the Book of Mormon's self-presentation to contemporary readers. What seems to haunt Alma about the Jaredite record in particular is the contagion of secret combinations, such that Alma 37's new theology of records is born directly from a confrontation between the Lehitic covenant framework of the Nephite writings and the secret combination threat conveyed by the Jaredite plates. This paper tracks that confrontation by way of the language of "keeping." To the traditional covenant language of "keeping" a record and "keeping" the commandments, Alma adds a third valence by encouraging Helaman to "keep" *back* certain details contained on the twenty-four gold plates. After outlining the structure of the text, the shifting terminology of "keeping," and the theological developments of which it is a symptom, the paper concludes by noting that both themes—Lehitic covenant and secret combinations—directly influence how the Book of Mormon presents itself and its task to modern-day readers.

## Structure

Structurally speaking, there seem to be at least three nested levels at which Alma frames the initiation of his son into the fraternal order of Nephite record keepers. The first is a threefold repetition of the Lehitic covenant that governs all of Alma 36–37, the second is the language of “commandment” that structures Alma 37 alone, and the third is the comparison of the Nephite and Jaredite records that sits between the chapter’s “commandment” language and forms the primary content of Alma 37:1–27.

At the first and broadest level, it is clear that Alma’s general guiding framework is the Lehitic covenant. His very first words to Helaman are nothing less than a full articulation of that foundational Nephite promise that “inasmuch as ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall prosper in the land” (Alma 36:1). This covenant promise is given in full no less than three times in Alma’s sermon (36:1, 30; 37:13) with abbreviated or slightly altered versions further punctuating the text at regular intervals (36:13; 37:15–16, 20, 43).<sup>1</sup> It is echoed as well in Alma’s talk of the record going “forth unto every nation,” being the object of generations of prophecy (Alma 37:4) and functioning as a primary means of bringing the Lamanites to repentance (37:9), as well as in Alma’s repetitive language of God’s “wise purpose” in preserving these plates (37:2, 12, 14, 18; compare 1 Nephi 9:5; Words of Mormon 1:7), all of which are themes traditionally associated with the Lehitic covenant. Alma straightforwardly frames the plates and their preservation in the covenant terms that have governed the Nephite record almost exclusively—terms that extend all the way back to Nephi, whose lifelong investment in Isaiah was explicitly motivated by that covenant, and terms that will persist forward all the way to the final record keeper, Moroni, whose title page announces that the book is “written to the Lamanites” in order that “they may know the covenants of the Lord.”<sup>2</sup> If there is nothing ultimately surprising about the fact that Alma adopts the dominant framework used by other Nephite record keepers, it is clear that in

this case the covenant serves an organizational, not just thematic role. At the broadest structural level, Alma hangs his words to Helaman on a scaffold built by a threefold repetition of the Lehitic covenant.

At the next level further down, however—this time focusing on Alma 37 alone—another structure comes into view. Echoing the triple iteration of the Lehitic covenant, Alma gives three direct commands to his son pursuant to Helaman’s new role as record keeper. They are as follows:

- “And now, my son Helaman, I command you that ye take the records . . . and I also command you that ye keep a record of this people” (Alma 37:1–2).
- “I command you, my son Helaman, that ye be diligent in fulfilling all my words, and . . . in keeping the commandments of God” (Alma 37:20).
- “And now, my son, I command you that ye retain all their oaths, and their covenants, and their agreements” (Alma 37:27).

Given Alma’s obvious investment in the commandment language of the Lehitic promise followed by careful use of commandment language when outlining Helaman’s responsibilities regarding the plates, Alma intends to connect the general covenant frame directly to the specific responsibilities being laid on his son. When Alma encourages Helaman to “keep the commandments,” this is not simply a general recommendation of righteous living but rather an injunction to obey the particular mandates that form Helaman’s record-keeping obligations. To “keep the commandments” such that he can “prosper in the land,” Helaman must follow his father’s “commands”—to keep a record, keep the commandments, and retain certain oaths. The Lehitic covenant, when applied to Helaman, takes on content specific to the role of record keeper.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, Alma’s ability to populate a covenant frame with record-keeping content is illustrated by one of his most significant variations of the Lehitic covenant. After his third and final full iteration

of the covenant in Alma 37:13 (“And [God] said: If ye will keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land—but if ye keep not his commandments ye shall be cut off from his presence”), Alma immediately restates the covenant but assigns new consequences that apply specifically to Helaman’s custody of the plates: “And now behold, I tell you by the spirit of prophecy, that if ye transgress the commandments of God, behold, these things which are sacred shall be taken away from you . . . But if ye keep the commandments of God, . . . behold, no power of earth nor hell can take them from you” (Alma 37:15–16). Alma has here taken the general consequence of covenant breaking (“ye shall be cut off from [God’s] presence”) and replaced it with a consequence keyed directly to Helaman’s role as record keeper (“if ye transgress . . . these things [i.e., the plates] . . . shall be taken away from you”). In Alma’s hands, the Lehitic covenant becomes a vehicle for imbuing specific individual duties with the force of covenant obligation.

By the time Alma turns his attention to the plates themselves, the records have thus been doubly framed in commandment and covenant terms. Alma has both emphasized the Lehitic covenant in its most general form and in terms of commandments specific to Helaman’s care of the plates. He has reinforced the Lehitic covenant and given that covenant specific content. Of course, this double framing is also focused on the transmission of physical artifacts, and so naturally the third level of the chapter’s structure focuses on the two sets of records themselves, which are enclosed between the three specific commandments Alma gives to Helaman:

- A commandment 1 (Alma 37:1–2)
- B comments on the Nephite record (37:3–19)
- A commandment 2 (37:20)
- B comments on the Jaredite record (37:21–26)
- A commandment 3 (37:27)

As we might expect given this parallel framing, Alma’s comments about the two records contain several parallels. First, as mentioned

above, both sets of records have some sort of “keeping” associated with them. Helaman is commanded to “keep a record of this people” on the Nephite plates (Alma 37:1) and to simply “keep” the Jaredite record (Alma 37:21)—he is instructed to continue writing the Nephite narrative in the first case and to preserve the Jaredite plates in the second. Both plates, additionally, contain “mysteries” that will eventually be revealed (Alma 37:4, 21). The revelatory function of each record is further connected to an odd artifactual brightness. In the case of the Nephite record, for instance, Alma emphasizes that they cannot perform their function unless they “retain their brightness; yea, and they will retain their brightness” (Alma 37:5; compare 1 Nephi 5:19).<sup>4</sup> In the case of the Jaredite records, their revelatory function comes about by way of “a stone, which shall shine forth in darkness unto light” (Alma 37:23), a stone that Alma immediately connects to the “interpreters,” whose origin and purpose he then goes on to discuss at great length (37:24–26). Doubly framed by covenant language, Alma 37 displays two sets of plates that share in a revelation of “mysteries,” operate by way of shiny artifacts, and result in similar tasks framed in the language of “keeping.”

While the relationship between the two records will be discussed in more detail below, here it must simply be noted how dominant a role the Lehitic covenant plays in these chapters and how much Alma wants to understand both sets of plates in similar (if not identical) terms. Structurally speaking, the plates are set up as parallel artifacts nested inside several layers of covenant framing. Between the threefold repetition of the Lehitic covenant and Alma’s insistence on outlining his instructions to Helaman in the language of “commandment,” it is clear that the covenant is Alma’s guiding archetype for the role of records in Nephite life. Indeed, all of Alma’s own autobiographical associations with the Lehitic covenant in Alma 36 and all the specific covenant obligations he wants to lay on his son in Alma 37 are brought to bear on a mere twenty-seven verses of explanation and instruction about the plates, tying both records into the available theological paradigm by which Nephite record keepers have

understood the role of plates and writing since at least their national namesake, Nephi. For all of Alma’s meticulous structuring, however, and for all the parallels through which he can associate the newly discovered Jaredite record with the familiar role of the Nephite record, there are signs that the twenty-four gold plates do not fit as tidily within the Lehitic covenant frame as Alma might wish. Something about these records not only unsettles Alma personally but also unsettles the sufficiency of the covenant frame into which he attempts to place them.

## Theology

For all the surface-level similarities between Alma’s framing of the Nephite records and the twenty-four gold plates, it doesn’t take much inspection to realize that Alma’s theology regarding the Nephite plates is vastly more developed than that regarding the Jaredite plates. As we have already seen in structural terms, Alma’s theology is centered squarely on the Lehitic covenant, which contains several elements already familiar to readers of the Book of Mormon: a record miraculously preserved (Alma 37:4–5) that will bring the Lamanites to repentance (37:9) and be kept for God’s “wise purpose” and the benefit of future generations (37:14, 18). Thanks, it seems, to the long legacy of this covenant framework among the Nephite record keepers, Alma’s treatment of the Nephite plates manifests more development and sophistication in grammatical, theological, and temporal terms.

Grammatically speaking, for instance, the verb *keep* takes on more complements in the case of the Nephite record than it does with the Jaredite record. Alma instructs his son not merely to “keep” the plates but specifically to “keep *a record* of this people” and to “keep all these things *sacred* . . . even as I have kept them” (Alma 37:2; emphasis added throughout). “Keep” here takes on both a precise object and an adjective, both of which are then tied to the fact and mode of Alma’s own keeping (“even as I have kept them”), and thus ties Helaman’s

future keeping into the past legacy of record keepers before him. In the case of the twenty-four gold plates, however, Helaman is enjoined simply to “keep them” (Alma 37:21), merely to preserve the records, not to actively add to them. This relative passivity echoes the negative task of keeping *back* certain contents of the Jaredite record that will be described in verse 27. Where “keeping” the Nephite record involves active additive work and a wider grammatical array of complements to the verb, “keeping” the Jaredite record feels almost impoverished by comparison—there are no additional modifying constructions for the verb, and Helaman is not given any additional written task.

Alma also possesses a richer array of theological characters in the drama of the Nephite record. He mentions an entire lineage of Nephite record keepers in the way the plates have been “kept and handed down from one generation to another” (Alma 37:4). He can mention by name individuals who have been positively impacted by the record (“Ammon and his brethren”; Alma 37:9). Alma even mentions God’s role in this lineage by portraying him as one more record keeper in the Nephite tradition. It is not just Alma passing on the records, he reminds Helaman, but it is also “God [who] has entrusted you with these things,” and just like Alma and the other record keepers, God has also “kept [the plates] sacred” and “will keep and preserve” them for his own “wise purpose” (Alma 37:14).

In the case of the Jaredite record, by contrast, God is further removed from the plates themselves. Alma reports that “the Lord saw that his people began to work in darkness” and “prepare[d] . . . a stone” to discover those secret works (Alma 37:22–23), but this is already quite distinct from God-as-record-keeper as he had been portrayed in earlier verses. Here God intervenes only from afar and only by word. Continuing to describe the interpreters, Alma goes on: “These interpreters were prepared that the word of God might be fulfilled, which he spake, saying: I will bring forth out of darkness unto light all their secret works” (Alma 37:24–25). God here speaks in the future tense (“I *will* bring forth”), never the past perfect as he had with the Nephite record (“which he has kept sacred”; 37:14).

Alma’s picture of the twenty-four gold plates involves a more distant deity who intervenes only verbally and speaks only in the future tense about projects not yet completed, leaving Alma to connect the dots and determine whether God’s word has or has not yet been fulfilled (37:26). Here there is no legacy of record keepers to which Alma has access, no direct names of persons impacted by the record, and God seems further removed from their production and preservation. And while it is unsurprising that Alma would lack this sort of information about a relatively new record from a land of ruins with no known survivors, it is nevertheless clear that, theologically speaking, the two sets of plates are on unequal footing.

When Alma gives the Nephite record to Helaman, he hands over a set of plates explicitly connected to a rich heritage of past generations that provides meaning to Helaman’s current role, gives him examples for how to carry out his task, and conveys historical evidence of the record’s impact. Helaman’s work is even connected to the work of God, who is himself imagined as a record keeper involved in this exchange. The Nephite record is wrapped in a context that extends hundreds of years through time, both past and future, and even crosses metaphysical planes to unite earth and heaven in the care and sacrality of these plates. When Alma hands over the Jaredite record, however, the best he can do contextually is explain Jaredite wickedness and repeat an oracle about that wickedness rather than about the plates themselves. Just as the Jaredite plates are lacking the grammatical complexity of “keeping,” they are also absent the theological cast and context that Alma can so readily supply for the Nephite record.

The most robust distinction to be drawn between the two sets of plates, however, concerns the different ways they are imagined to operate in temporal terms. For each set of plates, Alma describes how that record will function across several historical generations and also sums up how it operates at a single moment. With the Nephite record, as we have already seen, Alma sketches the image of a long string of record keepers passing these plates down for hundreds of

years. He then condenses that historical function into a single temporal moment, which he sums up using a present passive verb: “it is for a wise purpose that they are kept” (Alma 37:1). In a similar way, the Jaredite record also has a specific role to play across historical generations and at a single moment, but Alma reverses their order. He begins, first, with the way the record’s interpreters were initially intended to reveal secret works of darkness at one specific moment in history: “The Lord said: I will prepare . . . a stone . . . that I may discover unto my people who serve me . . . the works of their brethren” (Alma 37:23). Before the stone does any revealing through time, it first reveals secret works to people occupying the same historical moment—it “discover[s],” in the present tense, unto “their brethren.” After the destruction of the Jaredite nation, however, the interpreters, presumably in company with the plates, serve a revelatory function through several generations, this time “bring[ing] to light all their secrets and abominations, unto every nation that shall hereafter possess the land” (Alma 37:25). Here the plates become a means of revealing Jaredite wickedness through time to those who come “hereafter” rather than revealing contemporaneously to the Jaredite cohort most immediately implicated by their brethren’s sins.

Both records thus operate at a specific moment in time (God’s present tense view of the “wise purpose” and the moment the Jaredite interpreters were initially created) and across several generations of history (the Nephite record-keeper lineage and the future generations of audience for the Jaredite plates). What is significant, then, about the way that Alma reverses the order in which he mentions these parallel functions? Why does he *open* his discussion of the Nephite plates with their role throughout history but save the Jaredite plates’ parallel role across time for the *end* of that discussion? At the very least, it is suggestive that Alma begins with the generational conception of the Nephite plates because it highlights Alma’s ability to consolidate their purpose and sum up their divine function at all. He brings their entire historical legacy to bear directly on their summary moment, suggesting that God’s single “wise purpose” aggregates the

generations of writing and preservation that materially produced the record. In other words, to prioritize the generational legacy of the Nephite record focuses readerly attention on the plates themselves as they have been shaped and protected through time until we readers, like God, can view them as a single artifact expressing in a single moment the long historical legacy of its production. To begin historically and conclude with a single temporal moment focuses readers’ attention onto a distinct point, a point represented by nothing less than the very material artifact changing hands in front of us.

With the Jaredite record, however, to begin from its historical moment and then move generationally outward has the opposite rhetorical effect. Readers’ attention is scattered away from the singular moment of its initial function until it dissipates in the unknowns of its future operation. Indeed, it is not clear that Alma himself can long maintain any strong global or synchronic sense of how the twenty-four plates are meant to operate. Its synchronicity is narrated entirely in the past tense rather than the present, a function of what the Lord “said” about a moment so far removed from the present that it occurred long before the Jaredites were even destroyed. Where both temporalities of the Nephite record were brought to bear on Helaman’s present task, the temporalities of the Jaredite record seem only to explain the lessons future generations *might* draw from Jaredite destruction and to give an etiology of the interpreters. These temporalities carry very little contextualizing weight in and of themselves. In other words, where the framing of the Nephite plates gives Helaman a double ideal—to keep the plates as past generations have kept them and preserve them for the sake of God’s wise purpose—the temporal framing of the twenty-four gold plates only provides raw explanation and no ideal for how they ought to be dealt with in the here and now. The very first moment that Alma ventures an *almost*-present declaration on the situation (“thus far the word of God has been fulfilled”; Alma 37:26), he immediately hurries on to the

more solid footing of command (“And now, my son, I command you”; 37:27).

It is also worth noting that Alma’s discussion of the Jaredite plates has surprisingly little to do with those plates themselves. Alma seems almost symptomatic in his consistent distraction from the twenty-four plates in favor of divine prophecy, terror at Jaredite wickedness, and fascination with the interpreters. In fact, the role of the interpreters in Alma 37 betrays further the theological disparity between the two records. In a way, it would be more correct to say that Alma has *no* theology of the twenty-four plates; as soon as he turns to the Jaredite record, his entire sermon is routed through the interpreters rather than the plates that are their object. He begins by commanding Helaman to “keep [the plates]” in order that “the secret works of those people . . . may be made manifest,” but before the verse has ended, he has already doubled the commandment with an injunction that Helaman also “preserve these interpreters” (Alma 37:21). The next five verses contain Alma’s explanation of the interpreters’ creation and the way they reveal Jaredite wickedness (37:22–26) before Alma closes the section with his final commandment that Helaman “retain all their oaths, and their covenants” (37:27). Even in the structural parallels noted above where Alma sets two shiny artifacts alongside one another, it is the Jaredite interpreters that are the more direct parallel to the Nephite record. It is the interpreters, not the twenty-four plates, that parallel the miraculous brightness of the Nephite record (37:23), and it is the interpreters, not the twenty-four plates, that are credited with revealing ancient secrets. There is an obvious sense in which Alma says nothing about the Jaredite record at the very moment that he hands it over, instead devoting his sermonic energies to the interpreters and the contagious threat of Jaredite wickedness.

The discomfort and uncertainty Alma displays around the Jaredite plates—evidenced by their relatively underdeveloped theology, their grammatical poverty, their temporal differences from the Nephite record, and their symptomatic displacement in favor of the

interpreters—creates a kind of broader theological vacuum that Alma here needs to fill. Helaman requires at least some kind of instruction about these plates, some sense of their function and how they fit into the dominant Nephite paradigm of records. Unknown and even dangerous as they may be, how ought Helaman to understand these plates? Alma solves that problem by recourse to the most potent theological framework at his disposal: the Lehitic covenant. As we have already noted, Alma 36–37 is structured through and through by a tight, nesting weave of covenantal concerns. Unsurprisingly, Alma's initial attempts at understanding the Jaredite record are also thoroughly determined by that covenant.

And the connection Alma draws between the twenty-four gold plates and the Lehitic covenant is happily straightforward: put simply, secret combinations are a covenant threat; for Alma, the Jaredite records are primarily intended to convey the danger of secret combinations, and the Lehitic covenant is what secret combinations threaten most directly.<sup>5</sup> Notice how he splices together the premise of secret combinations with consequences to the covenant in verse 22: "The Lord saw that his people began to work in darkness, yea, work secret murders and abominations; therefore the Lord said, if they did not repent they should be destroyed from off the face of the earth." Lest Helaman—or readers—miss the point of connection with the covenant people and their covenant land, Alma goes on to remind Helaman of the risk that "this people . . . should fall into darkness also and be destroyed. For behold, there is a curse upon all this land, that destruction shall come upon all those workers of darkness . . . when they are fully ripe" (Alma 37:27–28). From Alma's perspective, the logic seems blindingly clear: the Lehitic covenant promises that failure to keep God's commandments results in destruction, and nothing so blatantly thwarts God's commandments or draws a people into wickedness like secret combinations.

It would be difficult to overestimate the extent of Alma's distress here, since these passages practically drip with terror. Alma has hardly introduced these plates before he is swept aside in a lengthy

catalogue of Jaredite wickedness: “I will speak unto you concerning those twenty-four plates, that ye keep them, that the mysteries and the works of darkness, and their secret works, or the secret works of those people who have been destroyed, may be made manifest unto this people; yea, all their murders, and robbings, and their plunderings, and all their wickedness and abominations” (Alma 37:21). The verbal distance between Alma’s mention of the “twenty-four plates” and their “mysteries” and “works” is a mere four words: “that ye keep them.” Helaman’s preservationist responsibility is almost entirely choked out by Alma’s inability to stem the tide of his horrified recitation of Jaredite crimes. Moreover, this recitation almost takes on a mind of its own. Any time Alma gets anywhere near the topic, he is carried away into another long enumeration of the forms of Jaredite immorality. He can never mention their “works” alone but must always clarify “yea, their secret works, their works of darkness, and their wickedness and abominations” (Alma 37:23; compare 37:22, 29). Is it any wonder, then, that Alma has difficulty focusing on the plates themselves? The artifactuality of the Jaredite record is obscured for him by the potency of their content.

That potency, however, affords Alma an opportunity as much as it poses a threat, and it is clearly this double bind that is responsible for the ambiguity of the twenty-four gold plates in Alma 37. The national destruction narrated on the Jaredite record is, on the one hand, a godsend for demonstrating the stakes of Nephite covenant breaking; Alma could not have asked for a better illustration of the catastrophe that befalls a wicked nation. In that regard, as he counsels Helaman, the plates are to be used to teach the Nephites “that these people were destroyed on account of their wickedness and abominations and their murders” (Alma 37:29). On the other hand, these plates also convey a direct template for how secret works were accomplished. They not only contain the “secret plans of . . . oaths and . . . covenants” (Alma 37:29) by which secret combinations operated, but also an account of the “signs and . . . wonders” combinations were able to achieve (Alma 37:27). Alongside national catastrophe

sits an account of the real, quasi-miraculous power accomplished by secret combinations before they led to the Jaredites' downfall. Alma's quite sensible concern is that, at the same time as the Jaredite record is a useful tool for warning the Nephites about the stakes of their covenant, that same record might also cause that covenant's demise. The twenty-four plates risk becoming a how-to manual rather than a deterrent.

Alma's solution, though it may at first seem mundane and predictable, has consequences whose import for the remainder of the Book of Mormon cannot be overstated. Given that there are both beneficially instructive and seductively dangerous examples contained in the record, Alma instructs Helaman to divide them—to teach the Nephites about the consequences of Jaredite wickedness while holding back the specific means by which that wickedness was accomplished. What must not be missed, however, is the way that this conceptual division is reflected in the covenant language of "keeping" the records. Just as he splits the contents of the twenty-four gold plates between what can be transmitted and what ought to be reserved, Alma splits the language of keeping between preservation and retention.<sup>6</sup> Helaman is instructed both to "keep [those twenty-four plates], that the mysteries and the works of darkness . . . may be made manifest unto this people" (Alma 37:21) *and* that "all their signs and their wonders ye shall keep from this people . . . lest peradventure they should fall into darkness also" (37:27). Helaman is to *keep* the plates in the sense of preserving them, and also to *keep back* those portions that most directly threaten Nephite righteousness.

Again, if this seems straightforwardly pragmatic on its face, we need to reemphasize that Alma packs this conceptual division into the available covenant language for record keeping. What is being impacted here is not just the twenty-four gold plates or Helaman's future pedagogy but also what it means to be custodian of records and the very language by which the Nephite covenant paradigm is conveyed. Even Alma's careful structuring of this sermon in Lehitic covenant terms is directly impacted by this new, threefold division

in keeping. Now that a third valence of the word *keep* is added to the lexicon of record-keeping responsibility, we can see that each of Alma's three commandments to Helaman is paired with a different definition of *keeping*. Helaman is commanded first to "keep a record" (Alma 37:2), second to "keep . . . the commandments" (Alma 37:20), and finally to "retain all their oaths" (Alma 37:27). To each of Alma's three covenant commandments corresponds one of the three senses of "keeping," putting Helaman's retention of secret combination plans on the same level as the Nephite legacy of preserving records and keeping commandments.<sup>7</sup> Once again, Alma routes his conception of the twenty-four gold plates and the responsibilities of their care through the language of the Lehitic covenant, slicing open covenant language, wedging the Jaredite record inside, and sewing up the wound. Alma is performing a kind of surgery right at the heart of covenant terminology such that the question now becomes, first, is the graft going to take? and second, what shape will the covenant assume as a result?

It seems evident that the transplant *does* take, because secret combinations rapidly become more prominent in the Book of Mormon narrative from this point forward. Even more pointedly, they grow prominent *not* in the way that Alma had hoped, that is, not as a negative pedagogical example held up by Nephite teachers, but rather as a more direct element of Nephite social organization. In parallel to Alma's willingness to work at the heart of Nephite covenant language, secret combinations show up as being more essential to the Nephite story than Alma intended. Not long after Alma inserts the Jaredite plates into a Lehitic covenant framework, for instance, secret combinations become a key thematic focus of the second half of the Book of Mormon. They are the organizing principle of the book of Helaman, the direct cause of Nephite collapse in 3 Nephi, a familiar leitmotif in the book of Ether, and an object of explicit warning in the writings of Mormon and Moroni.

Even more than becoming essential to the Nephite narrative, however, secret combinations become essential to the Book of Mormon's

own self-conception, to the way it narrates its emergence and its presentation to modern readers. By navigating the confrontation between secret combinations and Lehitic covenant in the way that he did, Alma has inadvertently impacted the shape not only of the Nephite *content* of the Book of Mormon, but the Book of Mormon’s sense of its own *form*. Several themes, names, and artifacts associated with the Jaredite record in Alma 37 find their most direct echoes not in the way secret combinations are narrated in the book of Helaman and not even in the catastrophic demise of the Nephite nation, but rather in the nineteenth-century emergence and translation of the Book of Mormon.

## Nineteenth-Century Echoes

Joseph Smith’s reception and translation of the Book of Mormon is narrated in company not only with the covenant purposes that were so prominent a part of early Latter-day Saint theology but also alongside a bevy of secret combination themes and echoes of Alma 37. To begin with, when contemporary Latter-day Saints read Alma’s warnings to Helaman about keeping the commandments in order that “no power of earth or hell can take [the plates] from you” (Alma 37:16), they are likely to be reminded of the nearly identical concerns with which the angel Moroni is portrayed handing records over to Joseph Smith: “the same heavenly messenger delivered them up to me with this charge: . . . If I would use all my endeavors to preserve them . . . they should be protected” (Joseph Smith—History 1:59). In both cases, plates are transferred alongside instructions about the plates’ physical safety and the imperative that their preservation depends on a certain custodial morality. Furthermore, Alma warns, should Helaman have the plates taken away from him, he will be “delivered up unto Satan, that he may sift you as chaff before the wind” (Alma 37:15). Curiously, the only other place in Latter-day Saint scripture that combines the phrase “deliver up” with reference to Satan occurs in Doctrine and Covenants 10:9–10 where Smith is chastised

for “deliver[ing] . . . up” the 116 manuscript pages of the Book of Mormon, exposing the translation to alteration by those to whom “Satan hath put it into their hearts to alter the words.” Helaman and Joseph Smith here become parallel recipients of stern warnings from divine figures about the loss of their respective records and the way that loss exposes them to the machinations of the devil.

The connections between Alma 37, secret combinations, and the Book of Mormon’s emergence were also wrapped up with Joseph Smith’s pseudonymic identity. One of the prophet’s code names in the earliest editions of the Doctrine and Covenants was “Gazelam,” drawn apparently from Alma 37:23’s explanation of the interpreters’ origins. Alma cites the Lord’s intention to “prepare unto my servant Gazelem, a stone, which shall shine forth in darkness unto light.” Although commenters have noted the ambiguity by which Gazelem could refer to either the “servant” or the “stone,”<sup>8</sup> either way Joseph recognized something of himself in this passage. Only one of the Doctrine and Covenant’s code names has its origins in the Book of Mormon, and it notably draws not on Nephite nomenclature or covenant imagery but rather on a figure or object associated exclusively with the Jaredite record. Even something as prestigious as the pseudonym for the Book of Mormon’s own translator is drawn from the network of secret combination themes rather than covenantal themes.

But if these parallels could arguably be identified as mere historical accident, there are others whose agency comes more directly from the text itself. Along these lines, for instance, the chapter’s extensive focus on the interpreters could be read not only as Alma’s symptomatic distraction from the Jaredite plates, but also as the Book of Mormon’s investment in the means of its own translation. Prior to the introduction of the Jaredite record in the narrative, there is no indication that the problem of translation might arise in connection with covenant writings. Even something as basic to a contemporary notion of the Book of Mormon as the idea of an ancient record requiring translation was introduced in the narrative in conjunction

with secret combinations and the twenty-four gold plates rather than the Nephite covenant and record. What’s more, the presentation of the interpreters in Alma 37 echoes some of the characteristic oddities of Joseph Smith’s translation project. As many have pointed out, the prophet did not understand translation as anything like the transference of concepts from one linguistic system to another. In the same way, the interpreters as Alma narrates them have nothing to do with translating foreign languages and everything to do with “bring[ing] forth” hidden mysteries “out of darkness” (Alma 37:25).

Thus, assuming it is justified to thematically relate the “stone” and “interpreters” of Alma 37 to the seer stone and Urim and Thummim employed by Joseph Smith (and the selection of “Gazelam” as Joseph’s code name suggests that it is justified), the tool the prophet used to translate the Book of Mormon is more closely associated with revealing secret works than with resurrecting voices from the dust. Indeed, the only dead voices crying out in Alma 37 belong to “the blood of those . . . murdered” by secret combinations who “did cry unto the Lord their God for vengeance” (Alma 37:30). For all that the Nephite record keepers seem to prioritize a Lehitic covenant framework to their project, the Book of Mormon’s nineteenth-century appearance is presented in terms more closely associated with the Jaredite record and, in particular, its secret combination themes.

## Conclusion

Alma 36–37 is a set of instructions from one Nephite record keeper to another, framed and punctuated by reference to the Lehitic covenant but also revealing the fault lines in a shifting theology of records at a moment when it is being complicated and expanded by the discovery of the Jaredite plates. The Lehitic covenant becomes a source of comfort and sure footing for Alma as he structures his instructions to Helaman and as he draws on its terminology to diffuse the threat of secret combinations contained on the twenty-four plates. Alma divides the covenant language of “keeping,” expanding

its traditional senses of “keeping” a record and “keeping” the commandments to include a third valence—keeping *back* or retaining a portion of the record that would otherwise threaten Nephite righteousness. Performing surgery right at the heart of covenant language and mechanisms, however, may have resulted in more than Alma bargained for. By suturing these two sets of records together in both the cache over which Helaman is granted custody and the terminology by which that cache of records is understood, Alma 37 also imports Jaredite and secret combination themes into the self-conception of the Book of Mormon.

Whether that importation is positively valued for its ability to address the modern Gentiles responsible for the book’s emergence or negatively valued for its contribution to the destruction of the book’s Nephite protagonists remains ambiguous. What is clear either way is that secret combinations are not merely incidental to the project and self-conception of the Book of Mormon. It is a book intent not just on gathering Israel, but also on revealing secret works. It accomplishes its ends not just through untarnished plates but also by means of a luminous stone required for their interpretation. The record is not just preserved, but also hidden up; not just a treasure, but specifically one that slips away. Alma commands Helaman to keep the plates and preserve their interpreters in order that “mysteries . . . may be made manifest” (Alma 37:21), linking the very tool used by Joseph Smith to translate the Book of Mormon with a tool initially intended to reveal secret works. Smith’s use of seer stones thus redounds to turn the Book of Mormon *itself* into one of the mysteries it was intended to reveal—a mystery that clearly demands explication along both Nephite and Jaredite lines, a matter of *both* covenants and combinations.

KIMBERLY M. BERKEY is a doctoral student in theology at Loyola University Chicago.

## Notes

1. This triple repetition is also noted by Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 4:497, 504, 509.
2. For more on the covenant framing of the Book of Mormon, see Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology*, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2016); and *The Vision of All: Twenty-Five Lectures on Isaiah in Nephi’s Record* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2016).
3. Nor is this the first time in the Book of Mormon that the Lehitic covenant’s “commandments” have been invested with specific content. As Joseph Spencer explains, Nephi seems initially to understand his retrieval of the brass plates as the specific obligation required in order to “prosper in the land.” See Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 84–90. See also Joseph M. Spencer, “René Girard and Mormon Scripture: A Response,” *Dialogue* 43, no. 3 (2010): 12–15.
4. It is clear that this emphasis is unusual even within a Nephite context since he anticipates potential resistance from Helaman: “Now ye may suppose that this is foolishness in me; but . . .” (Alma 37:6).
5. Indeed, there is reason to suggest that the narrative sequencing of the book of Helaman is intended to demonstrate precisely this point. See Kimberly M. Berkey, “Works of Darkness: Secret Combinations and Covenant Displacement in the Book of Mormon,” in *Reading Nephi Reading Isaiah: Reading 2 Nephi 26–27*, ed. Joseph M. Spencer and Jenny Webb, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2016), 105–21.
6. While the division between disclosure and concealment is here spliced with covenant language in an exceptionally direct way, Mosiah<sub>2</sub> may have set its precedent. Fred Axelgard points out that Mosiah<sub>2</sub> translated the Jaredite record but also “did . . . keep” the brother of Jared’s visions “that they should not come unto the world” (Ether 4:1). See Axelgard, “More Than Meets the Eye: How Nephite Prophets Managed the Jaredite Legacy,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 26 (2017): 135–64.

7. It is entirely possible, of course, that the ambiguities of the English verb *keep* were not present in the original language of the Book of Mormon's source material and were instead introduced during the book's translation. Given that the original plates are presently inaccessible and the Book of Mormon explicitly addresses itself to an English-speaking audience (the nineteenth-century America of its translation and publication), this paper decides methodologically to treat English as the Book of Mormon's original language. In the end, it is largely immaterial for our purposes whether the word *keep* in Alma 37 translates one or several different terms from the plates. Even if the ambiguities of "keeping" can here serve only as a metaphor for the linguistic innovations of Alma 37, the resonance could easily have suggested itself to the Book of Mormon's earliest readers. My claim means less to presume access to the intentions of a historical "Alma" and more to show how the Book of Mormon text functions in its received, English form.
8. See Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015), 62.