

## Chapter Ten

# “AS THOUGH”

## Time, Being, and Negation in Mosiah 16:5–6

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As this volume demonstrates, Abinadi’s story and prophecies can be approached from a variety of perspectives. In this essay, I provide a philosophical and theological approach to Abinadi. This analysis is motivated in large part by philosophical work that pays careful attention to a phrase—if not, in fact, a theological formula—that appears in the writings of the Apostle Paul. What draws my attention here is the fact that this phrase or theological formula appears not only in Paul’s writings but also in Abinadi’s defense before Noah’s priests. I wish to ask what light Abinadi’s use of the formula might shed on the philosophical implications of his defense. Thus, in an important way, this paper asks whether the Book of Mormon might be as rich a philosophical resource as the Bible has long been recognized to be. And, it will be seen, I believe that the answer to this question must be positive.

At any rate, recent philosophical work on the writings of Paul—quite in line with recent exegetical and theological interpretation of Paul’s

letters—has focused on 1 Corinthians 7:29–32.<sup>1</sup> The point in such work, undertaken in parallel across several disciplines, has been to privilege, what seems in Paul’s thought to serve as a kind of theological or philosophical operator, the phrase “as though not.” In my own work—most extensively in my book, *For Zion: A Mormon Theology of Hope*, but also in an as-yet-unpublished paper presented to the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology—I have given attention to how Paul’s “as though not” might speak to and within Mormonism. In *For Zion*, I argue that the underlying structure of the law of consecration as laid out in Doctrine and Covenants section 42 closely resembles the form of thought expressed in 1 Corinthians 7.<sup>2</sup> Further, in the unpublished paper just mentioned, I argue that Joseph Smith’s revisionary attention to 1 Corinthians 7 in his work on the New Translation (often called the Joseph Smith Translation) outlines a remarkable development of Pauline thought.<sup>3</sup>

Here I mean to continue in the same vein, but now I turn my attention from the Doctrine and Covenants and the New Translation to the Book of Mormon. As already noted, I want to look closely at a passage from Abinadi’s preaching to see how it might cause us to think still more closely about the Pauline formula. But where in my earlier studies of the formula in the context of the Restoration I have focused much attention on Paul’s own contribution, here I mean to leave Paul largely (or really, almost entirely) out of the conversation just to focus on the use of the formula in Abinadi’s preaching. Whether or how Abinadi’s “as though not” formulas might connect up with Paul’s lies just beyond the scope of the present study, and there seems to be little reason to think that Abinadi’s uses are meant to serve as direct intertextual references to Paul’s formula.<sup>4</sup>

The passage that we will consider here can be found in Mosiah 16:5–6, and it concerns the nature of redemption. Coming to the conclusion of his long polemical encounter with Noah’s priests, Abinadi outlines in Mosiah 16 a few thoughts regarding resurrection and redemption. And in verses 5 and 6 in succession, he uses both the strictly Pauline formula found in 1 Corinthians 7, “as though not,” along with a slight (less-Pauline) variation of it, simply “as though.” Here I wish to look at these two formulas in their Abinadite context, asking what might be learned, theologically, from their use in the most emphatically Mormon volume of Mormon scripture.

Although textual analysis and philosophical argument will have to clarify the stakes of my conclusions, it might be useful to state them here at the outset. In general terms, I find philosophical significance in the fact that the negative formula “as though not” appears in the part of the Abinadite passage that focuses on questions of being, while the positive formula, “as though,” appears immediately thereafter where the text instead focuses on questions of time.<sup>5</sup> In light of this, I argue that the presence of negation in the first use of an “as though” formula marks the deficiency of the world inhabited by those who rebel against God, while the absence of negation in the second “as though” formula marks the deficiency of the world the faithful place in brackets. Developing the implications of this interpretation, I conclude that the use of the two formulas in Abinadi’s words helps to draw a distinction between time and being in the operation of the atonement—at least as Abinadi might be said to conceive it.

## I

We will, in the course of this paper, eventually provide an interpretation of both verses 5 and 6 of Mosiah 16. For this first two sections of the paper, however, we will address just verse 5, developing the implications of the first use of the Pauline formula there.

Verses 1b–5 of Mosiah 16 form a clear textual unit.<sup>6</sup> A narrative transition (found in verse 1a) divides it from the material preceding it in Mosiah 15, just as a rhetorical transition at the beginning of verse 6 (“and now”) divides it from the material that follows in Mosiah 16. Further marking out the boundaries of this textual unit is a kind of repetition: a repetition of material from verses 2–3a in verse 5. These structural points need not receive detailed attention,<sup>7</sup> but the fact that the passage to which we hope to give our attention here resumes or reprises material from a few verses earlier proves to be of some interpretive importance. Verses 2–3a speak of “the wicked,” explaining that “the Lord redeemeth them not, for they are carnal and devilish, and the devil hath all power over them.” Verse 5 unmistakably harks back to this idea when it announces that “he that persists in his own carnal nature and goes on in the ways of sin and rebellion against God, he remaineth in his fallen state and the devil hath all power over him—therefore he is as though there was no redemption made.” Parallels

between the two passages are obvious; both talk of carnality, of the devil having power, and especially of some persons who fail to receive redemption. But differences between the two texts deserve notice as well. The most relevant of these differences, it seems, is this: Verse 2 straightforwardly negates redemption (“the Lord redeemeth them not”), while the later part uses the odd Pauline formula (“*as though* there was no redemption made”).

Why should straightforward negation of redemption in verse 2 be replaced within just a few verses by the more complex gesture of what might be called “quasi-negation”—the “as though . . . no” formulation of verse 5? Perhaps something of an answer might be found in verses 3b–4. Verses 2–3a, as we have already noted, address the subject of “the wicked,” but then verses 3b–4 turn their attention from “the wicked” to “all mankind.” At first it seems as if there is little to distinguish the two groups. According to verse 3a, the wicked “are carnal and devilish, and the devil hath power over them.” Similarly, according to verse 3b, the devil’s work in Eden “was the cause of all mankind’s becoming carnal, sensual, and devilish—knowing evil from good, subjecting themselves to the devil.” All mankind, like the wicked who form a particular subset of them, are “devilish,” and all end up at least temporarily in subjection to the devil. What seems to distinguish these two groups, then, is less the form of each’s relationship to the devil than the permanence or the temporariness of each’s subjection. Verse 4 is key: “Thus all mankind were lost, and, behold, they would have been endlessly lost were it not that God redeemed his people from their lost and fallen state.” What distinguishes at least some human beings from others is the fact they are “redeemed” and so eventually escape subjection to the devil—while others (“the wicked”) remain in subjection.

Abinadi gives a title of sorts to the redeemed in verse 4. They are “his people,” that is, God’s people. How should this title be understood? One might naturally interpret it in the broadest possible terms, as a simple description of the redeemed; because God redeems them or buys them back, they are God’s people.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, drawing on other features of Abinadi’s sermon, this is how *Alma* interprets Abinadi’s talk of God’s people when he establishes the first Nephite church a few chapters later (see Mosiah 18:8–10).<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, we might interpret Abinadi’s reference to God’s people in a rather different way: as a reference, quite specifically, to the house of

Israel or to the children of Abraham. In certain contexts, the meaning of such a title could *only* point in the direction of Israel and its historical covenant, and it may be that Abinadi means to make such a reference as well.<sup>10</sup> The meaning of Mosiah 16:4 depends on which of these two options is to be preferred. If we decide in favor of the broader or less specific interpretation, then it seems that Abinadi simply finds in Christ’s redemptive work a certain reversal for “all mankind,” even if only those who eventually constitute God’s “people” receive the full benefits of redemption. But if we decide in favor of the narrower or more specific interpretation, then it seems that Abinadi believes that the specific redemption of historical Israel somehow plays a role in reclaiming “all mankind” from their “lost” condition.

This specificity matters for the interpretation of verse 5, because only the latter of these two interpretations of verse 4 helps to motivate the shift from verse 2’s straightforward negation (“the Lord redeemeth them not”) to verse 5’s murkier form of negation (“he is as though there was no redemption made”). If we interpret verse 4 as claiming just that God’s “people” are the redeemed—those among “all mankind” who escape the destiny of “the wicked”—then it seems that the text assumes some kind of (inexplicable) equivalence between the two formulas. The wicked both *are* not redeemed and are *as though* not redeemed. But if we instead interpret verse 4 as claiming that Israel’s redemption opens up possibilities of redemption for “all mankind,” then verse 5’s formula would apply to something other than the simply and straightforwardly wicked. When in verse 5 Abinadi speaks of him who “persists in his own carnal nature and goes on in the ways of sin and rebellion against God,” it would seem that he has reference not to the wicked in general but specifically to the wicked among Israel—to the wicked among God’s redeemed people. The wicked generally simply *are* unredeemed (verse 2), but the wicked among God’s redeemed people are *as though* unredeemed (verse 5). When it comes to “every nation, kindred, tongue, and people” (verse 1), it seems it is possible to employ a simple division between those who are and those who are not redeemed. But when it comes instead to God’s people, no such simple operation of division works. Instead, it is necessary to utilize a logic of exception; the whole of God’s people is redeemed, but there are nonetheless certain exceptional individuals among them who exist as though that full redemption were not, in fact, accomplished.<sup>11</sup> In other

words, the wicked among Israel experience the world in terms of non-actual possibilities, hypothetical situations, or counterfactual states of affairs.

Now, it may ultimately be that this more complex interpretation of verses 4–5 is erroneous. Nonetheless, there are reasons to think it the better of the two interpretations, at the very least because it helps to motivate the distinction between the formulas of verses 2 and 5—a distinction that otherwise would be without obvious explanation. But this more complex interpretation also serves well because of the way it points to the larger theology of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. It points not only to 1 Corinthians 7:29–32, with its use of the “as though not” formula, but to the whole of the letter, which serves as an extended reflection on the notions of totality and exception, especially as these apply to covenant Israel.<sup>12</sup> These were, of course, themes that Paul developed even more fully in Romans 9–11.<sup>13</sup> For present purposes, however, we will leave fuller investigation of the theme of covenant—and of Paul’s commentary on it—for another time.<sup>14</sup> For now, perhaps it is enough just to allow these connections to motivate further the interpretation offered here of Mosiah 16:4–5.

To summarize things so far, then, we might say that what, for Abinadi, distinguishes covenantal and noncovenantal relationships to redemption is the distinct role played by negation in each. On the one hand, negation simply divides noncovenantal peoples in two, into the redeemed and the unredeemed. On the other hand, negation more complexly organizes the experience of exceptionality among the covenant people, attaching itself to an “as though” that brings with it the hypothetical or the counterfactual. We might make this same point by drawing on another facet of the text. Gentiles are either redeemed or not redeemed, such that negation negates always and only the individual’s redemption; either “the Lord redeemeth them” or “the Lord redeemeth them not.” But Israel as a whole apparently just *is* redeemed, and therefore what exceptional individuals among God’s people face is not their own individual nonredemption but rather, it seems, the (nonactual) possibility of the nonredemption of the whole of God’s people. Abinadi’s wording is quite suggestive here. He does not claim that the unrepentant among God’s people are as though they were not redeemed; he says, rather, that these are “as though there was no redemption made.” The “as though not” applies not to the individual’s own

particular redemption but to what that individual experiences with regard to the whole people’s redemption.

## II

At this point, in order to clarify what is at stake here, it seems best to take a step back from the text to ask about what happens, rather generally, when something like an “as though not” appears in language. What do we mean by “as,” by “as though,” and by “as though not”? And how might clarity on these points help to shed some light on Abinadi’s use of the formula?

There are, of course, numerous ways one might make sense of the word “as.” Among the many possibilities, we will focus here on what might be learned from the field of philosophical hermeneutics. According to the hermeneutic tradition (launched by Friedrich Schleiermacher, brought to a first maturation with Wilhelm Dilthey, given an ontological bent thanks to Martin Heidegger, and coming into its own with the conversation spurred by Hans-Georg Gadamer),<sup>15</sup> every “as” concerns an implicit understanding, a certain assumed bearing among things—a *world* in the Heideggerian or even the Wittgensteinian sense.<sup>16</sup> That is to say, the word “as” always already marks an individual’s involvement in a set of relationships and meanings, a totality of significations that serves as the basic context for sense. If I say that my friend works “as a teacher,” then I indicate that she does her work in the world of education, a world that is roughly determinate or determinable if not necessarily explicit for her or for me. Similarly, if I say that I regard the Book of Mormon “as scripture,” then I suggest that my reading of it ideally exhibits an implicit trust in its canonical or authoritative status both for me and for the larger religious community of which I form a part (a certain religious world), whether or not I or others in that community consciously think about what it means for the Book of Mormon to serve in this way.<sup>17</sup> And so it goes with every “as,” each serving as the indicator of some roughly determinate or determinable world.

What, then, occurs when one adds “though” to “as”? First, of course, it should be noted that there is a crucial element of negativity present in the word “though,” such that to say “as though” is always already to recognize that the world indicated by *this* “as” is nonactual or at least in some sense foreign to the context into which it is introduced. When we use the phrase “as though,”

then, we recognize that the actual world we inhabit in some way precludes or excludes the world we gesture toward with the word “as.” At the same time, our use of “as though” clearly means to indicate some kind of relevance to the actual world of the nonactual world we introduce by the words “as though.”<sup>18</sup> When I say that my friend acts “as though she were a student,” I clearly imply that my friend is not a student in the actual world even as I simultaneously note the relevance to the actual world (thanks to my friend’s behaviors) of some nonactual world in which she is a student. Similarly, when I say that I regard the Bhagavad Gita “as though it were scripture,” I indicate at once that the Gita is not authoritative or binding in the actual religious world I inhabit and that my devoted reading of it is suggestive of a nonactual world in which I would participate in a community of devoted readers of the Gita’s account of Krishna’s grace. So it goes with every “as though,” each serving to indicate a point of connection between the actual world and some non-actual world.

This description of the “as though” might be put in other, more philosophically fruitful terms. In every “as though,” one finds a layering of worlds: a layering of a *possible* world on top of the *actual* world. Further, in every “as though,” one discerns an intention to reveal something about the actual world: an intention to mark a suggestive feature of structure, to highlight some potential incongruity, or to underscore a focal point of passion or desire.<sup>19</sup> In short, the “as though” performs an intellectual (because linguistic) operation by which two orders of things, one actual and one possible, are brought into relation in a revealing way. Perhaps we could say that the two orders enter into a differential network, like x and y axes that, in the slopes and curves and singularities one can trace in their plotted interaction, reveal much about each other.<sup>20</sup> Or perhaps we could say that the two orders come into a comparative framework through which much becomes visible about each that would remain invisible if it were considered on its own.<sup>21</sup> At any rate and whatever metaphor one uses, in every “as though,” someone draws the possible toward the actual in order to reveal both the contingencies and the necessities of the latter.<sup>22</sup>

What, next, does the “not” of “as though not” add to the already philosophically rich gesture of the “as though”? What do we mean when we say “as though not”? Here, it seems clear, we are still involved in layering possible and actual worlds, just as in the slightly simpler formula of the “as

though.” What distinguishes the “as though not” from the “as though,” then, is just that the differential point of contact between the actual world and the relevant possible world concerns something lacking rather than present in the possible world. Where the “as though” identifies something (curiously or symptomatically) lacking in the actual world by imagining a possible world in which it is present, the “as though not” identifies something (curiously or symptomatically) present in the actual world by imagining a possible world in which it is lacking. When I say that my friend behaves “as though she were not a teacher,” I make clear that she *is* a teacher in the actual world, although her behavior suggests the relevance of a nonactual or possible world in which she is *not* a teacher. Similarly, when I say, as a theologian, that historians regard the Book of Mormon “as though it were not scripture,” I indicate my firm belief that the Book of Mormon fundamentally *is* scripture, even if historians sometimes inhabit a (for me) nonactual world in which the book is *not* primarily scripture. And so it goes with every “as though not,” each serving—like the “as though”—to indicate a point of connection between the actual and the possible, but by reversing the relationship of presence and lack that obtains in the “as though.”<sup>23</sup>

What might we say by way of summary regarding the philosophical force of both the “as though” and the “as though not” formulas? We have seen that the word “as” already invokes the philosophical notion of a world, serving as a kind of linguistic indicator of some roughly determinate or determinable world. When “as” is coupled with the word “though,” however, what is at issue is a layering of worlds, one actual and one possible, and the point of contact between these serves to reveal something about the nature of the actual world. Where “as though” appears without a subsequent negation (without a “not”), the point of contact between the actual and the possible concerns something lacking in the actual but present in the possible. Reciprocally, where “as though” appears with a subsequent negation (“as though not”), the point of contact between the actual and the possible concerns something lacking in the possible but present in the actual. The “as though” formula, we might say, thinks the actual through a possible world that is *in excess of* the actual, while the “as though not” formula thinks the actual through a possible world that is *deficient by comparison to* the actual.

This might be illustrated quite concretely by coming back to Mosiah 16:5, where “he that persists in his own carnal nature and goes on in the ways of sin and rebellion . . . is as though there was no redemption [of God’s people] made.” Here in Abinadi’s words there is no need to go looking for the actual world at issue, since it is *the* actual world—the world we all inhabit—but one should note well that Abinadi sees as a key feature of the actual world we all inhabit a certain event, for him still future, namely “God himself . . . com[ing] down among the children of men and . . . redeem[ing] his people” (Mosiah 15:1).<sup>24</sup> If this is the actual world in question, what is the possible world with which Abinadi’s “as though” brings it into contact? Quite straightforwardly, it is the possible world in which “there was no redemption made.”<sup>25</sup> So far as Abinadi is concerned, this possible world approximates the actual world at every point, except that it *lacks* one thing: God’s redemption of his people. The “not” of Abinadi’s “as though not” draws the reader’s attention to the chief (if not sole) point of tension between the two worlds he layers by using the “as though” formula. He inhabits a world in which God does in fact redeem his people, but he regards as relevant to the experience of certain individuals within the world the possible (but nonactual) world in which God does *not* redeem his people.

Of course, more needs to be said here because we have, to this point, ignored a crucial feature of the text in Mosiah. So far, we have spoken as if we always and only use “as though” language when attempting, in a kind of abstract way, to *think* about things—as if it were only or at least chiefly an *intellectual* matter. But, without discarding anything worked out about the use of the formula, we must now take careful note of a curious fact: Abinadi does not, in Mosiah 16:5, undertake anything like a thought experiment (like that to be found later, for instance, in Alma 42:11–13). The possible world he mentions, taken in its deficiency (lacking a redemption event), is not something someone *thinks about*; rather, it is something someone *lives through*. That is, Abinadi does not *speak* as though there was no redemption made; rather, the rebellious person to whom he refers just *is* as though there was no redemption made. Here, then, what usually passes a kind of intellectual exercise becomes an *existential* matter. And Abinadi in fact makes this a question of being: “he *is* as though there was no redemption made.”<sup>26</sup>

The existential stakes of Abinadi’s “as though not” require us to revise, however minimally, some of what we have said about the entanglement of the actual and the possible in the operation of the “as though (not)” formula. In the intellectual use of “as though (not),” one aims—quite intentionally—to reveal something about the actual through an explicit thinking of the possible. But here in Abinadi’s preaching, we find a reference to someone effectively unaware of the difference between the actual and the possible. Abinadi’s point, it seems, is to insist that those among the covenant people who continue in rebellion despite their redemption live out their lives in what is really only a possible world, never in the actual world (where redemption has irreversibly occurred). The rebellious thus do not bring up the possible in an attempt to get clearer about the actual; rather, they live in the possible in a way that renders them constitutively blind to the actual.<sup>27</sup> And the “not” that Abinadi couples with his “as though” makes clear that the merely possible world inhabited by the rebellious among the covenant people is a deficient world, a world essentially lacking.

These points should be brought to bear on our conclusions from the first section of this paper. At issue in Mosiah 16:5 is what certain people actually experience, what Abinadi does not hesitate to present as their way of being (“he is as though”). But we saw earlier that this sort of experience, this sort of way of being, is something Abinadi regards as exceptional. Hence, the rebellious among the covenant people are, quite unawares, condemned to the *exceptional* experience of a world that is not—that is, of a merely possible world. As we put it before, an odd logic of exception replaces the simple logic of division that holds outside the bounds of the covenant. Consequently, what operates outside the covenant as simple negation—some are redeemed, some not—we now recognize as operating inside the covenant in a rather different fashion. Within the covenant and as part of an “as though” formula, negation marks the deficiency of the merely possible world unconsciously inhabited by the rebellious, oblivious as they are to the actual world in which redemption has irremediably taken place.

All this might be adumbrated in two points. First, the Abinadite “as though not” is a matter of the lived, presented in terms of being (being, then, in its existential form: being-in-the-world). Second, the Abinadite “as though not” removes negation from its role as divisor (outside the covenant)

and assigns it instead to the role of marker of worldly deficiency—that is, as what marks the world-in-which-the-rebellious-are as in some way lacking.

### III

We might now turn our attention to Mosiah 16:6, the very next verse in Abinadi's defense before Noah's priests.

If, as we noted above, verses 1b–5 of Mosiah 16 form a determinate textual unit, then it should not surprise that, with verse 6, Abinadi begins a transition in his sermon toward a new theme (signaled in part by the words “and now” at the outset of the verse). The transition is effected over the course of verses 6–7 through a bit of literary artistry.<sup>28</sup> The point, rather clearly, is to replace talk of “redemption,” accomplished by Christ's having “come into the world” (verse 6) with talk of “resurrection,” accomplished by Christ's having subsequently “risen from the dead” (verse 7). This shift from redemption to resurrection allows Abinadi to bring out his final theme in addressing Noah's priests: the event of final judgment that accompanies resurrection (the topic of the remainder of Mosiah 16). The bit of literary artistry that makes the transition work so effectively lies in the fact that the two verses share an identical structure, but with the place occupied by “redemption” in verse 6 occupied in verse 7 by “resurrection.” Each verse presents a straightforward hypothetical statement (an “if-then” statement) that is interrupted at its heart by a point of clarification. The antecedent of each hypothetical statement opens identically, with “if Christ had not,” and the consequent in each case opens identically with “there could have been no.” What replaces the ellipses in each verse differs just in that verse 6 focuses on redemption and verse 7 on resurrection. As the reader moves from verse 6 to verse 7, the clear repetition of structure highlights this thematic shift, from what Christ accomplishes by coming into the world to what Christ accomplishes by leaving it again to return to heaven.

What concerns *us* is what one finds in the interruption of the hypothetical statement in verse 6, immediately before Abinadi accomplishes, in verse 7, his full transition away from the central themes of verses 1b–5. Between “if Christ had not come into the world” and “there could have been no redemption,” we get the following clarifying aside: “speaking of things to come as though they had already come.”<sup>29</sup> The parallel interruption in

verse 7—namely, “that the grave should have no victory and that death should have no sting”—is of no importance to our philosophical interpretation here. What is essential is just that in verse 6, in Abinadi’s final word regarding redemption before he turns his attention quite fully to resurrection, he (or a scribe or an editor) lets the reader know that the prophet is “speaking of things to come as though they had already come.” Crucially, here—only a breath after Abinadi has given us a theologically robust “as though not” formula, and while he remains for at least a moment longer on the topic of redemption—he (or a scribe or an editor) gives us an “as though” formula also.<sup>30</sup> The striking proximity between the two “as though” formulas, one with and one without a negation, is already quite suggestive. That the proximity of the two formulas comes coupled with a set of differences between their respective uses is only *more* suggestive.

Now, we might note that the framing hypothetical statement of verse 6 might itself seem to be related to all we have already had to say about verse 5, quite apart from the clarifying aside that interrupts it with an “as though” formula. Because the hypothetical statement refers to a “world” into which the Messiah “had not come” and for which there had consequently “been no redemption,” it seems already straightforwardly to be focused on possible worlds and counterfactual situations, much in the way any “as though” statement is.<sup>31</sup> And certainly verse 6’s use of the words “no redemption” directly echoes verse 5’s use of the same two words! Nevertheless, we need to distinguish strictly verse 6’s “if not, then” from verse 5’s “as though not.” The hypothetical statement in verse 6, like the formula in verse 5, certainly concerns itself with a merely possible world—and in fact with the *same* possible world explored in verse 5—but it does so in a strictly intellectual fashion (again, as in Alma 42:11–13), rather than in an existential fashion. In verse 6’s “if then, not” statement, no one *experiences* the actual world as anything other than what it is, and in verse 5’s “as though not” statement, no imaginary *consequences* of the counterfactual are drawn.<sup>32</sup> The point of the hypothetical statement in verse 6 is in fact just to draw on the resources of a nonactual or a possible world to establish a relationship of necessary conditionality that holds across *all* worlds, possible or actual (Christ’s coming into the world is a necessary condition for the redemption of his people). The fact that the framing hypothetical statement concerns God’s success or failure in redeeming his people

will prove relevant to the interruptive aside at the heart of verse 6—at the very least because of the way it determines the *thematic* and *temporal* significance of the aside—but its hypothetical construction must be viewed as distinct in crucial ways from the construction of an “as though” formula.

It is, then, in the clarifying aside of verse 6 that the spirit, if not also the letter, of verse 5 makes itself felt—perhaps simply because we are there again confronted with an “as though” formula. And in interpreting verse 6, we can move more quickly than we did with verse 5, since we have already done the philosophical work necessary to make sense of the “as though” formula in general. Here again, then, we face a layering of worlds, one possible and one actual. This time, however, the “as though” formula lacks a negation, a “not,” which, as our philosophical work above clearly shows, means that here the *actual* world, rather than the possible world, is what is found lacking.<sup>33</sup> In verse 6’s “as though” statement, the possible world exceeds the actual world (rather than vice versa, as is the case in verse 6), since the actual world lacks a key feature of the possible world.

Now, at this juncture, we might well assume that the difference between actual and possible worlds in verse 6’s aside *cannot* be the same as the difference between actual and possible worlds in verse 5. In verse 5, the difference between actual and possible concerns the actuality of redemption; the actual world is the world in which God redeems his people, while the merely possible world (certainly *nonactual*) is the world in which God fails to redeem his people. Since Abinadi has made perfectly clear which world is the real world (the world of redemption), we would naturally assume that the “as though” formula of verse 6 focuses us on the revealing relationship between the actual world invoked in verse 5 and some possible world other than that invoked in verse 5. The point, we cannot help but think, must here be to see how some *other* possible world might be brought to bear on the actual world in yet *another* revealing way. And yet the hypothetical statement that frames the interruptive aside of verse 6 makes perfectly clear that the subject matter throughout the verse is, quite precisely, the world without redemption, the world into which “Christ had not come.” The “as though” formula of verse 6, quite against the grain of verse 5, understands the actual world to be the world (at least as yet) without redemption. The “things to come,” about which Abinadi “speak[s] as though they had

already come,” are just Christ’s “com[ing] into the world” and there being a “redemption.” But the fact that these are only spoken of *as though* realized makes perfectly clear that they remain, from the temporal perspective of Abinadi’s (pre-Christian) era, questions of *possibility* rather than *actuality*. In verse 6, redemption for God’s people has irreversibly occurred only in the merely possible world, nonactual because it is still future for Abinadi.

This perfect reversal in verse 6 of verse 5—signaled by the exchange of the “as though not” formula for the “as though” formula and confirmed by close interpretation—necessarily surprises. Just a verse earlier, Abinadi presents the world eternally without redemption for God’s people as a kind of fantasy world experienced only by the rebellious. But now he (or a scribe or an editor) presents the world without redemption for God’s people as the real world of the present, such that only in “speaking” can one allow the future possibility of a world of redemption to occupy one’s attention.<sup>34</sup> Putting it this way, however, already helps to highlight a crucial element, introduced only in verse 6 but playing a vital role in effecting the reversal of the possible and the actual: *time*. In verse 5, Abinadi effectively brackets time in his presentation of the *being* of the rebellious among the covenant people. In verse 6, however, he (or a scribe or an editor) complicates matters by bringing time into consideration, along with a recognition that Christ comes into the world at a determinate moment in history and that, until that actually happens, redemption must in some sense be regarded as a possibility (rather than an actuality).<sup>35</sup> And it is clearly *this* that effects the surprising inversion of the actual and the possible. The implication might at first seem to be that Abinadi, at least when “speaking of things to come as though they had already come,” *himself* inhabits a fantasy world (a merely possible future world) and is therefore willfully blind in some way to the real world. But, of course, this way of putting things is misleading, since it ignores the way in which time operates in verse 6, as well as the way time operates in faith.

At issue in Mosiah 15:5–6, then, is a brilliant contrast between being and time, or between being and becoming.<sup>36</sup> The reversal of the possible and the actual, rooted in opposed uses of the “as though (not)” formula, concerns principally the radically distinct experiences of, on the one hand, those trapped in static being as if the to-come did not unsettle being at every moment and, on the other hand, those enmeshed in dynamic becoming

such that the crystallization of being is postponed (if not entirely eradicated). The too-stable experience of the rebellious is one of desperate fantasy, while the self-transformative experience of the faithful is one of hope and faith. For Abinadi, it seems, being and time are strangers to one another, and this clearly has something to do with the actual and the possible in redemption.<sup>37</sup>

These points need clarification, but we might fruitfully pause here to draw a few points of summary before turning to the twin tasks of clarification and conclusion. We have seen that verses 5 and 6 of Mosiah 16 both use “as though” formulas, and that each use concerns a layering of worlds—a layering of some possible world on the actual world. In both cases, what distinguishes the two worlds involved in the layering is the presence or absence in them of God’s redemption of his people; one world has as an essential feature the realization of that event, while the other lacks this. Strikingly, however, each verse layers these two worlds in a different—in fact, inverse—manner. In verse 5, the *actual* world features redemption, while the relevant possible world lacks redemption; but in verse 6, the *possible* world features redemption, while the actual world lacks redemption. What underlies this inversion as one verse gives way to the other is, apparently, the fact that the one uses the language of being and entirely ignores time or becoming, while the other uses the language of time or becoming and entirely ignores being. Where time is bracketed and being is foregrounded, the actual world features redemption, though one might exceptionally be “as though there was no redemption made” (living in a kind of fantasy world). But where the reverse is the case, the actual world as yet lacks redemption, though one might exceptionally “speak of things to come as though they had already come.” In a few concluding paragraphs, these final points deserve some exposition and development.

#### IV

What conclusions might we draw from this discussion, and how might we utilize them to clarify all we have said? For my part, I am deeply struck that the complex arrangement of Mosiah 16:5–6 allows “as though” formulas to be used to frame *both* rebellion against the Redeemer *and* faithful anticipation of the Messiah. Both the rebellious and the faithful live “as though” something, and that “something” has to do in each case with whether God

accomplishes the redemption of his people. Consequently, both the rebellious and the faithful live their lives through and in the element of the possible, which overlays the actual. Now, at the end of this philosophical textual analysis, and thanks to the set of clear similarities between the two sorts of experience outlined in the text, it is possible to attempt to distinguish at the theological level between faithful submission to God and faithless rebellion against God.<sup>38</sup> As we have already intimated, what is at issue is some kind of distinction between being and time—between the static nature of what is and the dynamic nature of what comes—as well as between being and speaking. But these points now deserve at least brief exposition.

We might begin with faith. Abinadi (or a scribe or an editor) gives us to understand that faith is a phenomenon at once temporal and verbal. The faithful *speak*, we learn from the text, and they speak in a manner that assumes something about the structure of *time*. That is, the faithful are those “speaking of things to come as though they had already come.” The faithful live out their faith by bringing the distant future directly into the present through their speech—that is, by assuming in their speech that what remains to come has in some sense always already come. Their speech, so to speak, *actualizes the possible*, or perhaps *potentializes actuality* through consistent attunement to the future as present. The faithful dwell in the possible, tapping into the potency of the potential, but they do so in a way that never loses sight of the present or actual world. Instead, we might say, it seems they work at depicting the halo of the possible that encircles the head of the actual. Peculiarly attuned to the possibilities with which the present is pregnant—*especially* to the possibility of redemption—they open the actual directly onto its future, to what remains to come.

Now, how does this contrast with rebellion, with sin? For Abinadi, sin seems not to be just a kind of languishing in the actual. Rather, it constitutes a certain flight into the merely possible, but one that fails to see how the possible is ultimately entangled with the actual. In essence, the rebellious *replace the actual with the merely possible*. Like the faithful, they are attuned to the possible, but unlike the faithful, they in no way open the actual onto the possible; instead they close off the actual entirely by insisting that what is really only merely possible exhausts the actual. Sin thus effectively gives up on time (with its forced disenlosure of the present and

the actual) thanks to a preference for a kind of stable state: mere timeless, fantastical being.<sup>39</sup> The sinful neither actualize the possible nor potentialize actuality, refusing to weave the actual and the potential in a more complex arrangement. Rather, they simply equate the actual and the possible in such a way that the latter entirely supplants (or closes) the former.

What we have in all this is, I think, two radically distinct ways of overlaying the possible and the actual. Sin and faith, that is, are two different ways of layering worlds. Faith amounts to a layering of the possible and the actual in such a way that the two interpenetrate, the future possible interrupting the present actual and all actuality opening directly onto its fundamental possibilities. Sin, however, amounts to a layering of the possible and the actual in such a way that one entirely obscures—if not eradicates—the other, the merely possible posing as and in the place of the actual. Faith denies only the radical independence of the actual and the possible, but sin pretends that there is only the actual, which happens for the sinful to be what is really only the possible.<sup>40</sup>

We might make all of this more concrete by returning one last time to Abinadi and what he has to say. What is actual and possible in Abinadi's words is divine redemption. Hence we might say that faith denies only the radical independence of the world as it currently stands (without redemption) from the world as it is promised to become (the scene of divine redemption). These two cannot be extricated because they are bound by time, and the faithful weave them into a still more remarkable arrangement where the present disarray of God's people itself bears the halo of gathering and redemption, as though the Messiah had always already come in advance to set all things right. Sin, on the other hand, affirms the static continuation of the world as it currently appears, without redemption. It insists that there is only the world where God's people—if such there be—are in disarray and will remain so. But of course, as the honest can see, static continuation of the way things appear right now is only one among so many possibilities. And the sinful must therefore be said to take the merely possible as the actual, failing to see the potency of the present.

Faith and sin, to *speak as though the redemption were eternally sure* or to *be as though there were no redemption*. These are, it seems, the only options Abinadi means to examine. How will we sort out the entanglement

of the actual and the possible? Are we content with the despair of being, or are we willing to turn to the hope of time? But these questions are ones we have to answer with our lives, and not through our philosophical discourse.

## NOTES

1. This alignment is perhaps clearest when N. T. Wright, a New Testament scholar, speaks with startling approval of Giorgio Agamben’s emphatically philosophical work on Paul. See N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 556, 559, 835. For a more systematic assessment, see N. T. Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 315–23.
2. See, generally, Joseph M. Spencer, *For Zion: A Mormon Theology of Hope* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014).
3. See Joseph M. Spencer, “Are There Predicates in Zion?” (paper presented at the annual conference of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology, “The Atonement,” held at Utah Valley University, October 31–November 2, 2013).
4. There is too little about the contexts of Paul’s and Abinadi’s uses of the formula to assume that they are meant to be deliberately related. For some analysis of the criteria for recognizable allusions to New Testament texts in the Book of Mormon, see Nicholas J. Frederick, “Evaluating the Interaction between the New Testament and the Book of Mormon: A Proposed Methodology,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24 (2015): 1–30.
5. I assume no particular philosophical conception of the notions of—or relationship between—being and time here. Despite what the subtitle of this paper might suggest, I do not aim to provide a Heideggerian reading of Abinadi’s words, though it *is* worth noting that Heidegger too was interested in Paul’s “as though not” formula. His discussion might well be consulted, but it does not directly affect my interpretation here. See Martin Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 83–89.
6. Throughout this paper, I quote from Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009)—though I use my own punctuation where it seems useful to do so.
7. Unfortunately, I am unaware of any published attempts at fixing the basic textual structures of Mosiah 16. It seems to me, however, that the resumption of verses 2–3 in verse 5 may be one feature of a larger structure organizing the whole of

- verses 1b–5—perhaps in a chiasmic fashion. I will have to leave to others the task of discerning such structure. For my purposes, it is enough just to recognize the reprise of verses 2–3 in verse 5.
8. Jennifer Lane has consistently written on the theme of redemption in Latter-day Saint scripture. For a good overview of the idea in the Book of Mormon, see Jennifer C. Lane, “Choosing Redemption,” in *Living the Book of Mormon: Abiding by Its Precepts*, ed. Gaye Strathearn and Charles Swift (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2007), 163–75.
  9. Alma’s conception of what constitutes God’s people draws heavily on Abinadi’s interpretation of Isaiah 52:7–10 and Isaiah 53:8–10. Whether Abinadi meant to link his interpretation of these Isaiah passages to his passing reference to God’s people remains unclear, however.
  10. In the Book of Mormon, one should point especially to Nephi. I have elsewhere argued that Abinadi is far less interested than Nephi is in Israel’s historical covenants, but I do not think that their distinct theological perspectives directly implies that Abinadi’s reference to God’s people could not here have reference to historical Israel. See Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology*, 2nd ed. (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2016).
  11. Various formalizations of such a logic of exception might be cited for the purposes of fuller elaboration, although any strictly formal presentation of such a logic would likely avoid using the language of Paul’s “as though (not).” For this reason, it is perhaps best to cite the extended discussion of exception, which draws on formal work, found in Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). The extremely lengthy discussion among logicians and mathematicians about the concept of the exception has been gathered in its essentials in Jean van Heijenoort, ed., *From Frege to Gödel: A Source Book in Mathematical Logic, 1879–1931* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).
  12. This is a point made especially by Jacob Taubes, who calls 1 Corinthians “one great fugue around this single word *pan* [‘all’].” Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 1.
  13. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 53–57.
  14. For my own discussion of Romans 9–11, see Spencer, *For Zion*, 57–68.

15. The story of the hermeneutic tradition here summarized is told by Gadamer himself. See HansGeorg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 172–382. For the basic texts, see the excellent collection: Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, ed., *The Hermeneutics Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1994).
16. See the discussions in Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962); and Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (New York: Routledge, 2001). For a full formalization of this notion of worlds, see Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II*, trans. Alberto Toscano (New York: Continuum, 2009).
17. This example suggests that a more careful regard for the various sorts of things Latter-day Saints read the Book of Mormon *as* might prove useful. It is one thing to read the Book of Mormon as scripture and another to read it as history; it is one thing to read it as literature and another to read it as a theological resource; it is one thing to read it as comparative text and another to read it as material artifact. Each of these approaches to the text brings with it a larger world or context that determines the possibilities of interpretation.
18. It is worth noting that there has been a systematic attempt—not as yet widely recognized for its importance—at a “philosophy of ‘as if.’” I do not here pursue a close reading of this approach, but it deserves at least mention. See especially Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of “As If”: A System of the Theoretical, Practical, and Religious Fictions of Mankind*, 2nd ed., trans. C. K. Ogden (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968).
19. See Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 279: “As always, coherence in contradiction expresses the force of a desire.”
20. I take this example from calculus, not without some violence, with an eye to the remarkable exposition provided in Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). For a helpful commentary, see Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).
21. Here one might in fact point to the concrete work of comparative philosophy of religion. For a rich experiment in this discipline that is focused specifically on Mormonism, see Jad Hatem, *Postponing Heaven: The Three Nephites, the Bodhi-sattva, and the Mahdi*, trans. Jonathon Penny (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell

- Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2015); for a shorter example that is somewhat more explicit about methodological questions (and interested in the same examples of scripture used here), see Joseph M. Spencer, “Christ and Krishna: The Visions of Arjuna and the Brother of Jared,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 23 (2014): 56–80.
22. Drawing on the resources of model theory (and comparative study of two philosophers: Alfred Tarski and Alain Badiou), I have elsewhere provided a formal analysis of this procedure. See Joseph M. Spencer, “Formalism and the Notion of Truth” (PhD diss., University of New Mexico, 2015).
  23. My discussion here differs in important ways from that of Giorgio Agamben, but it should be noted that his comments focus quite specifically on the use of “as though not” when the layered worlds are, curiously, identical (as in 1 Corinthians 7). See Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 23–25; and also my own commentary in Spencer, *For Zion*, 150–53.
  24. The importance of this claim to Abinadi should not be missed. It clearly forms the central feature of his sermonizing before Noah’s priests, and Noah subsequently cites this particular teaching as his chief offense, the reason for his state-sponsored murder (see Mosiah 17:7–8). Importantly, a generation later, Noah’s son Limhi explicitly recalls that the basic motivation for Abinadi’s murder was his insistence that God would come in the flesh to redeem his people (see Mosiah 7:26–28).
  25. This is, incidentally, a possible world on which Book of Mormon prophets seem to reflect often. See, for instance, Alma 11:41; 12:18; 42:11–13; and Moroni 7:38.
  26. Obviously, such language would seem to gesture toward Heidegger—and toward existential phenomenology more generally. As will become clear in the course of this paper, however, the sort of being presupposed in Mosiah 16:5 is far more static than dynamic, and thus far more reminiscent of classical conceptions of being than of any conception set forth by Heidegger. The title of this paper does *not* mean to align Abinadi with Heidegger’s thought.
  27. In effect, Abinadi might be said to accuse the rebellious as living ideologically, while those attuned to the actuality of redemption occupy what philosophers would call a more strictly “scientific” position. See, for instance, the careful delineation of science and ideology in Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Verso, 2005); and Louis Althusser, “*Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*” and *Other Essays*, ed. Gregory Elliott, trans. Ben Brewster et al. (New York: Verso, 1990). For an extremely useful

- commentary on the larger conversation within which this point of view takes shape in French philosophy, one in which “the lived” (as viewed in phenomenological circles) is definitively associated with the ideological, see Knox Peden, *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology: French Rationalism from Cavallès to Deleuze* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).
28. There is, of course, some question of whether the literary artistry in question should be understood as the sermonic work of Abinadi or the literary endeavors of Alma (who apparently produced the first transcription of Abinadi’s words; see Mosiah 17:4) or some subsequent editor (Mormon, for instance). Commentators have generally argued that Abinadi’s preaching as contained in the Book of Mosiah reflects Mormon’s editorial hand. See Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987–1992), 2:249; Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 3:316.
  29. I have provided a preliminary theological interpretation of this and similar phrases in the Book of Mormon in a piece investigating the thought of Adam Miller. See Joseph M. Spencer, “Notes on Novelty,” *SquareTwo* 6, 1 (Spring 2013), <http://squaretwo.org/Sq2ArticleMillerSymposiumSpencer.html>.
  30. The possibility that an editor, rather than Abinadi, provides the second formula should not be overlooked.
  31. In essence, the “if” of the hypothetical statement operates in a manner quite similar—if not identical—to that in which the “though” of every “as though” formula operates. Obviously, the “no” or the “not” operates in each case in a similar—if not identical—fashion as well.
  32. In other words, what distinguishes the hypothetical “if then, not” from the existential “as though not” is both (1) the absence in every “as though not” formula of a “then” and (2) the absence in every hypothetical statement of an “as.”
  33. Giorgio Agamben finds in the simple gesture of the “as though” the basic nature of the parabolic, an already-messianic function because of the way Jesus uses parables in the Gospels. He ties this notion, moreover, to Franz Kafka’s interest in parables. See Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 24, 41–43. In some sense, to be sure, Mosiah 16:6’s use of the “as though” formula is parabolic, opening up the actual world toward the possible in a messianic embrace of the coming Kingdom of God. The way this is so should become clear as this paper proceeds.

34. I will return to the question of speaking, but it is worth providing at least one point of contact here with Agamben's thought. See his discussion of speaking in Paul's thought in *ibid.*, 126–37.
35. Here it becomes particularly clear why it should be important whether Abinadi himself is the author of the aside in verse 6, or whether it is the work of a subsequent scribe or editor. Does Abinadi himself recognize the reversal of verse 5's basic conception of things in verse 6? Does he see himself as enmeshed in time at all, or does his way of "speaking" in fact suggest that his prophetic anticipations provide him with a nonlinear experience of the temporal? For a brilliant exposition of the difficulties of prophetic time in the Book of Mormon, see Jacob Rennaker, "Divine Dream Time: The Hope and Hazard of Revelation," in *Christ and Anti-Christ: Reading Jacob 7*, ed. Adam S. Miller and Joseph M. Spencer (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute, forthcoming).
36. It may be most appropriate to speak of becoming rather than of time, in light of the actual wording of the two verses. Verse 5 speaks of the person who "is as though," while verse 6 speaks of things "to come as though." This suggests *becoming* much more directly than it does *time* as such.
37. Nothing in Abinadi's words directly contests the viability of philosophies—like Heidegger's, for instance, but like those of many others as well—that find the dynamic instability of time at the heart of what is. "Being" and "time" operate as stipulative technical terms in this theological or philosophical reading of Abinadi, rather than as generalizable terms that can be put, acontextually, into conversation with philosophers using similar language.
38. This notion that difference becomes clear only thanks to a larger network of discernible similarities is one I have discussed elsewhere. See, again, Spencer, "Christ and Krishna."
39. I borrow the language of "disenclosure" from Jean-Luc Nancy. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. Bettina Bergo and Gabriel Malenfant (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).
40. These categories of the actual and the possible might productively be triangulated with the third category of the "impotential," as articulated by Giorgio Agamben (throughout his works). This I leave for another occasion.