BODIES MATERIAL AND BODIES TEXTUAL: CONFLATION OF WOMAN AND ANIMAL IN THE WILDERNESS

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As a woman myself, I often wonder about the daughters of Ishmael. What did they think when their father suddenly decided to leave Jerusalem and follow Lehi and his sons into the wilderness? How did they decide who would marry Nephi, Laman, and Lamuel? What was it like giving birth in the wilderness without the life-saving expertise of the midwives in Jerusalem? Did Sariah know enough to guide them through this harrowing experience? I wonder these things because we do not know them—the Book of Mormon scriptures give precious little information about the women who traveled with Nephi and his brothers. We do know, however, that the wife of Nephi and his children pleaded with Laman and Lamuel to loosen his bonds when they were crossing the storm-tossed ocean. We know that they grieved the loss of their father, Ishmael. And we know that even though they had nothing but raw meat to eat in the wilderness, they gave "plenty of suck for their children" (1 Ne. 17:2).

Today I want to sit with that small, scriptural afterthought—these women, bearing children and giving suck in the wilderness—and ask what it means to have a woman's body in the wilderness. In doing so, I hope to connect these women's bodies with both animal bodies and textual bodies. The act of leaving Jerusalem—leaving the culture, the city, the history—is more than just a journey to the new land; it is an exercise in rethinking established social and ontological hierarchies. In

examining the connections between animal, woman, and text, I demonstrate how Nephi's choice to return to Jerusalem for the brass plates and the daughters of Ishmael reveals an interdependency between all things.

As a medievalist, I spend hours reading and studying manuscripts from the Middle Ages. Produced centuries prior to print culture, these manuscripts are materially central to our understanding of the received text today. Consider, for example, *Beowulf,* a poem regularly assigned in the classroom. There is only one extant copy of this text, the Nowell Codex from the Cotton library, which was badly damaged in the infamous 1731 fire. While most of the manuscript is in decent condition, parts of it sustained extensive fire and water damage, and some of the final pages are in fragments. When reading this poem, you must not only consider the translator's interpretive choices—which can vary wildly at certain points—but also the condition of the manuscript and what words are missing or filled in. Parchment, of course, is made from animal skins, most commonly sheep. If you look closely at the *Beowulf* manuscript, you can sometimes see veins, hair follicles, or places where the skin was overstretched and a hole appeared. There is an incredible intimacy between the medieval manuscript and the medieval text—every poem, every word we have today exists because the parchment of a manuscript managed to persist.

So too with the Book of Mormon. The first thing Nephi is sent back to Jerusalem for is the brass plates (the second is the women, but more on that below). Nephi and his father recognize that in order for their culture and religion to continue, they not only need to remember the words in memory, they need the material presence of the words. Nephi considered the brass plates to be so important, in fact, that he ultimately justified killing Laban to get them. Like the medieval manuscripts, the brass plates were a physical manifestation of the scriptural text, and their material presence is absolutely crucial to the continuation of religious understanding for the descendants of Lehi and Sariah. In both the medieval manuscript and the brass plates we can see how a material

object acts upon, or at least interacts with, us. Jane Bennett calls this *thing-power,* or "the curious ability of inanimate thigs to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle."[1] Bennett here explores the necessity of acknowledging the importance of what we consider "things," and how their presence (or absence) can dramatically affect our lives. She calls, as many ecologically-minded scholars do, for a recognition of the connections not only between human and animal, but between living and non-living. Thus, far from being mere inanimate objects, the brass plates interact with, and upon, Nephi and his descendants.

After securing the brass plates, Nephi returns once again to Jerusalem to convince Ishmael and his daughters to join them in their exodus. Lehi quickly realizes that it would do little good to have a record of the Lord's dealings with their people if there were no people to share such dealings with (1 Ne. 7:1). Just as Nephi needs the brass plates to carry stories and create a culture in the new land, he needs women's bodies to literally carry new life and create a people in the new land. Textual bodies and women's bodies: both are necessary for the continuation of the people of Lehi. Much can be and has been said about the deep classical and exegetical anxieties surrounding the corporality of women's bodies, and, although I do not have the space to explore such writings here, it is worth noting that such theories frequently situate the woman's body as a passive receptacle of male will. At first glance, this certainly seems to be what is happening here: Lehi decides that his sons need wives, Nephi convinces Ishmael to join them, and everyone makes a grand exodus to the wilderness. However, I would argue that even if their thoughts and experiences were not recorded, the women of Ishmael were active participants in the management of their bodies. This is most vividly seen when they, living off raw meat in the wilderness, give plenty of suck for their children and become "strong . . . like unto the men" (1 Ne. 17:2). While this passage is troubling in that it measures the

1. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 7.

women's strength in relation to male strength, it does reveal the capacity of women's bodies to bear an exodus, childbirth, malnutrition, and great loss. It reveals how these women's bodies, removed from Jerusalem and placed in the wilderness, gain a kind of power in becoming raw like the meat they consume.

I am always arrested by Nephi's language in this passage in which he describes the strength of the women and the raw meat. It is, perhaps, especially striking given the narrative flow that precedes it: having returned with Ishmael and his daughters, Lehi, and subsequently Nephi, immediately receive the vision of the tree of life, followed by several prophecies concerning the growth of the church in the new land. All of these visions speak to futurity and abundant fertility—the tree of life almost explicitly so with its glorious fruit, and the prophecies more indirectly as they sweep across the generations of people that will inhabit these lands. Nephi's immediate shift, then, to the welfare of his wife and the other women is understandable. His language, however, most clearly illuminates the linking between spirituality and physicality. He praises the women for their strength and their ability to "bear children in the wilderness" and give suck (1 Ne. 17:1–2). He admires them for consuming raw meat and, perhaps, for becoming raw themselves in the wilderness. In these two verses we see Nephi switch from the glories of the tree of life to the glories of the woman's body in its most animal of all states: childbearing.

Of course, when I think of woman-as-animal, I cannot help but be reminded of the medieval parchment made from animal skins. As I mentioned above, these manuscripts create a material connection between animal and text that makes real our dependence on *bodies* for everything, including, in this case, textual transmission. There is something incredibly visceral about studying a manuscript and reading not only the written text of the scribe's hand, but the animal text of veins, hair follicles, and skin discolorations. The daughters of Ishmael do similar textual work with their bodies in the wilderness as do the

animals of the medieval text. Their bodies bear the marks of their wilderness travels: they become strong, they live off raw meat, and they bear children. Childbearing marks a woman's body in very real ways—pelvic bones shift their positioning, the abdominal skin stretches, often leaving permanent marks, and scars are left from the birthing process. Not only do the women bear children, but they bear the writing of the childbearing process on their bodies. The bodies of the daughters of Ishmael have literally become a second text, a second witness to their travels in the wilderness. Perhaps not as long-lasting as brass plates, or parchment even, but no less significant.

In her groundbreaking reading of Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale* Carolyn Dinshaw writes that "the Wife maintains that the literal text—her body—can speak for itself."[2] In this passage, Dinshaw explores how the Wife resists those who would try to gloss her—to contain her—by unapologetically insisting on the physical authority of her own body. I would like to extend this reading to the daughters of Ishmael, whose textual, womanly bodies have their own authority and voice in the wilderness. Nephi does not write that they became weak from their travails, but rather that despite—or perhaps because of—their added physical burdens in the wilderness, they became strong "like unto the men."

This reading, of course, runs the risk of implying that the women's strength comes from childbearing alone. While I do think that bearing children can be very empowering, my focus here is the ability of the women's bodies, like the brass plates, to act as a type of text in the wilderness. Nephi equates childbearing with strength because it is the difference that he lacks; fortunately, we have several other witnesses in the Book of Mormon where a woman's strength comes from her actions. What this moment does reveal is the interconnectedness of all things.

Nephi's departures and returns to Jerusalem reveal an interdependency between bodies that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. Perhaps

2. Carolyn Dinshaw, "'Glose/bele chose': The Wife of Bath and Her Glossators," in *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 115.

if they had planned better and taken the time to gather their brass plates and (potential) wives before they left, we would not have these stories of returning, but they didn't, and in the first few chapters of the Book of Mormon we repeatedly trace the lines of interconnection between man, text, and woman. These lines reveal what Timothy Morton would call the enmeshment of all living (and nonliving) things: "All life forms are the mesh, and so are all dead ones, as are their habitats, which are also made up of living and nonliving beings."[3] Morton explores here how all things are connected—how, for example, what we call the environment interacts with animals and us as humans. Or, to be more specific, how the exodus of Lehi was a gathering of animals, women, brass plates, children, men, weapons, cloths, tents, and eventually ships and "a round ball of curious workmanship" (1 Ne. 16:10). Thinking in the mesh requires thinking big and small; it requires recognizing the value of the cells in your body, the bricks in a building, and a hive of honeybees. It requires seeing the paths between interstate highways, the roots that connect the redwood groves, and the lines of ants. Thinking in the mesh disorients in that it removes hierarchies—not only cultural, but physical as well. When we think this way, we no longer see Lehi or even Nephi as the founder of a religious community in a new land, but rather as a member of an interconnected ecosystem moving across the land. We recognize, as Nephi did, that he was not going to succeed without the brass plates and women, to say nothing of the many other unnamed supplies that he took with him into the wilderness.

At the start of this paper, I wondered what it must have been like for the daughters of Ishmael in the wilderness. Here at the end, I wonder too what it must have been like for the entire company on their exodus, and not only them but also the abandoned city of Jerusalem and the anticipated new land. In tracing the connections between Nephi, the brass plates, and the daughters of Ishmael, I hope to have made apparent

3. Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 29.

the interdependency between all things—human, animal, and material. This is especially urgent given the ecological crisis we find ourselves in. Perhaps by thinking in the mesh we can trouble the hierarchies that have situated human needs over planetary needs. Perhaps in becoming aware of the connections between male, female, animal, and textual bodies we can rethink which voices we prioritize in our political and social discourse. And perhaps we can, like the daughters of Ishmael, become raw in the wilderness and find a way to give plenty to our children.

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