

The Old Testament and Easter

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This is not an academic paper; it is more like a homily. We normally don't use the word *homily* in Latter-day Saint circles, but we actually do homilize frequently. A homily is a sermon, one that is often based on, or follows, the reading of a scriptural text. This sermon meets that definition. Some homilies are associated with special events in the Christian calendar, as is this one. And many, like this, have been the means of expressing thanks and joy for the goodness of God, in keeping with our themes of temple, praise, and worship. My homily is titled "The Old Testament and Easter." It is based on the truth that Jesus is Jehovah, the God of the Old Testament, and that "all things which have been given of God from the beginning of the world, unto man, are the typifying of him" (2 Nephi 11:4). I will focus on three Easter events: Palm Sunday, Jesus' suffering in Gethsemane, and Jesus' Resurrection. In important ways, all three are Old Testament events, although they are recorded in the New Testament. If you do not know the connection between Easter and the Old Testament, this homily is for you.

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Triumphal Entry

Our first Old Testament event in the New Testament is the Triumphal Entry, perhaps the New Testament's ultimate example of praise and worship.

Every spring on the Sunday before Easter, Christians around the world commemorate Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem that is recounted in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The day is called Palm Sunday, and it begins the Holy Week that culminates in the celebration of Jesus' Resurrection. In Jerusalem, this commemoration takes on special meaning, because a procession follows a route very close to that followed by Jesus in the original event. On Palm Sunday in the Latin (Western European) calendar, pilgrims from around the world join local Arab Catholics in a service at the little church at Bethphage that marks the beginning of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on that day. Crusaders in the twelfth century identified what they believed was the very rock from which Jesus mounted the young donkey; it is still on display in the church today.

To begin the annual commemoration, bishops, priests, and believers meet in the courtyard behind the church for a joyful remembrance of Jesus' saving work. The Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, the Catholic Church's highest authority in the Holy Land, pronounces a blessing on the annual event. Palestinian Catholic scout troops carrying banners lead the way of the procession. Following them are thousands of worshippers holding palm branches, joyously re-creating Jesus' entrance into the Holy City. They walk from east to west—up over the Mount of Olives, down the Qidron Valley, past the traditional location of the Garden of Gethsemane, up the other side of the Qidron, through St. Stephen's Gate, into Jerusalem's Old City, and into the nine-hundred-year-old St. Anne's Church, where in joyous ceremony the Palm Sunday celebration is concluded.

The biblical story thus commemorated gives us every reason to rejoice. It is one of the rare events in Jesus' ministry that is recounted in all four of the Gospels, showing its importance.

In Luke, we read that as Jesus ascended the Mount of Olives from Jericho on his final journey to Jerusalem, approaching Bethany and Bethphage, he sent two disciples ahead to procure a young donkey on which he could ride. They brought it to Jesus, "cast their garments upon the colt, and they set Jesus thereon. And as he went, they spread their clothes in the way. And when he was come nigh, even now at the descent of the mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty

works that they had seen; saying, Blessed be the King that cometh in the name of the Lord: peace in heaven, and glory in the highest” (Luke 19:35–38).

Luke does not include the information that Mark provides that people “spread their garments in the way: and others cut down branches off the trees, and [spread them out] in the way” (Mark 11:8). They did this to create for Jesus a carpeted path, signifying great honor and reverence. Matthew tells us that the people shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest” (Matthew 21:9). John adds, “Blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord” (John 12:13).

“Hosanna,” “King,” “Son of David,” “King of Israel, that cometh in the name of the Lord”—this language is carefully chosen and very meaningful. It is true that the people in the multitude knew they were not welcoming just any Galilean rabbi to Jerusalem. But there is much more than that to the words they chose. The texts of all four Gospels show that the people in the crowd, and the Gospel writers themselves, knew they were experiencing a *biblical* event—an Old Testament event.

How do we know this? All of the words and phrases spoken by the multitude in response to Jesus’ presence come from the Old Testament. *King*, *Son of David*, and *King of Israel* are obvious allusions to Israel’s kingship in the Old Testament, established with David and to be continued through his descendants (see 2 Chronicles 13:5; 21:7; Psalm 89:3–4). Titles like these were not chosen lightly by Jews in Jesus’ time but were reserved to identify messianic hopes. It was not a new kingdom that Jews desired but the restoration of that of the Old Testament, and the people recognized it in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. His coming “in the name of the Lord” highlights the multitude’s level of praise and worship. The Psalms tie praise and worship to God’s name: “O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!” (Psalms 8:9); “All nations whom thou hast made shall come and worship before thee, O Lord; and shall glorify thy name” (Psalm 86:9); “I will praise thee, O Lord my God, with all my heart: and I will glorify thy name for evermore” (Psalm 86:12).

To strengthen the connection with the Old Testament, Matthew and John saw in the Palm Sunday event the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy. “All this was done,” Matthew reports, “that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet” (Matthew 21:4). He then quotes Zechariah 9:9 (see Matthew 21:5), as does John (see John 12:15), which is rendered as follows

in the King James translation: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.”

The setting in Zechariah’s prophecy is clearly millennial. With images familiar from other Old Testament prophecies, it points to a day in which the Lord will establish peace throughout the earth. Zechariah tells us that God will destroy the military armaments of men—characterized by *chariot*, *horse*, and *battle bow*. He will rule over all the world, and in that day, those who are in prison will be freed through the blood of the covenant (see Zechariah 9:11). The fulfillment of the prophecy will thus be in a context associated with Jesus’ Second Coming, not his First.

So how is the Triumphal Entry a fulfillment of a millennial prophecy? When the Savior entered Jerusalem, he rode over the Mount of Olives and into the city in careful reflection of the events foretold in the prophecy. It is obvious from the record that all things transpired as they were intended as a means of identifying his actions with the foretold events of the distant future. The purpose of the Triumphal Entry was to proclaim who Jesus was, to identify the man Jesus of Nazareth with the holy Messiah who would come at the end of time. Thus his earthly life and ministry were themselves both prophecies and signs of his millennial reign. He rode a donkey rather than a horse (as we might expect) because in biblical times, a horse was primarily military equipment, and he was coming as the Prince of Peace. Matthew knew the connection with the prophecy when he wrote his account, and John tells us that it was only after Jesus’ ascension—after the Apostles had received the Holy Ghost—that they understood fully what had happened (see John 12:16).

In the Palm Sunday event, the connection between the Old Testament and Easter starts to become clear. Jehovah, the God of ancient Israel, would triumph over Israel’s foes and reign over all the world as King of Kings. Jesus’ messianic triumph over death and sin would show him to be not only Israel’s promised Messiah but also Israel’s God.

Gethsemane

Our next Old Testament event recorded in the New Testament is Jesus’ experience in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Each year on the night of Holy Thursday in the Latin calendar, three days before Easter Sunday, a most moving service takes place in Jerusalem's Roman Catholic Basilica of the Agony. Sometimes called the Church of All Nations, this twentieth-century church stands on the location of earlier churches built by the Byzantines and later the Crusaders. Near the base of the Mount of Olives and opposite the Holy City, the place has been revered from early Christian times to the present because it is considered to be where Gethsemane was located in the days of Jesus.

The annual service takes place late in the evening, well after dark, to reproduce the environment of the night Jesus spent there with his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion. Even in daytime, the church represents night, its windows in darkened glass and its ceiling in dark blue studded with stars. Beneath and in front of the altar, an extensive slab of bedrock is believed to be where Jesus "fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matthew 26:39). Those words capture much of the mood of the Holy Thursday service that commemorates Jesus' last earthly night.

The service includes singing by a choir, singing by the congregation, and spoken parts—prayers and scripture readings—in Latin, Arabic, English, Spanish, German, French, Italian, Hebrew, and Polish. Among the readings are the accounts from the Synoptic Gospels that tell of Jesus' experience in Gethsemane. Following the service, a candlelight procession takes the worshippers across the Qidron Valley and up to the west, ending at the Church of St. Peter in Gallicantu, which commemorates Caiaphas's palace to which Jesus was taken after his arrest in Gethsemane.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke give accounts of Jesus' experience in the garden. Mark relates the events in their simplest form:

And they came to a place which was named Gethsemane: and he saith to his disciples, Sit ye here, while I shall pray.

And he taketh with him Peter and James and John, and began to be sore amazed, and to be very heavy;

And saith unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful unto death: tarry ye here, and watch.

And he went forward a little, and fell on the ground, and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him.

And he said, Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt. (Mark 14:32–36)

Jesus was alone through much of the ordeal because his disciples slept. Only Luke adds that “there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him” (Luke 22:43). Matthew’s description that Jesus “fell on his face” (Matthew 26:39) seems to reflect the essence of Christ’s suffering, but only Luke tells us that “being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (Luke 22:44). Likely, none of the accounts can come close to describing what really happened that night, and John’s silence on the whole experience continues to puzzle thoughtful readers.

Was this an Old Testament event? The Gospel writers thought so. Each account includes references to events of that night fulfilling Old Testament prophecy. Matthew and Mark record Jesus quoting a passage to say that the disciples would abandon him and flee (see Zechariah 13:7; Matthew 26:31; Mark 14:27). In Luke, Jesus states, “For I say unto you, that this that is written must yet be accomplished in me” (Luke 22:37), then quoting Isaiah 53:12. Matthew was more explicit that the events of the evening were in fulfillment of prophecy. Were things not to proceed as intended, “how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled . . . ?” (Matthew 26:54). In the end, “all this was done, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled” (Matthew 26:56).

Light of Life

Our final Old Testament event written in the New Testament is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, characterized by the light of new life that he brings. Jesus said, “I am the true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world.” He is “the light and the Redeemer of the world; the Spirit of truth, who came into the world, . . . and in him was the life of men and the light of men” (D&C 93:2, 9).

Christians of many persuasions use light in their worship services. Often this is in the form of candles, whose flames can represent the light of Christ. Following the practice of lighting oil lamps in ancient Israel’s temple, many Christians light candles with ascending flames representing prayers going up from the worshipper to heaven. Darkness represents the absence of divine presence, as light represents God’s nearness.

Perhaps the most remarkable use of flame in Christian worship is found in the celebration of the Miracle of the Holy Fire in Jerusalem each year. On Holy Saturday in the Orthodox Christian calendar, the day before Orthodox Easter, worshippers gather in Jerusalem to participate in this extraordinary celebration of the Resurrection that has been going on for over a thousand years. The ritual is not found in Western—that is, Catholic and Protestant—churches. The celebration of the Holy Fire takes place only in Jerusalem, yet it is loved throughout all of Eastern Christianity and is even broadcast live in some Orthodox countries.

Thousands of worshippers flock to the Holy City on that day. Many are local Palestinian Christians, but pilgrims from Russia, Greece, and other Orthodox lands come to participate in this event. They enter Jerusalem's Church of the Resurrection (called by Catholics and Protestants the Church of the Holy Sepulcher) with a bundle of candles in hand. The bundles contain thirty-three thin candles, one for each year of the Savior's life. Thousands of worshippers fill the massive church, and many others line the surrounding streets of the Old City in all directions. All come with their candles unlit and approach the building in a spirit of praise and worship. This is one of the most glorious celebrations in their religious calendar.

Orthodox Christianity's highest authority in the Holy Land, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, presides over the ceremony. He is assisted by bishops of the Armenian and Syriac Orthodox Churches and others. In the church, the traditional site of Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection, the annual celebration renews the power and message of Jesus' life. Inside the church is a structure identified as the tomb of Jesus. It contains two rooms, the outer representing the place where angels announced the Resurrection, and the inner representing the Savior's burial place. The Patriarch enters alone into the tomb, his own bundle of candles unlit, as others wait in anticipation of his return. Soon fire is seen from within the structure, and the Patriarch emerges, holding his bundle of burning candles. The tradition is that the starting of the Holy Fire on his candles is a miracle unaided by matches or other incendiaries.

The bells of the great church start to peal as the Patriarch's lighted candles are seen. He extends his candles to those nearest him to ignite theirs. Those in turn are touched to others, and thus the flame spreads rapidly to the candles

in the hands of all the worshippers within the church. From there, the flame spreads outside the building to thousands more along the streets, and within mere minutes of hearing the church bells sound, worshippers hundreds of meters from the church receive the flame from others ahead of them. Many take their lighted candles to their homes to keep the flame alive. The fire is even transported to other lands as the celebration continues abroad, and so the light that comes from the place of Jesus' triumph over darkness spreads all over the world.

In the Old Testament's praise and worship, God is associated strongly with light. He is its source and provides its sustaining power (see Genesis 1:3; Psalm 74:16). When the tabernacle was built, there was great emphasis on the means of illumination within it (see Exodus 25:31-37; 40:24-25; Numbers 8:1-4). We read in the Psalms, "The LORD is my light and my salvation" (Psalm 27:1). Worshippers pray, "LORD, lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon us" (Psalm 4:6); "For thou wilt light my candle: the LORD my God will enlighten my darkness" (Psalm 18:28); "For with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light" (Psalm 36:9). We read that those who will be blessed will be those who walk "in the light of [God's] countenance" (Psalm 89:15).

The association of God with light also plays a role in prophecies of the future. Isaiah writes that "the light of Israel shall be for a fire, and his Holy One for a flame" (Isaiah 10:17); "Then shall thy light break forth as the morning" (Isaiah 58:8); "Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the LORD shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising" (Isaiah 60:1-3).

In Jesus' own words and in those of the Evangelists, the New Testament connects directly with our Savior these Old Testament images of God as Israel's light. Jesus was the light that "shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not." He is "the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world" (John 1:5, 9). The Savior himself taught, "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8:12); "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (John 9:5); and "I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness" (John 12:46).

In making statements like these, Jesus was asserting his identity as Jehovah, God of the Old Testament.

The Easter Message of the Old Testament

In their narratives and letters, the writers of the New Testament sometimes made connections and comparisons with the Old Testament that seem to modern readers to discard the intent of the original authors. Some Old Testament passages cited in the New Testament do not seem to actually mean what the New Testament writers took them to mean. I do not know if Matthew, to mention one author, believed that all the Old Testament passages he related to Jesus' life truly referred to Jesus when the Old Testament authors wrote them. But his use of those passages and his application of them to Jesus shows that he understood well a fundamental principle of the Bible: Jesus' life, suffering, death, and Resurrection are the very message of the Old Testament. How could it be otherwise, for Jesus' life, suffering, death, and Resurrection are at the heart of all truth.

Believers in New Testament times had the same Old Testament text that we have today. Through images, types, and shadows, it teaches us fundamental truth, but few of its passages are overtly centered on Jesus Christ. One that certainly qualifies is Isaiah's Suffering Servant prophecy (Isaiah 53), which is very hard to explain as anything but a prophecy of Jesus. When the disciple Philip encountered a man from Ethiopia reading from that text, Philip asked, "Understandest thou what thou readest? And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? . . . The place of the scripture which he read was this, He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth." The Ethiopian asked, "Of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man? Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus" (Acts 8:30–32, 34–35). Abinadi read the same Isaiah text to hostile listeners who could not see Jesus in the Old Testament. After reading it, he concluded, "God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people" (Mosiah 15:1).

After his Resurrection, Jesus met two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They were troubled over the recent events of Jesus' death and rumored Resurrection. Jesus said to them, "O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. . . . And they said one

to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?" (Luke 24:25–27, 32). Clearly, Jesus was able to open the Old Testament to see in it, and teach from it, truths that were not visible to ancient readers and remain not visible to modern readers unaided by his revelation.

The message of Christ is indeed not absent from the Old Testament. In this great book of scripture, faith and repentance are fundamental to the person and character of Israel's God. His capacity to save is one of the hallmarks of his personality, and faith in his ability to deliver his people from every enemy teaches faith in his capacity to save from the greatest enemies—sin and death. Jehovah's longsuffering and willingness to receive repentant sinners characterizes his nature. Repentance was possible because his arm of mercy was ever extended to those who forsook their sins and came to him. Thus sincere Israelite worshippers who knew nothing of Jesus Christ understood both faith and repentance and saw them as the foundations of their relationship with a merciful God—even if they did not know the full details of their salvation.

Israel's temple worship taught the Christian gospel, because vicarious atonement and subsequent forgiveness are at the very heart of the temple sacrifices. Faithful ancient Israelites knew that they could not save themselves from sin but needed to rely on the intervention of God to deliver them spiritually. Jesus, his Book of Mormon prophets, and the writers of the New Testament revealed that Christ himself was to be God's sacrificial lamb, but the fundamental principles had already been made known in the Mosaic law. And Israel's Messiah was Jehovah himself, something not always clear in the Old Testament but understood by Jesus' followers in the Book of Mormon and the New Testament. Honorable people who looked forward to a saving Messiah were looking forward to the coming of Jesus, and many recognized him when he came.

By teaching Jehovah's love and mercy and bearing testimony of him, all of the Old Testament prophets were testifying of Christ, as the Book of Mormon says they did (see Jacob 4:4–5; 7:11). Those who could see with an eye of faith saw Jehovah as the center of all their righteous desires and devotions. Those who were taught, as was the man from Ethiopia, or whose eyes were opened, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, were enabled then to perceive rightly that Jesus of Nazareth was their Messiah and God's unblemished offering in their behalf. One such disciple, John the Baptist, was able to testify when he

saw Jesus, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

Christian writers from Paul to the present have seen in the message of Easter the purpose and fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. Easter, indeed, is the culmination of the Old Testament, the reason for its covenant, the message of its Mosaic law, the objective of its temple, and the fulfillment of all the hopes and aspirations of its worshippers. Israel's temple, praise, and worship had their ultimate aim in the Easter mission of the Old Testament's saving Messiah, Jesus Christ.