The Fortieth Anniversary of the RSC: A Conversation with Elder Jeffrey R. Holland

Interview by Thomas A. Wayment
On the cover:
A breathtaking view from the Angels Landing trail looking northward to the Narrows, Zion National Park, Utah.

PHOTO BY TOBIAS ALT
The publication of this issue of the *Religious Educator* corresponds with the celebration of the RSC’s fortieth anniversary. In the events leading up to our anniversary, I have had the opportunity to reflect upon where we have been as a center, where we are going, and where we want to be in the coming years. The lead article in this edition represents a candid interview that Elder Jeffrey R. Holland sat down for in preparation for our fortieth anniversary. As you may already know, Elder Holland established the center in 1975. His foresight and planning laid the foundation that we build upon today. In the article he shares some of his thoughts on how the center came to be and events that led him to propose starting the center.

This issue of the journal has much to offer, and it reflects the great diversity that the RSC represents. Over the course of our first forty years, the journal has increasingly grown into a bridge-building endeavor where academics can speak to teachers and interested readers and where fresh and insightful studies can be published. The journal represents a community of believers who are seeking to improve their teaching, expand their understanding, and broaden their academic horizons. It also helps academics identify the relevancy of their work for the larger public. And for general readers, it is hoped that the journal offers careful discussions that are timely and insightful. This issue of the journal offers a welcome time to reflect on where we’ve been and to look forward to another forty years of productive and healthy discussions.
Contents

1 The Fortieth Anniversary of the RSC: A Conversation with Elder Jeffrey R. Holland
INTERVIEW BY THOMAS A. WAYMENT

9 Peter, the Priesthood, the Temple, and Christ’s Atonement
ELDER BRUCE C. HAFEN

33 Diversity: The Strength of Book of Mormon Prophets
ELDER KHUMBULANI D. MDLETSHE

NOEL B. REYNOLDS

77 “With All Diligence of Mind”
FRED E. WOODS

91 “To Whom Is the Arm of the Lord Revealed?”
AARON P. SCHADE AND MATTHEW L. BOWEN

113 A Different Way of Seeing the Hand of the Lord
JOHN GEE
129  How Young Latter-day Saints Read Scriptures: Five Profiles
     ERIC D. RACKLEY

149  What We Should Teach the Latter-day Saints about Family
     History and Genealogy
     ROGER P. MINERT AND ANNE LEISHMAN

161  “For Our Profit and Learning”: One Method for Likening
     the Scriptures
     CHARLES SWIFT

175  Responding to Wrong Answers
     RYAN J WESSEL

184  New Publications

188  Upcoming Events

189  Staff Spotlights
The RSC Turns Forty: A Conversation with Elder Jeffrey R. Holland

INTERVIEW BY THOMAS A. WAYMENT

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland is a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles who founded the Religious Studies Center in 1975 while serving as dean of Religious Education at BYU. Thomas A. Wayment (thomas_wayment@byu.edu) is publications director of the Religious Studies Center.

Wayment: Elder Holland, would you start by sharing with us your original vision for the Religious Studies Center and what you had intended?

Elder Holland: When I was appointed the new dean of Religious Education, one of the first impressions I had was that there were a lot of very valuable things going on—bright, wonderful faculty members, a lot of interest from students, all the zeal and excitement surrounding religion and religious education on this campus—but it struck me that this was a hodgepodge of things when it came to our “college.” I thought, “We need a way to organize here.” There were institutes, journals, a chair, and a couple of research study groups. It just seemed to make sense to create a place for these groups to come together. I hoped that we could cluster those entities, give them a little better administration, maybe avoid some duplication, reinforce what needed to be reinforced, get them more resources. But even more important than that, I thought, was the need to have some sort of place, some sort of sponsorship—a center, if you will—where our faculty could publish.

I am not one of these who say that you are either a teacher or a scholar. We are both of those when we are at universities—you learn in order to teach,
and you teach in order to learn. Through all of that, there is regular need to write something, to publish one’s best thinking. But we did not have a lot of opportunities to publish LDS oriented scholarship. We needed a place—a center, if you wish—for our faculty to write and share their teaching with an ever-widening audience of students, alumni, and Latter-day Saints generally. So we combined those two elements: an organizational principle, a home for several existing entities, and a place to write and publish good, orthodox studies that would matter to us in Religious Education at BYU. I took that idea to then-President Dallin H. Oaks. He embraced it instantly, and the next thing I knew it was to the board of trustees and we had a Religious Studies Center. I think it has been a good thing to have done.

Wayment: Can you reflect on one of the things you said there and something that’s interesting to us? We were speaking to Latter-day Saints—that was part of our original intent—and we’ve grown a bit to speak to the external audience.

Elder Holland: No question that our initial view was too modest, too narrow. I see us writing to a wider world more and more in the years ahead as we come out of obscurity and out of darkness. I think as a church we are poking our head out of obscurity and out of darkness now. Certainly we will always write to Latter-day Saints. But clearly, as young scholars like yourself and others come with the ability to write equally well to the Latter-day Saints and those not of our faith, we will see more of both kinds of writing. We are getting the faculty that can do that.

Wayment: We are, certainly. One of the things that might be exciting too is that so many universities now have courses on Mormonism, courses about Mormons and our history, and what’s exciting is that people are reaching out to us at the center and asking, “What resources do you have? What things are available?”

Elder Holland: I think the RSC is an obvious place for other scholars to turn. I don’t know that it would be that easy for an outsider to know with whom to communicate on such matters. I think it is great to have a Religious Studies Center to which inquiring outsiders can be directed. However, you have to have something to offer, a corpus of information to share, if the larger academic community is going to communicate with you and expect information.

Wayment: Great. Another thing, when we started, you mentioned this kind of a hodgepodge, and now we’re publishing about ten to fifteen books per year and three journals. I wonder how that strikes you.
Elder Holland: It strikes me very favorably. What I am anxious about, however, is that we not get too broad. I don’t want us to be a mile wide and an inch deep with too many kinds of publications. But I am thrilled with the products I see; I get a copy of most things that are published. I am very proud of that, and like it all very much. But I think we will want to keep asking hard questions: how much is practical, how much is needed, how many lines of communication do we need, and what books are good enough to carry our imprimatur. When we know which products those are, then we should do a world-class job with them. I would like this to become known as the scholarly voice of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on matters that would normally be considered as “religious studies.” When people think, “Where do I look to see the real heartbeat of intellectual life and academic contribution for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” I want them to think BYU, and at BYU when the issue is religious scholarship, I want them to think of the Religious Studies Center. There is room for lots of other publications too; we have *BYU Studies Quarterly*, which is a great journal, but it is serving the entire university community, not just Religious Education. I would not want the RSC to creep laterally into dozens of academic fields; I would like it to dive down vertically and really put out first-rate, foundational products, which it seems to me we are beginning to do.
Wayment: Yes, and we have a website. And let me just share an interesting thing that you can reflect on. Our statistics are 30,000 unique visitors each month to the RSC website using the materials that are published, which we make available for free, but we've also noticed a dramatic spike in that about 75 percent of those visits happen on Sunday mornings.


Wayment: Yes. I wonder if you could reflect if you saw the RSC being involved in helping teachers prepare. It’s a little bit of a different component.

Elder Holland: It is different. I actually cannot say that 40 years ago I thought then so much about the Gospel Doctrine teacher or the sister preparing her Relief Society lesson. But I am thrilled to think about serving them. In this day and age with technology available to us—the use of websites, apps, and all kinds of devices that are available—it would be sad, truly unfortunate if we did not serve as many interested parties as possible. But I have to say I did not anticipate that. I was essentially trying to find a way to bless and help young faculty, and, as I said, get some order in our little part of the vineyard there at the university. But your wider world now is just a testimony to what happens with good things when the ideas are right and the effort that’s put into it is vigorous and inspired—a lot of great things happen. The only thing I would say at this point is I strongly encourage teachers to prepare earlier than Sunday morning, but that is a story for another day. I am happy that your website is being used.

Wayment: One thing you may not have seen at the time is the availability of free content, and so we make most of our products available for free.

Elder Holland: I have noticed that.

Wayment: And that’s really causing Latter-day Saints to embrace us, and so I wonder if you could share, if you were to look forward for a moment, where could we reach?

Elder Holland: Well, I think we are just beginning; I think we are just barely sprouting out of the ground on this thing. I would hope we would do a lot more, become a lot better known and get more than your current 30,000 hits. I hope it is 300,000 five months from now, because there is an immense need for people to have their understanding of the gospel increased. I think we are all going to need our faith fortified, and one way we fortify it is by solid study. So I think for people to have opportunities, avenues, ways, channels, places to study and fortify their faith, to learn the wonders and beauties and marvels of the Restoration—I think you have just barely started on that, and
so I would hope the RSC becomes much more widely known. And I would hope the quality of our product is unassailable—as definitive, as rewarding, as inspiring as a wonderful, bright set of faculty members and contributors can make. So I think what will happen is (a) we will do a lot more of this, (b) it will go not only to members, but it will bless Latter-day Saints, but it will bless those who are not of our faith, and (c) the quality of our work will improve. If we are going to be that kind of a voice for the Religious Education faculty within the university, then for a portion of the university itself, then for the Church, it will just have to be world-class work. In the early going, as the RSC got started, we picked up whatever was available here and there, publishing a wide variety, sometimes even a kind of peculiar variety of things. Today I think interest coupled with demand is refining that, and we will not have either the luxury of or need for publishing peripheral things. First-rate books, profound religious and scholarly essays and insights—that is what’s going to define the center in the years ahead. I think we are going to be, and I want us to be, world-class in the way we do the work: the quality that goes in, and the product that comes out. That is the journey we are on, that is where I see you going as I watch what comes to my office month by month.

Wayment: Excellent. Two more questions, if that’s OK, and I’ll tell you both up front so you can ruminate on those. One, I’m going to ask you about our student involvement now, and that’s a new component. And then, finally, if there’s anything you feel we should have asked or anything you would like to say. So briefly, my second-to-last question. We really engage students at the RSC, employing sometimes dozens of students at a time, and it’s become a mentoring environment where we really shepherd them through the hiring and look out for them to get jobs. And I wondered if you could at all place that in your vision of the RSC. It’s really a growth component since you’ve been there.

Elder Holland: Well, that is new. I would say my vision was probably a lowercase v when we were dreaming our dreams. I am thrilled to see student efforts, student essays, and student products. I would not have been conscious enough at the time to see that would be one of the great things that the RSC would grow into. I am happy that it has. Again, I think that testifies to the vitality of a good idea. If something is good, suddenly it starts to bless more here and bless more there. If you plant a little seed and it grows up into a pretty healthy tree, I guess a lot of people can get under it and enjoy the shade in three or four or five directions. It is marvelous that it is blessing students. A good thing has blessed another cohort, another aspect of the
university, broadly and even profoundly. I just was not smart enough at the time to know that that would happen or that there was a need to have it happen. As a student, I would have loved to be able to hang around the religion faculty or participate even remotely with the production of first-rate work by favorite faculty members at BYU. That would have been fun for me, and I am grateful it is happening for some that are there now.

Wayment: Excellent. That really captures it. We’ve integrated with the university’s goals better. Anything you would like to share or something we should have?

Elder Holland: No, I am just very proud of you. I am proud of the center. I will confess I wasn’t sure how much the center would grow. I thought it would do some immediate things that we needed. Elder Oaks was university president at the time, I was a young dean, and Elder Neal Maxwell was the commissioner of education—my dear friends all. As we talked about it, we thought, “Well, this will address an immediate need; it will do some good.” I am grateful—and I think I can speak for those two—I am grateful that it was such a good idea, that it has taken on the maturity and the dimension that it now has. It is very gratifying that it’s forty years old, which is really quite
amazing when you think of that. And often, I think the Lord does things with
us and through us that we are not aware of at the time. The scripture says, “Be
not weary in well-doing, for ye are laying the foundation of a great work. And
out of small things proceedeth that which is great” (Doctrine and Covenants
64:33). I think you are doing that with RSC. I think it was a small thing—in
a way, almost an incidental thing when we started—but out of small things
proceedeth that which is great. For university matters, we combine the head
and the heart, the spirit and the faith, reason and revelation. The Religious
Studies Center and those products that are coming out of it represent that,
symbolize that, offer that kind of gospel evidence to the world. I just want you
to keep doing it and keep doing it better. I want every piece that comes out to
be so stunning that people are speechless, that they are fighting their way to
the website or to their mailbox to get their hands on the truly inspirational,
profoundly important materials you pursue at the RSC. That is what I hope
for today and tomorrow, next month and next year. We have a lot of work to
do. This Church has a divine destiny. It also has an immense amount of work
to do and considerable opposition to doing it. We need the products of the
Religious Studies Center, and we need all the good people who are contribut-
ing there. May the Lord bless all of you abundantly. Thanks for the invitation
to talk about it. PE
Peter, the Priesthood, the Temple, and Christ’s Atonement

Elder Bruce C. Hafen

Elder Bruce C. Hafen is an emeritus member of the Seventy who recently served as president of the St. George Utah Temple.

Editor’s Note: This is part 2 in a two-part series for the Religious Educator. In this issue, Elder Hafen continues a conversation with religion teachers that offers some reflections on how we currently understand and teach about the Atonement. Part 1, “Fear Not, I Am with Thee,” was based on a talk he and his wife, Marie, gave at the 2014 BYU Women’s Conference. Part 2 is based on his 2014 BYU Sperry Symposium keynote address.

Introduction: Peter and the Temple

Several historical clues tell us that the Apostle Peter had, and probably still has, a significant responsibility for our dispensation—a kind of “hands-on” role that symbolizes the earthly use of the priesthood. For example, the Lord revealed in 1829 that he had given certain keys to Peter, James, and John that would be in effect until the Second Coming.1 Only a month later, when John the Baptist conferred the Aaronic Priesthood upon Joseph and Oliver, he told them that he acted “under the direction of Peter, James and John, who
held the keys of the Priesthood of Melchizedek.” Not long afterward, those same three men conferred that higher priesthood upon Joseph and Oliver.

Less well known is Peter’s intriguing appearance at the Kirtland Temple dedication in 1836, a visit that hints that Peter also has some role with temples. During the dedication, an angel entered through a window and sat next to Joseph Smith Sr. The Prophet later told the congregation that this angel was Peter, who had been sent as a messenger to accept the temple dedication.

Why would the Lord send Peter for that purpose? Perhaps it was because Peter holds the keys for the Melchizedek Priesthood, and the temple ordinances are the ordinances of that priesthood. If so, I wonder if that also explains, at least in part, the role that Peter plays in the temple endowment. Thinking of Peter in this way prompts these further thoughts: The primary ordinances of the Aaronic Priesthood are baptism and the sacrament. Those ordinances are also intertwined with the first principles of the gospel. Is there a similar interactive relationship between the temple ordinances of the high priesthood and some set of higher gospel principles?

If so, what are those higher principles, and what do they teach us about the natural pattern of our spiritual development as we move sequentially in the endowment’s pattern from the Aaronic through the Melchizedek Priesthood levels of our personal growth? And would that pattern also provide a framework for applying Christ’s Atonement to our experience beyond the Aaronic Priesthood ordinance of baptism?

The Temple Ordinances and the Two Priesthoods (D&C 84)

Whatever Peter’s exact duties are, the high priesthood for which he evidently holds keys is clearly related to the higher ordinances of the temple. Only in the ordinances of the higher priesthood—the temple ordinances—can “the power of godliness” be “manifest unto men in the flesh.” Moses had wanted the children of Israel to receive this higher priesthood and these higher ordinances. So he “sought diligently to sanctify his people that they might behold the face of God; but they hardened their hearts and could not endure his presence; therefore, the Lord . . . swore that they should not enter into his rest.” And when God took away Moses and the high priesthood, the people could no longer be sanctified by participating in the higher priesthood’s ordinances, even though they retained the Aaronic Priesthood.

Differences between the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods. The Lord has explained that the “lesser” or Aaronic Priesthood “holdeth the key of the
... preparatory gospel; which gospel is the gospel of repentance and of baptism, and the remission of sins, and the law of carnal [or temporal] commandments." Moreover, this preparatory priesthood administers the “outward ordinances, the letter of the gospel, [and] the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.”8

So the first few principles of the gospel—faith, repentance, and baptism—are identified with the “preparatory” or “outward” ordinances of the lesser priesthood—in contrast to the more internal ordinances of the higher priesthood. That higher priesthood holds “the keys of all the spiritual blessings of the church,” including “the privilege of receiving the mysteries of the kingdom” and becoming worthy and able to enjoy “the communion and presence” of the Father and the Son.9 Perhaps such higher principles as sacrifice and consecration are to the higher ordinances what the principles of faith and repentance are to the preparatory ordinances.

These scriptures about the two priesthoods make this simple point: As essential as faith, repentance, and baptism are—so essential that all of us must rely constantly on their power and their blessings—still, those elements really are “first” or “preparatory.” There is more. And we can find key portions of that “more” through the initiatory, endowment, and sealing ordinances—in combination with the higher gospel principles that teach us to live in our lives the higher covenants we learn in the temple.

Obedience to the ordinances and principles of the Aaronic Priesthood makes us eligible for salvation. After that, the temple ordinances help us to internalize the higher principles that help qualify us for exaltation. As Brigham Young said, the temple endowment provides “all those ordinances in the house of the Lord, which are necessary” for us to “gain [our] eternal exaltation.”10

What the higher ordinances and principles add. We don’t always speak of this complete pattern of the two priesthoods as much as we could—or perhaps should. Of course milk must come before meat. For example, the stated purpose of our full-time missionaries is “to invite others to come unto Christ by helping them receive the restored gospel through faith in Jesus Christ and His Atonement, repentance, baptism, receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost, and enduring to the end.”11

The principles of faith and repentance are “first” not only in the natural sequence of conversion, but also “first” as the foundation for every step of our spiritual growth. These are the principles that allow us to learn and grow
continually from all of our experience—a vital, lifelong process made possible by our continued reliance on the Atonement. Indeed, those who “hold out faithful to the end” have the promise of eternal life (see Mosiah 2:41).

Sometimes, however, we refer to the lesser priesthood’s elements in that sequence as if they were the entire process of discipleship. When we do that, “endure to the end” can sound like an afterthought, as if our baptism and confirmation have hooked us like a trout on God’s fishing line, and so long as we don’t choose to squirm off the hook, He will just reel us safely in. Or some assume that “endure to the end” simply describes the “no worries” stage of our spiritual retirement, when all we need to do is buy a Winnebago and go to Winnemucca—and don’t do anything really bad along the way.

But there is more. Noel and Sydney Reynolds, former president and matron of the Mount Timpanogos Temple, believe that “endure to the end” is a gospel principle that is paired with the temple endowment, just as repentance is paired with baptism. President Reynolds said this is the stage when we decide if we really want to become as the Father and the Son are.12 Nephi offered a similarly expansive view of “enduring”: “Unless a man shall endure to the end, in following the example of the Son of the living God, he cannot be saved.”13 The first principles will always be first—yet they are but the foundation for pressing on toward the Christlike life: “Therefore, not leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance . . . and of faith [and baptism].”14

Nephi also makes clear that faith, repentance, baptism, and the Holy Ghost are but the entry gate—the launching pad—for our lifetime spiritual journey toward the goal of eternal life. Now we must energetically press forward along the narrow path, seeking hope and charity, and feasting on Christ’s words—not as snacks to entertain us as we coast smoothly toward Winnemucca, but because His words, through the Holy Ghost, “will tell you all things what ye should do.”15 Tell us what to do—about what?

Nephi said he was not free to explain further what he meant by telling us to feast on Christ’s words for more direction. He said, “The Spirit stoppeth mine [further] utterance” about that. He was allowed only to tell us to “pray always,” and that we should not “perform any thing unto the Lord” without asking God to “consecrate [our] performance unto [us],” so that it “may be for the welfare of [our souls].”16 I wonder if, not feeling free to speak more openly about sacred matters, Nephi was hinting about hearing Christ’s words through the prayerful performance of temple ordinances and temple
worship, along with personal revelation. We do know that, before he wrote these words, Nephi and his people had already built a temple “after the manner” of Solomon’s Temple. Perhaps he knew more than he was allowed to say.

*Living the complete sequence makes possible complete spiritual growth.* The Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthood segments in this process work together to mirror for both men and women the pattern of personal spiritual growth embodied in the temple endowment. As President David O. McKay said, the endowment represents our “step-by-step ascent into the eternal Presence. If our young people could but glimpse it, [this] would be the most powerful spiritual motivation of their lives.” As crucial as they are, when we focus mostly on the faith-repentance-baptism steps in that ascent, we are seeing only the first steps of the spiritual staircase.

In his classic 1920 sermon on temple worship, for example, Elder John A. Widtsoe said, “Some people, having obeyed these first principles, believe their work done. . . . They are members of God’s chosen people—what more need they? [But] the gift of the Holy Ghost . . . is a promise of growth into . . . a larger condition of life.” We can realize “a promise of added intelligence . . . in part at least in the worship and ordinances of the temples of the Lord.” Therefore, we “may win salvation” by “obedience to the first principles . . . and a subsequent blameless life.” However, “those who [truly] hunger and thirst for righteousness . . . will advance farther than those who placidly sit by with no driving desire within them. Temple worship is an avenue to exaltation in God’s kingdom.”

Thus does exaltation ask us to *step up*, well beyond just doing nothing harmful. The theme of lifelong spiritual learning and growth was absolutely central to Joseph Smith. “When you climb up a ladder,” he said, “you must begin at the bottom, and ascend step by step. . . . You must begin with the first [principle], and go on until you learn all the principles of exaltation.” Thus Joseph prayed at the Kirtland Temple dedication “that all those who shall worship in this house . . . may grow up in thee, and receive a fulness of the Holy Ghost.”

*How the Atonement relates to the higher ordinances and principles.* Do the blessings of Christ’s Atonement play any role in this postbaptism, Melchizedek Priesthood journey—or does the Atonement apply only to the Aaronic Priesthood’s preparatory stage of faith, repentance, and baptism? Elder David A. Bednar has said that the fruit of the tree in Lehi’s dream is a symbol for all of the Atonement’s blessings. Elder Bednar then invited us
to think of baptism and confirmation as the gate that puts us on the path toward the tree of life. Then, he wrote, “pressing forward [along the path] and partaking of the fruit of the tree [of life] may represent the receiving of additional ordinances and covenants whereby the Atonement can become fully efficacious in our lives.” The natural, even obvious, place for those additional ordinances and covenants is the temple.

This doctrinal pattern suggests how the complete sequence of Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthood ordinances—and the gospel principles associated with them—invite us through the complete process of our spiritual growth through salvation and then exaltation: baptism, confirmation, the sacrament, receiving the priesthood (for brethren), the initiatory ordinances, the endowment, and the sealing.

And throughout these ascending and sequential steps, we are blessed by the redeeming, strengthening, and perfecting powers of the Atonement. The Atonement’s redeeming blessings connect especially to the first principles and ordinances—even though they obviously play a continued and critical role thereafter. Then its strengthening and perfecting blessings help us after baptism as we move from being forgiven (sometimes repeatedly) through the growing pains of being filled with Christlike love and character. Thus can we “endure to the end, in following the example of the Son of the living God.”

Even though the idea of sequential steps helps us to see more clearly the normal process of personal spiritual development, it is also clear that all of these steps, and all of the Atonement’s blessings, throughout both priesthoods and all ordinances, work together in the wholeness we call the gospel of Jesus Christ. In addition, they overlap and interact continually. We are never “done” with faith or repentance, and we can find entry points for our particular growth needs all along the spectrum.

Physical reflections of the complete pattern in the temple. During the first decades of complete proxy temple work for the dead (which began in 1877 in the St. George Temple), temple patrons would take each name through each of the steps in the complete sequence—rather than doing only baptisms/confirmations, or initiatory ordinances, or endowments, or sealings on a given day. The contemporary grouping of ordinances into these categories is a relatively modern pattern established for the practical convenience of the much-increased number of temple patrons; however, the original pattern perhaps more clearly showed the symbolic nature of the ascending sequence of Aaronic followed by Melchizedek Priesthood ordinances.
In addition, the early temples (in some ways, even as early as the Nauvoo Temple) also followed a symbolically important and ascending room-to-room pattern. Again, the modern practice of combining some of these steps into one or two rooms of the temple is for reasons of practical convenience (especially in newer, smaller temples). The room-to-room approach made more clear how the entire pattern of the ordinances reflected the climbing, step-by-step nature of each person’s progress and growth through the mortal journey back to the Lord’s presence.

In those older temples, in order to complete all of the needed ordinances in their natural sequence, patrons began in the baptistry at the temple’s basement or lower level, then they walked physically upward (in some cases only slightly upward, but still upward) from room to room—to the creation room, the Garden of Eden room, the world room, the terrestrial room, the celestial room, and finally the sealing room. That upward room-to-room pattern was a conscious reflection of what President McKay called a "step-by-step ascent into the eternal presence.”

Ordinances and the Atonement Bless Our Growth Beyond Baptism—Sacrifice

The concept of sacrifice illustrates how the temple ordinances embody and teach higher, Melchizedek-level principles. These ordinances reflect Christ’s sacrifice, and they teach us symbolically how our own sacrifices might seek to echo His. As our Primary children sing, “He knows I will follow him,/Give all my life to him.”

Ordinances in similitude of Christ’s sacrifice. When they left the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve built an altar and offered animal sacrifices. Then an angel came to ask Adam why he offered sacrifices. He said, “I know not, save the Lord commanded me.” So the angel told him, “This thing is a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten.” The unblemished lambs they sacrificed pointed them toward the Father’s future sacrifice of His Son. The angel then taught Adam and Eve that Christ’s sacrifice and the plan of redemption gave meaning and purpose to their entire experience, from Eden throughout mortality.

Many of us go to the temple today the way Adam and Eve did at first—simply because we are commanded, without knowing why. And simple obedience is certainly better than not performing the ordinances at all. But
the Lord who sent that angel must have wanted them to know why—and I believe He wants us to know why.

Are today’s temple ordinances also “a similitude of the Only Begotten”? Think of how the temple’s altars are, like the altar of Adam and Eve, altars of prayer, sacrifice, and covenant. Think of the dimensions of sacrifice in all the covenants of the endowment. Since Christ completed His atoning mission, we no longer offer animal sacrifice, but we do covenant to sacrifice—in what way? Christ taught the Nephites, “Ye shall offer for a sacrifice unto me a broken heart and a contrite spirit.”28

Animal sacrifice symbolized the Father’s sacrifice of the Son. But the sacrifice of a broken heart and a contrite spirit symbolizes the Son’s sacrifice of Himself. Elder James E. Talmage wrote that Jesus literally “died of a broken heart.”29 In similitude, we now offer ourselves—our own broken hearts—as a personal sacrifice. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell said, “Real, personal sacrifice never was placing an animal on the altar. Instead, it is a willingness to put the animal in us upon the altar and letting it be consumed!”30

We promise to sacrifice ourselves in this personal way throughout the temple ordinances. Then we leave the temple, and we try to live our sacrifices—and that process can help us flourish spiritually as the Savior’s strengthening and perfecting blessings, along with the priesthood power of the temple, interact with our moment-to-moment daily striving. Thus the doctrine of sacrifice illustrates how interaction between the higher ordinances and the higher principles helps us become more fully consecrated followers of Christ. As the sixth lecture on faith teaches, “A religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation.”31

Sacrificing and living “in similitude”—the marriage sealing. To illustrate how this process works, consider the sealing ordinance. Not long ago, I was about to seal a young couple in the St. George Temple. As I invited them to the altar, he took her by the hand, and I realized that they were about to place upon that altar of sacrifice their own broken hearts and contrite spirits—an offering of themselves, to each other and to God, in emulation of Christ’s sacrifice for them. And for what purpose? So that through a lifetime of sacrificing for each other—that is, trying to live as He did—they might become ever more as He is. By seeking to live that way every day, they would each come closer to God, which would also bring them closer to each other. Through their increasing closeness to the Lord, their own energy and discipline would
also draw in an interactive way upon the strengthening and perfecting powers He offers them through their personal relationship with Him as his covenant son and daughter. This way of living the covenants of the sealing ordinance would then sanctify not only their marriage but also their hearts, even their lives.

This understanding of marriage differs starkly from the prevailing view in today’s culture. In His parable of the Good Shepherd, Jesus described a “hireling”—someone who is paid to care for the sheep. When the wolf comes, He said, the hireling “leaveth the sheep, and fleeth.” Why does he flee? Because, Jesus said, “[his] own the sheep are not.” By contrast, He said of Himself, “I am the good shepherd. . . . I lay down my life for the sheep.” Most people today think of marriage as an informal arrangement between two hirelings. And when a hireling feels threatened by some wolf of trouble, he will flee. If trouble is coming, why should he risk his comfort or convenience, let alone his life?

But when we offer in our marriage a broken heart and a contrite spirit in similitude of the Good Shepherd, we will give our lives for the sheep of our covenant, a day or even an hour at a time. That process invites us to take selflessly upon ourselves both the afflictions and the joys of our companion and our children, emulating in our own limited way how the Savior takes upon Himself our afflictions. “Be you afflicted in all his afflictions,” said the Lord to Peter Whitmer Jr. about his missionary companion. In that same phrase, Isaiah described Christ and those He redeems: “In all their afflictions he was afflicted. . . . [He] carried them all the days of old.”

The more our sacrifices help us find Christ in the temple, the more we will find Him in our lives—and that process will transform us over time, preparing us to live one day in the exalted company of those seen in vision by President Joseph F. Smith: “And there were gathered together . . . an innumerable company of the spirits of the just, who had been faithful in the testimony of Jesus while they lived in mortality; and who had offered sacrifice in the similitude of the great sacrifice of the Son of God, and had suffered tribulation in their Redeemer’s name.”

As this statement suggests, those who seek the life of mature discipleship at the Melchizedek Priesthood level are likely to find that the higher principles and covenants of sacrifice are often linked to such higher sister principles as consecration, suffering, meekness, and sanctification. Thus the Lord told the Missouri Saints in 1833 that he had allowed their afflictions, because
“they must needs be chastened and tried, even as Abraham... For all those who will not endure chastening... cannot be sanctified.”36 Or as Elder Neal A. Maxwell both said and experienced for himself, “The very act of choosing to be a disciple... can bring to us a certain special suffering... [a] dimension that comes with deep discipleship.... [Thus] all who will can come to know [what Paul called] ‘the fellowship of his sufferings.’”37

In a sense, the sealing ordinance invites us into the fellowship of Christ’s suffering, as our sacrifices for one another may indeed ask us at times to suffer. The children born of that sealing are also part of the same fellowship, as we may suffer to bring them here, to rear them, and to suffer with them through their dark valleys. In such ways, living our temple covenants teaches us to be serious about deep discipleship.

The Power of Godliness Is Manifest

In addition to sacrifice, section 84 gives us another concept that illustrates how the temple conveys the higher “keys of all the spiritual blessings”38—“in the ordinances [of the greater priesthood] the power of godliness is manifest.”39 Thus, as Truman Madsen put it, the temple offers “the ordinances of godliness.”40 And President Harold B. Lee said that the endowment contains the sacred but not secret “mysteries of Godliness.”41

Forsaking ungodliness. These ordinances of godliness manifest godly power in several ways. First, as an example of how all of our temple covenants can influence the way we live, think again of the sealing. Trying to offer the attitude of a broken heart and contrite spirit to our families “in similitude” of the Savior will encourage us to see our spouses and our children as He sees them—which will help us understand and try to love them as He would. Trying to live that way, even when we often fall short, will write the Lord’s pattern of marriage and family life upon our hearts, and by our own exertion we will become better companions, better parents, and better people—just as people who choose to live the Word of Wisdom will have better health. So we bring one part of the power of godliness into our own lives simply by choosing to deny ourselves of ungodliness—and that choice alone makes us a little more godly. The choice to live that way is, as Elder Christofferson said of the choice to repent, “a self-willed change.”42

Godliness from the Atonement’s perfecting blessings. Moreover, the perfecting blessings help us to become ever more as He is—more godly. As Moroni said, “If ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all
your might, mind and strength, then . . . by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ.”\footnote{43} “Godly” also suggests “saintly”—we “become a saint through the atonement”\footnote{44} as the Lord’s influence leads us to develop saintly qualities. Our friend Peter spoke of this process when he urged us to become “partakers of the divine nature.”\footnote{45}

I once asked a group of temple workers if working in the temple really had helped them to develop greater meekness, humility, love, and submissiveness. Listening to their warm personal examples, I asked myself—are these dear people more saintly because they love the temple, or do they love the temple because they are so saintly? That is, are they sanctified \textit{by} the temple or \textit{for} the temple? Both dimensions matter, but our time in the St. George Temple left us with no question. The temple lifted us to find Him and know Him better than before.

As my wife, Marie, said recently, “As I was walking up to the temple one day, I came upon a grandmotherly woman—one of our temple workers—bending over, tending to the flowers near the front door. She looked up. Her aging face was alive with light—the face of a lifetime of temple worship and [the sacrifices of] temple living. Her countenance enveloped me in the aura of the temple and filled me with the desire to have that same happy holiness in me.” Like Joseph and Mary, we will “find Him in the temple.”\footnote{46}

\textit{“With you”—godliness as being with Christ through the ordinances.} Further, the temple’s power of godliness can enhance and deepen our personal relationship with the Lord simply by drawing us closer to Him, opening our hearts to whatever we need most from Him at a given time. In the temple we are “[endowed] . . . with power from on high.”\footnote{47} Moroni wrote that his people had gained \textit{power} over their enemies by their faith, their religion, and their “rites of worship.”\footnote{48}

Drawing on Moroni’s comment about gaining power from rites of worship, BYU professor Daniel Belnap has written that the “power of godliness” may refer to the state a mortal must be in to interact with divinity. If so, priesthood ordinances offer not only a \textit{symbolic} way of learning but also “an \textit{actual} experience” that makes us more conducive to the Spirit, as a means of entering into God’s presence.\footnote{49} Joseph Smith once said that knowledge about the purpose of mortality “can only be obtained by experience \textit{through the ordinances of God set forth for that purpose.”}\footnote{50}

Speaking of the endowment as given in Nauvoo, Richard Bushman wrote that “the temple’s sacred story stabilized and perpetuated Joseph’s governing
passion,” which “was to have his people experience God.”51 That is also why Moses “sought diligently to sanctify his people that they might behold the face of God.”52 Apparently both Moses and Joseph wanted for their people what they had experienced themselves.

Joseph Smith offered a similar thought in his translation of Mark about the sacrament. In the King James Version, Jesus said of the bread, “Take, eat: this is my body.” And then of the wine, “This is my blood . . . which is shed for many.”53 But in his translation of these verses, Joseph told us that the Savior further said, “This is for you to do in remembrance of my body; for as oft as ye do this ye will remember this hour that I was with you.” Then, as He offered them the wine, He said, “And as oft as ye do this ordinance, ye will remember me in this hour that I was with you and drank with you of this cup.”54

He did not say, “you should remember me” but rather, “you will remember me.” When we partake of the sacrament and the temple ordinances while in the right state of mind, could the power of godliness somehow help us remember and even visualize Him in some way? Perhaps from a similar perspective, Abinadi said that “when [Christ’s] soul has been made an offering for sin he shall see his seed”—those “whose sins he has borne.”55

I have wondered if somehow, in the great eternal present tense of the Atonement, the Savior in Gethsemane was able to “see” in some way all those who would accept His sacrifice. And if so, is there some reciprocal gift of sight that would let us “see” or visualize Him as He drinks His bitter cup—for us, and with us? And when He said, “You will remember that I was with you and drank with you of this cup,” could that mean that He “sees” us drink our bitter cups?

If so, perhaps the sacrament and the temple ordinances can somehow quicken our awareness not only to see Him drink his cup, but to know that He is “with us” when we drink ours—just as He was in the fiery furnace with those three men in the book of Daniel, literally “with them” in the fires of their affliction. After all, it is only because He drank His bitter cup that the bitter cups of our own sacrifices can be sanctifying to us. Without Him, our sacrifice alone would not sanctify us. There is a reciprocity of sacrifice just as there is a reciprocity of grace.

The phrase “with you” in these verses took on real meaning for Marie and me when we were in Sweden for one of the first international Especially for Youth (EFY) programs. We saw how much the Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish youth loved being with each other and with their young single adult
counselors; most of them had never spent several days with so many their age who shared their faith. They didn’t want to go home. At a concluding fireside, the leaders asked us to take just ten minutes to teach them about the Atonement.

As the meeting began, we saw banners posted around the large gymnasium, showing their group names from the standard EFY pattern—short scriptural phrases like “Happy Still,” “Highly Favored,” and “Dreamed a Dream.” Marie and I decided we should also choose a scriptural name for our two-person group. And our warm feeling about being with them prompted us to choose the name “With You.”

But what we could possibly say about the Savior’s Atonement to young people in ten minutes? We decided to share our group name as our theme. We told them about our grandson Clark, then just over two years old. As his mother was leaving him with a babysitter one morning, little Clark pleaded, “With you, Mom! With you!” He didn’t want to be away from her. Then we said to the EFY youth, that’s what the Atonement is about—“with you.” When we really come to know Him, we don’t want to be away from Him. We want to be with Him. Because of His sacrifice for us, He said, “I will be with you in overcoming your sins. I will be with you in the hard moments; with you in becoming as I am.” Because of Him, we can tell our families and each other, “I will be with you forever.”

Later that evening I said to Marie, “I hope ‘with you’ is actually in the scriptures—that’s the rule for EFY group names. But the sacrament prayer says ‘with them.’” I just knew it had to be there some place—and a quick computer check found it in several places, such as 3 Nephi 18:7: “If you do always remember me ye shall have my Spirit to be with you.”

Only months later did we run across the special use of “with you” in Joseph’s translation of Mark 14: “[Y]e will remember me in this hour that I was with you and drank with you of this cup.”56 Our relationship with the Lord through the Atonement and the temple is all about the multiple meanings of “with you.”

Godliness and entering into “the rest of the Lord.” In addition, the idea that the temple ordinances can help infuse us with the power of being in the Lord’s presence also recalls His saying that because the Israelites hardened their hearts, they “could not endure his presence; therefore, the Lord” would not allow them to “enter into his rest.”57 Entering into the “rest of the Lord” is a significant, temple-related concept that describes the blessing of advancing
from living a kind of worldly or telestial life to living on the higher spiritual plane, as if moving upward from one temple room or sphere to another, even though we may occasionally falter.

The prophet Mormon spoke of “the peaceable followers of Christ” who “have obtained a sufficient hope” that they “can enter into the rest of the Lord.” President Joseph F. Smith described “the rest of the Lord” as a deep spiritual peace the Lord bestows on those who have “an invincible determination in their hearts to be steadfast in the truth, and who are treading in humility and righteousness the path” of the “followers of Jesus Christ.” These people receive “joy to their hearts” that frees them from “unsettled, restless” feelings of mortal discouragement, “suspicion, unrest, [and] uncertainty.” This is not just a hope for the next life. We can receive this tangible “spiritual contentment . . . here upon the earth . . . now, today.”

Alma made it clear that entering into the Lord’s rest is not a privilege reserved for the elect few. He said there had been “many, exceedingly great many [high priests], who were made pure and entered into the rest of the Lord their God.” Alma also linked “the rest of the Lord” to ordinances while speaking of the higher priesthood: “These ordinances were given . . . that thereby the people might look forward on the Son of God, it being . . . his order.” Then he implored all of us to become sufficiently “humble, meek, submissive, patient, full of love and all long-suffering”—there are those same higher level words again—that we too might “enter into his rest.”

In this condition of ascending from within our own mortality while still on this side of the veil, we can also cast away the influence of Satan, as Moses did before regaining the Lord’s presence. At first Moses was afraid, but after being strengthened by the Lord, he commanded, “Depart hence, Satan.” And Satan departed.

The Blessings of Temple Sealings

Sealings to family and the general sealing blessings. The crowning dimensions for our spiritual growth through the Aaronic and Melchizedek levels come to us from the temple’s sealing power. After receiving all of the other ordinances, our sealings can bless us in multiple ways. First of all, we must be sealed to a spouse in order to qualify for exaltation in the celestial kingdom because only a sealed couple can enjoy the continuation of seeds promised by exaltation. We may also be sealed to both our children and our parents, either through births in the covenant or specific sealing ordinances, live or by proxy. These
child-to-parent sealings not only ensure eternal family bonds, they are also welding links in the great ancestral chain that joins all generations into the family of God through all dispensations.  

This welding is part of what we might call the general sealing blessings of the temple—eternal promises regarding our own exaltation that are

“The temple’s sacred story stabilized and perpetuated Joseph’s governing passion,” which “was to have his people experience God.”
bestowed in addition to, and in some sense independent of, our person-to-
person sealings. Elder Carlos E. Asay said that—if we remain faithful—the
sealing ordinance gives us “blessings pertaining to the prospects of (1) par-
ticipating in the first [that is, celestial] resurrection, (2) all the blessings of
Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and (3) the [exalted] blessings of powers and
kingdoms.”65

I mention these general sealing blessings not only because their prom-
ises are so magnificent, but also because I found in the temple that too many
Church members seem unaware of them. Many assume that temple sealings
are for the sole purpose of sealing individuals and families to one another.
This isn’t the time for a complete discussion of the general sealing blessings,
but here is one illustration. If one parent in a temple-sealed family is excom-
municated and therefore loses his or her temple blessings, that obviously
cancels the sealings between him and his family members, and it cancels his
general sealing promises. However, his cancellation does not impair the gen-
eral sealing promises that remain with his spouse and children.

*Jesus Christ will “seal you his”—becoming sons of God.* The scriptures speak
of one other dimension of the sealing power that shows how the ordinances
and principles of the two priesthoods lead the Savior’s followers through a
complete upward sequence that fulfills the Atonement’s promise of at-one-
ment with the Lord. After King Benjamin’s people covenanted to become
“the children of Christ,”66 he exhorted them to retain Christ’s name in their
hearts and to remain obedient, even “steadfast and immovable.” If they would
do this, he said, the day would come when Christ “may seal you his, that you
may . . . have everlasting salvation and eternal life.”67

When Benjamin’s people accepted the first principles, they became the
children of Christ through the doctrine of adoption. And that lifelong process
could find its fulfillment in their being sealed to Him eternally. This example
is consistent with other references to the concept of adoption. Section 84
teaches that those who are faithful to the oath and covenant of both priest-
hoods are “sanctified by the Spirit” until “they become the [adopted] sons of
Moses and of Aaron and the seed of Abraham, and . . . the elect of God,” and
then “all that my Father hath shall be given” to them.68

Other passages teach about adoption, often tying it to ideas about
inheritance. Those who accept the gospel are adopted into Abraham’s lineage,
allowing them to inherit his promises. Faithful people who are not literal
descendants of Israel may be adopted into the house of Israel and their patriarchal blessings may assign them a lineage among Israel’s twelve sons.

Perhaps the most significant meaning of adoption is to become “the sons of God.” For example, “[A]s many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God.” And Paul said, “Ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.” And if we are God’s children in this sense, we are also “heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ”—if, as Paul added, “[it] so be that we suffer with him. . . . For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” in “the manifestation of the sons of God.”

Elder Bruce R. McConkie summarized what all of this means: “Eternal life or exaltation, is to be like God, to be a son of God, a joint-heir with Christ, receiving, inheriting, and possessing, as he does, the fullness of the kingdom of the Father.” Elder McConkie and President Joseph Fielding Smith were particularly explicit in teaching that the temple ordinances, particularly the marriage sealing, are the source of our adoption as sons and daughters of God in this sense.

But haven’t we been God’s sons and daughters ever since our premortal birth? Yes, He is the father of our spirits. Yet prior to that birth or organizing process, some essence of our being existed co-eternally with God. “Man was also in the beginning with God.” Then, as Joseph Smith taught, “finding [that] he was in the midst of [these] spirits,” God essentially invited them into a relationship with Him whereby they could “advance like himself” and be exalted with Him. In Terryl Givens’s words, this is “more like spiritual adoption than primordial birth.”

Still, as something of a second pre-existent stage, we know that “man, as a spirit, was begotten and born of heavenly parents, and reared to maturity in the eternal mansions of the Father.” Against this rich but not precisely defined background, “God is not a creator who fashions humans for his own purposes,” but is more a “heavenly mentor who . . . endows spirit matter with the form and conditions conducive to . . . full emulation of a perfect Father.”

At the same time, only Christ is the Father’s natural, physical child in mortality—His unblemished “Only Begotten.” So only Jesus is a natural heir to the Father’s kingdom. He invites us to share fully in His sonship—and thus His inheritance—by adopting us through the act and power of His Atonement. Therefore, the scriptures say—by and of Christ, the earth’s inhabitants can be “begotten sons and daughters unto God.”
After becoming Christ’s adopted children through baptism, if we remain faithful through the sequence of the remaining principles, covenants, and ordinances of the two priesthhoods, we may one day “come unto the Father in [Christ’s] name, and in due time receive of [the Father’s] fullness.”79 “I . . . am the Firstborn,” He said. “And all those who are begotten through me” and remain faithful shall one day receive the Father’s fullness and thereby become eternal partakers of Christ’s glory as members of “the church of the Firstborn.”80 Then Christ will seal us His as sons and daughters of the Father who are joint heirs with Christ, inheriting all that the Father hath. They have received their exaltation, for “all things are theirs and they are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.”81

In his masterful book on Christ’s Atonement, President John Taylor described these links between the Atonement, the adoption, and our exaltation. His language speaks of this process as endowing us not only with the forgiveness made possible by the first principles and ordinances, but, beyond that, with the Christlike capacities of godliness: “It is for the exaltation of man to this state of superior intelligence and Godhead that the mediation and atonement of Jesus Christ is instituted; and . . . man . . . is rendered capable not only of being a son of man, but also a son of God, through adoption. . . . And thus through the atonement of Jesus Christ and the adoption he [or she] is capable of eternal exaltation [and] eternal lives. . . . Through that atonement and the power of the Priesthood associated therewith, they become heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ,” inheriting “dominions in the eternal worlds,” where they “can become the fathers and mothers of lives.”82

So what does it mean that Christ might seal us His? This is one of those sacred doctrines about which we can catch and share only slight glimpses. It does seem to be part of the fulfillment of our relationship with Him, a personal process that is enhanced and authorized by the sealing ordinances of the temple and linked to the blessings of the Atonement. As Truman Madsen said:

The answer to “Who am I?” can never be complete unless it answers “Whose am I?” You are the son or daughter of a king. The Father himself. Through the ordinances you are begotten spiritually through his Son. You become heir to his throne. . . . You take his name. To receive him fully is to receive the fullness of his atonement. . . . [D&C 131:15, which speaks of being sealed up to eternal life, is talking] about coming to know by revelation through the power of the Holy Priesthood not only that Jesus is the Christ, but also that a relationship has been forged between you and Jesus Christ. . . . How do you come to know that? I can only tell you that the promise does pertain to the temple. . . .
[The] patterns of worship [in some religions fill our relationship to God with darkness, distance, and] irrational fear. [But] God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ yearn not to widen that gap, but to close it. In the house of the Lord we may come to him in light, in intimacy, and in holy embrace. . . . The temple is many things: a house of faith, a house of study, [a house of learning, order, prayer, fasting, and glory]. But surrounding all of those, it is a house of love. None of us receives enough love in this world, none of us. . . . The Father and the Son call us to come in the spirit of sacrifice and be surrounded by that holy environment which embraces us in love.83

This essay has been concerned with growing up spiritually to become sons and daughters of God in the fullest sense—rather than merely enduring. Just as we began with a reference to Peter, I conclude with another scripture from Peter’s life about growing up. This verse marked a turning point in my own life nearly forty years ago. I had barely begun what was my dream career—being a full time law professor at Brigham Young University. I was then shocked when Elder Maxwell asked me on two weeks’ notice in midsemester to leave my dream job and work for “a year or two” in a new correlation department at Church headquarters.

In my first meeting with the members of the Quorum of the Twelve to whom we reported, I was asked to say a few words. Only recently did I recall again the scripture I quoted on that long-ago day. It was from Christ’s final words to Peter: “When thou wast young, thou girdest thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old [also perhaps meaning fully grown] . . . another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not.”84

Those words refer to how Peter would die, but for me that day, and now, they also have a more general meaning: Most of us are quite full of ourselves when we are young. But when we grow up spiritually, we will, we hope, no longer be so self-absorbed. Rather, perhaps we will then desire to live more outside ourselves and to be carried by Him who was afflicted in all our afflictions, He who “redeemed them, and bore them, and carried them all the days of old.”85

I was secretly praying that day that I could grow up enough to accept what felt like an unwanted intrusion into my life plans—an intrusion that essentially continued for the next 38 years. In retrospect, I bear witness that I have been carried and stretched and changed for the better by Him who said those sobering words to Peter. So now I respond to Him in Cordelia’s words from *King Lear*: O good Master, “How shall I live and work, / To match thy
goodness? My life will be too short / And every measure fail me." In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

4. "In his account of the dedication of the Kirtland Temple, the Prophet recorded in his journal, 'Presdt Williams also arose and testified that while Presdt Rigdon was making his first prayer an angel entered the window and seated himself between father Smith, and himself, and remained there during his prayer.' Truman O. Angell later added, 'When the afternoon meeting assembled, Joseph, feeling very much elated, arose the first thing and said the Personage who had appeared in the morning was the Angel Peter come to accept the dedication.' President Heber C. Kimball even gave a description of Peter's appearance. "They had a fair view of his person. He was a very tall personage, black eyes, white hair, and stoop shouldered; his garment was whole, extending to near his ankles; on his feet he had sandals. He was sent as a messenger to accept of the dedication." Scott C. Esplin, "Wondering at His Words: Peter's Influence on the Knowledge of Salvation for the Dead," in The Ministry of Peter the Chief Apostle, ed. Frank F. Judd Jr., Eric D. Huntsman, and Shon D. Hopkin (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 303.
7. D&C 84:26–27; emphasis added.
12. From a stake conference talk, Orem Utah Sharon Stake, May 2014.
13. 2 Nephi 31:16; emphasis added.
14. Joseph Smith Translation, Hebrews 6:1; emphasis added.
15. 2 Nephi 32:3.
17. 2 Nephi 5:16.
23. David A. Bednar, Power to Become: Spiritual Patterns for Pressing Forward with a Steadfastness in Christ (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 77; emphasis added.
24. 2 Nephi 31:16.
25. For a description of the name, nature, and purpose of each of these rooms in the Salt Lake Temple, see James E. Talmage, *The House of the Lord* (1962; Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1912), 183–92.


34. D&C 133:53.

35. D&C 138:12–13; emphasis added.

36. D&C 101:4–6; emphasis added.


39. D&C 84:20; emphasis added.


41. “These revelations, which are reserved for and taught only to the faithful Church members in sacred temples, constitute what are called the ‘mysteries of Godliness.’ The Lord said He had given to Joseph ‘the keys of the mysteries, and the revelations which are sealed. . . .’ (D&C 28:7.) As a reward to the faithful, the Lord promised: ‘And to them will I reveal all mysteries, yea, all the hidden mysteries of my kingdom from days of old. . . .’ (D&C 76:7.)” *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Harold B. Lee* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2000), 102. Perhaps speaking of such mysteries, Alma said that to him who “will not harden his heart” is “given the greater portion of the word,” until he knows “the mysteries of God” in full. But those who harden their hearts receive the lesser portion until “they know nothing concerning his mysteries” (Alma 12:10–11).


43. Moroni 10:32; emphasis added.

44. Mosiah 3:19.

45. 2 Peter 1:4; emphasis added.

46. Bruce C. Hafen and Marie K. Hafen, “‘Fear Not, I Am With Thee’: Christ’s Atonement and our Personal Growth,” address given May 1, 2014, at Brigham Young University’s Women’s Conference. Transcript available online.

47. D&C 95:8; emphasis added.

48. Alma 44:5; emphasis added.


50. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), 419.
52. D&C 84:23–24.
54. Joseph Smith Translation, Mark 14:21–24; emphasis added.
56. Joseph Smith Translation, Mark 14:21–24; emphasis added.
57. D&C 84:24; emphasis added.
58. Moroni 7:3; emphasis added.
60. Alma 13:12, 16, 28–29; emphasis added.
64. “Those portions of [the Abrahamic covenant] which pertain to personal exaltation and eternal increase are renewed with each member of the house of Israel who enters the order of celestial marriage; through that order the participating parties become inheritors of all the blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 13; emphasis in original.
67. Mosiah 5:15.
69. John 1:12.
70. Romans 8:14–19.
72. “If you [would become a son or a daughter of God and an heir of the kingdom], you have got to go into the temple of the Lord and receive these holy ordinances . . . which cannot be had elsewhere. . . . The higher ordinances in the temple of God [the endowment and sealings] pertain to exaltation in the celestial kingdom . . . The Lord has made it possible for us to become members of the Church of the Firstborn, by receiving the blessings of the house of the Lord and overcoming all things. Thus we become heirs, ‘priests and kings, who have received of his fulness . . .’ who shall ‘dwell in the presence of God and his Christ forever . . .’ with full exaltation.” Temple sealers “seal upon us the keys and powers which, through our obedience, entitle us to become sons and daughters and members of the Church of the Firstborn, receiving all things in the kingdom. This is what we can get in the temple, so that we become members of the family, sons and daughters of God, not servants . . . No person can receive an exaltation in the celestial kingdom without the ordinances of the temple. The endowments are for advancement in that kingdom, and the sealings for our perfection, provided we keep our covenants.” Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), 2:41–45; emphasis in original. See also McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 13.
73. D&C 93:29.


83. Madsen, “The Temple and the Atonement.”


85. D&C 133:53; emphasis added.

Diversity: The Strength of Book of Mormon Prophets

Elder Khumbulani D. Mdletshe

Elder Khumbulani D. Mdletshe is an Area Seventy and a Seminaries and Institutes regional coordinator at the Roodepoort Institute of Religion, South Africa.

The apartheid government believed in “divide and rule.” Whites were divided according to which language they spoke: English or Afrikaans. Amongst the black Africans, tribal traditions and linguistic differences were emphasized, which caused the black Africans to be divided not only from the whites, but also from each other. For forty-six years, South Africans did not know each other. Eventually people got so tired of being divided according to race, culture, language, and other factors that they toppled the government and replaced it with a democratic one. Shortly after the removal of the apartheid system, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the former Church of England cleric and the anti-apartheid activist, coined the term “the Rainbow People” in appreciation of the diversity that existed in the country. He said, “Look at your hands—different colours representing different people. You are the rainbow people of God.” Since 1994, South Africans of all races have been working together to build a new country that recognizes the strength of its diverse population.

I am privileged to teach institute classes that are made up of students from different backgrounds, including differences in race, gender, economic
status, level of education, and Church experiences. These differences enrich the discussion in the classroom. For example, a newly baptized student will ask a question that seems so simple to a lifelong member of the Church, but an answer to a simple question enriches everyone in the classroom as each student responds based on his or her unique background. As a teacher, I have learned to let the students ask whatever is in their minds and then leave it to students to respond. I would come in only when the students were finished responding to assist them in making sure that whatever had been said in the classroom would build their testimonies.

In my study of the Book of Mormon and in my classroom experiences, I have observed diversity in the background of prophets, which extends to their teachings. I have also noticed that their environment shapes their character, which in turn influences what and how they teach. An analysis of the teachings of Lehi, Jacob, King Benjamin, and Alma the Younger proves fruitful in showcasing this variety of background of the Book of Mormon prophets and to what extent it contributes to the richness of the book.

After examining the unique circumstances that shape each prophet’s message, this paper will investigate five subtopics: Zenos and his teachings, Jesus Christ, resurrection, baptism, and the law of chastity. In discussing these topics, we will look for both consistency and variety across the four authors identified. It would be expected that they would teach a particular topic differently than one another. Their variety of teaching styles was informed by their own personal settings and experiences. Despite this diversity, they share a common purpose: “the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God.”2

Settings for the Four Prophets

The four teachers selected make a significant contribution to the Book of Mormon. Indeed, their combined contribution is 14 percent of the entire book.3 Their teaching covers the time between 600 BC and 53 BC, over a five-hundred-year span. Of the four, only Lehi and Jacob have a close relationship. Benjamin and Alma are historically far removed from the founding fathers of the Book of Mormon and are fairly removed from each other.

John S. Tanner reminds us that “we tend to forget how our favorite verses relate to a particular speaker in a specific historical and rhetorical situation.”4 The different audiences and settings contribute equally to what is taught and how it is taught. With such varied settings and audiences, the teachings
match the needs that existed at a particular time. For example, Lehi is the only one who teaches his small family about obeying God, even if it means leaving the comfort of his home (see 1 Nephi 2:2) and staying in a tent (see 1 Nephi 2:15). Jacob is the only writer to have quoted the entire allegory of the tame and wild olive trees (see Jacob 5), and King Benjamin is the only prophet who gives an extended sermon on service (see Mosiah 2). The uniqueness of these teachings to each author is what brings variety and enriches the Book of Mormon.

Lehi. In the thirty years of Lehi’s life covered in the Book of Mormon, we see him teaching his children first at his home in Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 1). Then we see him in the wilderness as he begins his journey (see 1 Nephi 2), in a tent as his temporal residency (see 1 Nephi 2:15), and on the seashore (see 1 Nephi 17:5) as he prepares his family to cross the great deep to the promised land. We then picture Lehi teaching aboard a ship as he courageously leads his family across the great deep (see 1 Nephi 18:17). And finally, on his deathbed in the promised land, he continues to teach his family (see 2 Nephi 1–4).

Lehi’s message is directed to a much smaller group than the other three authors’ messages. Lehi initially teaches his nuclear family. Only later are they joined by Ishmael’s family in addition to Zoram, Laban’s servant. Lehi’s teachings seem to be dominated by counsels and commandments directed to members of his family. Some specific instances are recorded in 2 Nephi 2 and 3, where Lehi addresses his two younger sons Jacob and Joseph respectively. We do not see Lehi traveling far and wide to preach and convert people.

From Nephi’s record, we know that Lehi teaches his family by example about faith. For example, when he is asked to teach to the Jews, the Jews mock him, but he continues to teach because he knows that Lord had commanded him (1 Nephi 1:19–20). Shortly thereafter he is asked to “leave all of his earthly possessions and depart into the wilderness not knowing the extent of his journey or the trials he would face.” Through these acts, Lehi teaches his children the extent of his faith in the direction of the Lord. When someone needs to go back to Jerusalem to get the records, it is not surprising that he counsels his faithful son Nephi, “Therefore go, my son, and thou shalt be favoured of the Lord” (1 Nephi 3:6). Lehi does teach his family in words as well as in deed, mostly focused on his role as a visionary prophet. He prophesies of the destruction of Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 1:18), the coming Messiah (see 1 Nephi 1:19; 10:4–6), and a future “choice seer” (see 2 Nephi 3:6). On a few occasions, Lehi teaches his family about how to communicate with
God through dreams and visions. 1 Nephi 8 contains one of those significant dreams Lehi sees and shares with his family. He also teaches the important doctrines of opposition in all things, the necessity of the Fall, and the gift of agency and that the purpose of humanity is to have joy (see 2 Nephi 2).

As a patriarch to his family he continues to teach even on his death bed. He concludes his ministry by blessing each of his own sons, Zoram, and the sons of Ishmael. Peterson observes that Lehi “pronounced his prophetic views upon them, extending that blessing unto their posterity for hundreds of years”8

Jacob. According to Robert J. Matthews, the boy Jacob could not be less than three or more than ten years old when Lehi’s family enters the ship.9 That means he would be familiar with the teachings of both his father, Lehi, and his older brother Nephi. Their teachings influence young Jacob’s religious commitment both in the land of his ancestors and in the promised land. He is ordained to the priesthood and set apart to ecclesiastical leadership by his brother Nephi (see 2 Nephi 6:2). Jacob later rears a family of his own, and he teaches them many times in “nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Enos 1:1). He also teaches in the temple (see Jacob 2–4), where he spends two days preaching the deep things of God to his people. The bulk of his recorded teachings come from this two-day conference.

Jacob’s audience is still small when compared to King Benjamin’s and Alma the Younger’s, but it is larger than Lehi’s. When Jacob becomes a leader and a teacher to his people, Nephi and Joseph are already married and have families, as do his other siblings. We can assume the same conclusion for Ishmael’s children and Zoram. This would mean the population has increased significantly from when Lehi initially presided over it. While more of Lehi’s teachings are conducted while they were on the move, the bulk of Jacob’s teachings take place near the temple.

According to C. Terry Warner, Jacob’s teachings are divided into three major sections: First, in 2 Nephi 6–11, Jacob bears his testimony of Christ as the Messiah and quotes from the prophecies of Isaiah. Second, he ministers to his people in the temple while presiding over the Church when he is about fifty years old (see Jacob 1:17).10 Jacob labors in this calling to consolidate the Church against forces of corruption and apostasy.11 The third and final part of Jacob’s ministry (see Jacob 5–7) is a discourse directed toward those of us living in the latter days, rather than toward his contemporaries. Jacob hopes his record will be read by a future generation (see Jacob 4:3; 7:27). The largest
portion of his sermon is his recounting of the prophet Zenos’s allegory of the olive tree. The allegory helps us understand the pains the Lord has taken in nurturing and reclaiming Israel.

John S. Tanner summarizes Jacob’s teachings as “a truly impressive array of genres: vision, narrative, psalm, scriptural exegesis, allegory, sermon, prophecy, father’s blessing, spiritual autobiography, and more.” Robert J. Matthews, describing Jacob’s mannerisms and approach to teaching, adds this: “There have been few people in history who have possessed the combination of spirituality, intellectual capacity, judgment, literary ability, parentage, faith, and seership that Jacob did. He exhibited an inherent desire for righteousness. He was a plain-spoken man, but used very descriptive language in his teachings.” As we review some of his teachings later, note how the descriptive nature of Jacob’s writing is evident and unique.

King Benjamin. Unlike Lehi and Jacob, Benjamin was born in the promised land. As a father, Benjamin is blessed with three sons: Mosiah, Helorum, and Helaman. The text is clear that he loves his sons and takes upon himself the responsibility of teaching and educating them (see Mosiah 1:13), and he counsels other parents in his kingdom to do the same (see Mosiah 4:15).

People come to listen to him at a time when there is peace among his people (see Mosiah 1:1), which he has been responsible for bringing to pass (see Words of Mormon 1:12–18; Mosiah 2:4). His love and concern for his people cause him to devise various ways of making sure that his message is received. Once the people are on the temple grounds, he notices that there are too many to get near enough to hear him speak. So he builds a tower and speaks from it, but he finds that his voice is still not reaching all those who are in the assembled audience. Thus he causes his words to be written and distributed to the people (see Mosiah 2:7–8).

One of the main reasons he gives for addressing his people is that his mortal days are numbered (see Mosiah 1:9 and 2:28). As a prophet, a teacher, and a man full of love for his people, he wants to make sure that his people are fully fortified (see Mosiah 2:27–28).

Benjamin gives his message to a much bigger group than the earlier teachers. A large population presents a multiplicity of challenges. We are also aware that the crowd he addresses is living in a peaceful time in the history of the Nephites (see Mosiah 1:1). We further know that there are families in the crowd, which means a variety of age groups are present (see Mosiah 2:5). Such a diverse audience means that a variety of topics needs to be addressed.
The text makes it clear that Benjamin has a unique position in that he provides political and religious leadership simultaneously. He inherits political power, which includes ecclesiastical authority from his father, Mosiah (see Omni 1:23, 25). As a protector (see Words of Mormon 1:14), he successfully leads Nephites to war against Lamanites (see Omni 1:24). Amaleki, who is a keeper of records, trusts King Benjamin for his moral standing in society and gives him the title of a “just man” (see Omni 1:25). To inspire his people, including his sons, he chooses the temple located in the city of Zarahemla to give his landmark address. It is estimated that close to 25,000 people come to listen to the words of one they love and revere. King Benjamin uses examples gained from both political (see Mosiah 2:14) and religious experiences (see Mosiah 3:2). In his words, there is a sense that he understands the challenges of his people. He speaks as one of them, rather than as a leader who looks down upon his subjects with condescension and a life far removed from their own. John W. Welch finds Benjamin teaching his people to be effective because “Benjamin's message combined the best of concerns for both poles in the typical dichotomies of life: the group and the individual, temporal affairs and spiritual matters, politics and theology, power and pleading, and recognizing both strengths and weaknesses. He spoke from a rich and wide spectrum of personal experience gained from his youth to his old age.”

King Benjamin’s message and its impact on his sons and his people is covered in the book of Mosiah. Though the topics he covers in his ministry are varied—such as service to our fellow neighbors (see Mosiah 2:17) and the importance of priesthood (see Mosiah 6:3)—King Benjamin seems to have a thorough knowledge of the Savior and especially of his Atonement (see Mosiah 3). King Benjamin seals his teaching by giving his people a name, which he had promised to give when he first begin his teaching (see Mosiah 5:7). Service dominates King Benjamin’s teaching, but he incorporates other teachings, such reading of the scriptures, the role of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, and the role of ordinances and covenants in our lives.

*Alma the Younger.* Like King Benjamin, Alma finds himself holding both political and spiritual leadership positions. He is a chief judge and a high priest (see Mosiah 29:42). At the time when he is a leader, the population has grown and has become scattered throughout the land. He defends his people through the word of God (see Alma 5) and by the sword (see Alma 2:29–33).

As a responsible leader, sensing the sorrowful state of his people, he resigns the position of chief judge and concentrates on being the high priest
over the Church (see Alma 4:18). Gerald Hansen Jr. points out that Alma “recognized the Nephites’ true needs and gave up the highest political office of the land.” As a result, he travels far and wide teaching (see Alma 5–15), baptizing (see Alma 4:4), and setting up churches (see Alma 15:13). His commitment to spreading the word of God causes him to wish that he were “an angel” (see Alma 29:1).

Alma travels extensively (like Paul of the Bible) and teaches in different settings: he teaches large crowds, small groups, and individuals. He is as effective in a crowd (see Alma 7) as he is one-on-one (see Alma 30). The effectiveness of his one-on-one teaching can especially be seen when he teaches Zeezrom, Nehor, and his own sons (see Alma 36–42). Alma teaches in synagogues, on riverbanks, inside a prison, in the wilderness, and in homes. His audience includes the poor (see Alma 32:12), the educated (see Alma 10:31), false teachers like Zeezrom (see Alma 30:12), and family members like his own sons (see Alma 36–42).

Because of this variety in audience, his teachings cover a vast number of subjects. Included in the assortment of topics he addresses are baptism, repentance, priesthood, ordination, prayer, the tree of life, the plan of redemption, a mighty change of heart, and the Redeemer. Hansen expands on this variety of places he teaches in and topics he addresses when he observes that in each of the places Alma travels, he finds a different level of preparation. Because of the differences in the preparedness of the people he taught, the variety of topics addressed in the Book of Mormon is articulated clearly in the writings of Alma. His travels and various audiences contribute to this variety in his message. For example, in Zarahemla the hearts of the people are lifted up in pride (see Alma 6:3), in Gideon the hearts of the people are not lifted in pride and they repent (Alma 7:6), and in Ammonihah Satan has a great hold on the people (see Alma 8:9–11).

Another factor that makes the teachings of Alma unique is that he finds himself in situations specific to missionaries. He is the only author among the four investigated here who teaches with a companion. Alma is also the only author who gives an extended sermon on priesthood (see Alma 13), the only author who talks about conversion because he is a beneficiary of a loving father who prayed that he might change his ways, and the only author who expands on what it means to be a missionary. Commenting on Alma 26, Elder F. Burton Howard, a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy, writes, “No one but a missionary could have written this story. Joseph Smith could never
have known what it was like to be a missionary to the Lamanites, for no one he knew had ever done such a thing before.”

Although the teachings of the Book of Mormon prophets discussed above are unique to their specific situation, their teachings have several themes in common. However, they each teach these recurring themes in a way that is unique to them and their circumstances.

**Treatment of Zenos**

Of the four writers being discussed in this paper, only Lehi, Jacob, and Alma quote from Zenos’s writings. Zenos lived sometime between 1600 and 600 BC. His writings appeared in the Book of Mormon as quoted by various writers who were quoting from the brass plates.

These prophets have different reasons to use Zenos’s words: Lehi is traveling with the brass plates, and he relies on ancient records for spiritual feasting while on the arduous journey. Jacob is influenced by his father as a young boy. He would have been familiar with his father’s teachings and the content of those records because they were around him. Alma asks a question and relies on the written words for a response. Whether he reads directly from the records or quotes from memory is not clear from his record.

We are introduced to Zenos in Nephi’s record of his father’s teachings in 1 Nephi 19:10–16. In verse 10, Lehi teaches about the signs that would follow the death of Christ, which include the three days of darkness. In verse 12, Zenos described the destruction that will follow the death of Christ. Verse 16 introduces the gathering of the house of Israel.

Jacob quotes extensively from Zenos. In Jacob 5, he quotes Zenos word for word, making it the longest chapter in the Book of Mormon. John A. Tvedtnes observes that Jacob is greatly influenced by his father in all that he does, which includes the extensive use of Zenos’s words in his writings. For example, Jacob says in 2 Nephi 6:3, “I am desirous for the welfare of your souls,” while in Jacob 2:3 he speaks of his “anxiety for the welfare of your souls.” The word “anxiety” is also mentioned in Jacob 1:5 and 4:18. Tvedtnes reminds the readers that Lehi first uses the word “anxiety” when addressing his family in 2 Nephi 1:16: “And I desire that ye should remember to observe the statutes and the judgments of the Lord; behold, this hath been the anxiety of my soul from the beginning.”  Even though Jacob was young when his father was a teacher and a prophet to his people, he seems to remember clearly the language his father used and the way he loved the writings of
Zenos. Amongst the things Jacob remembers is how his father spoke about the gathering of Israel (see 1 Nephi 19:16), and to ensure that this message is not missed by future readers, he decides to quote the entire allegory about the gathering of the house of Israel as recorded in Jacob 5. Both Jacob and Lehi center their quotation of Zenos on gathering. The difference is the lengths of what they quoted: Lehi quotes one verse, and Jacob quotes what became the longest chapter in the Book of Mormon.

Alma takes a completely different approach. If people on the Hill Onidah (see Alma 32:4) had not told Alma that they could not worship their God because they had been cast out of their synagogues, we have no reason to believe that Alma would have taught them the words of Zenos as recorded in Alma 33:3–11. Alma begins by paraphrasing what they had told him: “Behold, ye have said that ye could not worship your God because ye are cast out of your synagogues. But behold, I say unto you, if ye suppose that ye cannot worship God, ye do greatly err, and ye ought to search the scriptures; if ye suppose that they have taught you this, ye do not understand them” (Alma 33:2). Following this comment, he then says to them, “Do ye remember to have read what Zenos, the prophet of old, has said concerning prayer or worship?” (Alma 33:3). From verses 4 to 11 he answers this question. It would appear that this record was nearby for him to have quoted when a question had been asked.

**Jesus Christ, the Redeemer**

As stated, the title page of the Book of Mormon claims that the book is written to “the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God.” This suggests that the primary message of the book is the saving role of Jesus Christ. The four authors highlighted in this paper do not disappoint on this front. However, there is variety in the ways they testify of Christ. For example, Lehi does not mention the Virgin Mary as the mother of Jesus. Jacob also has nothing to say about the birth of Christ. On the other hand, both King Benjamin (see Mosiah 3:8) and Alma (see Alma 7:9–10) call Mary by name. Note the similarities in how they refer to her: Benjamin says, “And [Jesus’] mother shall be called Mary,” whereas Alma says the same thing but in slightly different words: “he shall be born of Mary.”

Additionally, the authors we have investigated try to communicate the form Jesus Christ would take after he was born. Lehi and his son Jacob have nothing to say on this topic, except that Nephi testified that Jacob had seen
the Messiah (2 Nephi 11:3). King Benjamin and Alma talk about him dwelling in a mortal body, yet note the difference in how they phrase this concept. In Mosiah 3:5 King Benjamin says, “[He] shall dwell in a tabernacle of clay.” Alma 7:8, on the other hand, says, “The time of his dwelling in his mortal tabernacle.”

In holy writ, Jesus Christ is known by many names. Lehi starts by using the name Messiah (see 1 Nephi 10:4) and shortly thereafter he introduces the title “Redeemer of the world” (1 Nephi 10:5). Jacob joins other Nephite prophets and writers by referring to Jesus Christ as “the Holy One of Israel” (2 Nephi 6:9). He further reminds his readers of the role Christ played in the beginning when he calls him the “great Creator” (2 Nephi 9:5). In keeping with his reputation of using descriptive language, King Benjamin uses different names when he refers to Jesus Christ: Lord God Omnipotent (see Mosiah 3:21), the Father of heaven and earth (see Mosiah 3:8), the Creator (see Mosiah 3:8), the Savior (see Mosiah 3:20) and, of course, Jesus Christ (see Mosiah 3:8). Although Alma the Younger covers more pages than the other authors, he restricts himself to the following names when referring to Jesus Christ: Good Shepherd (see Alma 5:38), King of all the earth and the King of Heaven (see Alma 5:50), Only Begotten Son (see Alma 12:33), and Son of God (see Alma 3:17).

Lehi, King Benjamin, and Alma the Younger seem to be consistent in how they view the role of Jesus Christ. They see his coming as a fulfillment of the prophecies of the promised Messiah who would save a fallen people. Despite this common view among these prophets, they use different descriptive language. Lehi says, “All mankind were in a lost and a fallen state, and ever would be save they should rely on this Redeemer” (1 Nephi 10:6). Lehi offers no such detailed description except to say that he would come, be the Redeemer, and be baptized (see 1 Nephi 10:4–10).

Once again, King Benjamin is a little more descriptive when speaking of Christ fulfilling the prophecies of a Messiah: “But men drink damnation to their own souls except they humble themselves and become as little children, and believe that salvation was, and is, and is to come, in and through the atoning blood of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent” (Mosiah 3:18). Alma is somewhat unique in his soteriology: “And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people” (Alma 7:12).
Resurrection

One of the missions of Jesus Christ is the Resurrection. The word “resurrection” appears eighty-one times in the Book of Mormon. This section of the paper will discuss how the word “resurrection” is used by the four prophets and writers. Lehi uses the word once: “The Holy Messiah, who layeth down his life according to the flesh, and taketh it again by the power of the Spirit, that he may bring to pass the resurrection of the dead, being the first that should rise” (2 Nephi 2:8). The verse tells us who is going to be resurrected and why he is going to be resurrected. Jacob makes the word “resurrection” a regular part of his discourse. We see this in 2 Nephi where the word appears seven times, with Jacob using it six of those times.

In the book of Jacob, Jacob uses the word three times. John Hilton III and Jana Johnson suggests that Jacob made it a regular part of his teachings “perhaps because Lehi had discussed the concept of resurrection with Jacob.” Hilton and Johnson further added that Jacob’s use of resurrection is uniquely Jacob’s and that no other prophet uses it the same way. Here are some examples: “power of the resurrection” is used on three occasions (2 Nephi 9:12; 10:25; Jacob 4:11), and “resurrection which is in Christ” is used twice (Jacob 4:11; 6:9).

King Benjamin does not use the word “resurrection” in his discourse, but this does not mean that he did not believe in or understand resurrection. Mosiah 3:10 sheds light on this observation when King Benjamin teaches, “And he shall rise the third day from the dead; and behold, he standeth to judge the world.” King Benjamin’s way of teaching about resurrection adds to the distinct and varied way of how prophets teach their audiences.

Alma uses the term “resurrection” more than any other prophet-writer: thirty-four times. Twenty-seven of those times are while he teaches his son Corianton in Alma 40. Why such a concentration of usage in a single chapter? Alma 40:1 helps us to answer this question. Alma began this chapter with these lines: “Now my son, here is somewhat more I would say unto thee; for I perceive that thy mind is worried concerning the resurrection of the dead.” One wonders, if Corianton had not been worried about resurrection, would Alma still have been known as the person who used the word “resurrection” most often?
Baptism

The four prophets discussed in this paper have an understanding of baptism. As Lehi teaches his family, he concentrates on John the Baptist’s baptism of Jesus Christ: “He should baptize in Bethabara, beyond Jordan; and . . . he should baptize with water; even that he should baptize the Messiah with water” (see 1 Nephi 10:9). This prophecy of Christ was given between 600 and 592 BC, and it is significant because it tells us that the Nephite prophets knew about baptism. Lehi’s faithful sons, Nephi and Jacob, also teach about baptism. In 2 Nephi 9:23 we read the following: “And he commandeth all men that they must repent, and be baptized in his name, having perfect faith in the Holy One of Israel, or they cannot be saved in the kingdom of God.” From the first amongst the Nephites, a prophet links baptism directly to faith and repentance. Furthermore, Jacob clarifies that baptism is a requirement to enter the kingdom of God.

At the end of King Benjamin’s teachings, King Benjamin makes a record of the names of those who have entered into the covenant (see Mosiah 6:1). Prior to taking their names, he asks if they “believed the words which he had spoken unto them” (Mosiah 5:1). Their response indicates that they have entered into a covenant and participated in a baptismal ordinance even though it is not recorded as baptism, but “the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent, which has wrought a mighty change” (Mosiah 5:2). They confirm this mighty change with these words: “And we are willing to enter into a covenant with our God to do his will” (Mosiah 5:5). These words sound like a baptismal covenant; however, in his teachings, the word “baptism” is not used.

Note that during this sermon, King Benjamin’s audience is overcome by the Spirit: “we know of their surety and truth, because of the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent, which has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2). In verse 3 we read that this happened “through the infinite goodness of God, and the manifestations of his Spirit.” Joseph Smith Jr. taught, “Baptism has always been accompanied by the baptism of the Spirit, the gift of the Holy Ghost. You might as well baptize a bag of sand as a man, if not done in view of the remission of sins and getting of the Holy Ghost. Baptism by water is but half baptism and is good for nothing without the other half—that is, the baptism of the Holy Ghost.”

The Book of Mormon preserves no record of Lehi, Jacob, or Benjamin conducting a baptismal ceremony. However, at the conclusion of King
Benjamin’s teachings, his people entered into a covenant with their God. Pinegar and Allen comment on this verse, saying, “By what process is the name of Christ imparted to us? The miracle of the mighty change is more than a spiritual transformation—it is a covenant process. Faith and repentance are followed by requisite ordinances at the hands of authorized priesthood holders commissioned to baptize and impart the gift of the Holy Ghost. It is through this process that we come to be known under the name of Christ.”

This differentiates King Benjamin from other authors discussed in this paper and from authors throughout the entire Book of Mormon.

Alma the Younger could have been there at the Waters of Mormon, observing his father teaching about baptism and baptizing those who believed his words. Later, as a missionary and a teacher, Alma the Younger invites all he teaches to show their commitment to the gospel through the baptismal ordinance. In Alma 5:62, Alma issues a personal invitation to members and nonmembers of the Church when he said, “Come and be baptized unto repentance, that ye also may be partakers of the fruit of the tree of life.” From this passage, we know that Alma understands that baptism is the fruit of repentance and that he also knows that it prepares one for eternal life. Alma 9:27 is recorded when there are still eighty-two years left before the Savior is born, but Alma reminds the people of Ammonihah that baptism is linked to Jesus Christ’s doctrine when he says, “He cometh to redeem those who will be baptized unto repentance, through faith on his name.” The final scripture dealing with baptism from Alma is in Alma 15:12–13. He baptizes Zeezrom and consecrates priests and teachers in the land of Sidom, and he challenges them to be baptized. Even though this is eighty-two years before the coming of Jesus Christ, we find Alma, like his father, baptizing people. Of the four writers and prophets being discussed, he is the only one who is recorded as actually performing baptisms.

**Law of Chastity**

Rodney Turner observes, “The Book of Mormon hardly mentions the purity of the marital relationship except on a very general way.” He further argues, “Fidelity is simply assumed.” Of the four writers discussed in this paper, Jacob and Alma discuss the sin of immorality (see Jacob 2:31–33; 3:5–7; Alma 39:3–14). Turner adds that other writers and prophets might have not specifically mentioned sexual sin by name because “the Ten Commandments
constituted a basic, general code of conduct of the Nephites as it did for the rest of Israel.”

Lehi would have taught chastity to his people. We see this when Jacob is in the middle of his teachings on this subject, and right after mentioning various whoredoms he says, “Ye know that these commandments were given to our father, Lehi; wherefore, ye have known them before; and ye have come unto great condemnation; for ye have done these things which ye ought not to have done” (Jacob 2:34). This is a reminder to his people that this was not the first time chastity is being taught.

Jacob stands alone in giving an extended exhortation on sexual sins. Robert J. Matthews praises Jacob on his ability to teach: “His teachings on these subjects are among the best we have in the scriptures, not only for their content, but also for the directness of his message and the beauty and power of his language.” Among the Book of Mormon writers and teachers, Jacob brings more clarity on the law of chastity as he uses different words and approaches to bring clarity to his readers. For example, he begins by talking about his uneasiness with the people’s thoughts (see Jacob 2:5) and the wickedness of their hearts (see Jacob 2:6).

To ensure that his hearers do not misunderstand his message, he becomes specific on what kind of sexual sins they were guilty of. In Jacob 2:24 he teaches, “Behold, David and Solomon truly had many wives and concubines, which thing was abominable before me, saith the Lord.” In Jacob 2:27, he brings to his people further clarity when he said, “For there shall not any man among you have save it be one wife; and concubines he shall have none.” He then reminds them of how the Lord feels about women when he said, “For I, the Lord God, delight in the chastity of women” (Jacob 2:28). Clarity on the law of chastity as taught by Jacob is further clarified in Jacob 3:12 when he says he is “warning them against fornication and lasciviousness, and every kind of sin, telling them the awful consequences of them.” If I had been in that audience, I would have left that temple clearly understanding what I had been taught.

King Benjamin, on the other hand, does not attack the issue of chastity with the same clarity as Jacob but talks about it generally, including it with other commandments that needed to be obeyed by his people. An example of this is recorded in Mosiah 2:13: “Neither have I suffered that ye should be confined in dungeons, nor that ye should make slaves one of another, nor that ye should murder, or plunder, or steal, or commit adultery; nor even have I
suffered that ye should commit any manner of wickedness, and have taught you that ye should keep the commandments of the Lord, in all things which he hath commanded you.”

Alma addresses the law of chastity with more clarity than Lehi and King Benjamin. Alma teaches far and wide and touches various subjects in his ministry. But toward the end of his fruitful life, he comes across a difficult situation in his own house. His son Corianton had been sent out on a mission to help convert the people of the land of Siron, but had left the ministry to follow a harlot (see Alma 39:3). Like Jacob above, Alma first highlights the condition of the heart when he says, “Yea, she did steal away the hearts of many; but this was no excuse for thee, my son” (Alma 39:4). Even though Corianton is guilty of only sexual sin, his loving father decides to stress the seriousness of this sin by reminding of other sins. This is what is recorded in Alma 39:5: “Know ye not, my son, that these things are an abomination in the sight of the Lord; yea, most abominable above all sins save it be the shedding of innocent blood or denying the Holy Ghost?” H. Dean Garrett mentions the following as the reasons why Alma mentions all these three sins to his son: first, to help his son fully understand the seriousness of his conduct, and second, to allow his son to fully understand the possibilities of repentance and forgiveness.27

These Nephite prophets understand the consequences of breaking God’s laws. Since they all teach about the general keeping of the commandments, they also teach about the general blessings that come to the faithful using similar terminology: “And inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper” (1 Nephi 2:20), a promise from the ancestor of the Nephites, Lehi. Other prophets give similar promises. Jacob gives a clear description of the consequences of breaking the law of chastity, writing, “Ye have broken the hearts of your tender wives, and lost the confidence of your children, because of your bad examples before them; and the sobbings of their hearts ascend up to God against you. And because of the strictness of the word of God, which cometh down against you, many hearts died, pierced with deep wounds” (Jacob 2:35). In a clear warning directed to men who break the law of chastity, Jacob teaches that adultery does not only affect the spouse but the children as well. Some of us see daily these consequences in many modern families. Alma also teaches about the consequences of sexual sin, but he is more pointed to his son because it starts as an interview with him. He says, “Behold, O my son, how great iniquity ye brought upon the Zoramites; for
when they saw your conduct they would not believe in my words” (Alma 39:11). This warning continues to be true today for all teachers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our conduct can either be a positive or a negative reinforcement of the truthfulness of the gospel to those who observe and look up to us.

Conclusion

Having reviewed the four authors selected for this study and the variety of their teachings, I conclude that the variety of teaching approaches in the Book of Mormon contributes to its richness and fulfills its mission of inviting us to come unto Christ. Variety continues to play a significant role to the modern Church. Since 1830, sixteen prophets have presided over the Church and have emphasized different aspects of the gospel in their ministry. For example, Joseph opened this dispensation with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and the priesthood, while Brigham Young led the Saints to their new home in the West. Lorenzo Snow taught the importance of the law of tithing. Spencer W. Kimball received a revelation allowing all worthy men to receive the priesthood, and Ezra Taft Benson emphasized reading the Book of Mormon. Gordon B. Hinckley accelerated the building of temples and brought the Church out of obscurity through public affairs. And the current prophet, Thomas S. Monson, is known for his efforts to rescue those who are spiritually struggling. Despite the variation in each of these topics emphasized by different presidents of the Church, at the heart of each president’s teachings is an invitation to come unto Christ.

Notes

2. Title page of the Book of Mormon.
8. Peterson, “Father Lehi,” 64.
23. Teaching of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 95.
Nephi teaches that the essence of repentance is to humble ourselves before the Father—giving up our own agendas and ways of doing things and turning back to him.
In the Doctrine and Covenants, the Latter-day Saints are directed at least five times to look to the Book of Mormon for “the fulness of the (everlasting) gospel” (D&C 20:9, 27:5, 42:12, and 135:3) or “all those parts of my gospel” (D&C10:46).¹ Most easily recognizable as an authoritative statement of this gospel is 3 Nephi 27:13–21, where Christ comes one final time to his Nephite disciples and clearly states the basic principles of his gospel to them. Perhaps less obviously, the same principles are also stated by him in 3 Nephi 11:31–39 when he first appears to the Nephites gathered at Bountiful a year after the great destructions that signaled the crucifixion of Christ to them. But the earliest, most comprehensive, and least recognized teaching of the gospel of Christ in the Book of Mormon by the Savior himself is reported by Lehi’s son Nephi² in the form of a brief appendix to his second book.³

In this essay, I hope to demonstrate how foundational 2 Nephi 31 was for all Book of Mormon writers and how important this passage of scripture is for understanding Christ’s gospel in this last dispensation for a wide range of readers.⁴ My aim is to help readers recognize 2 Nephi 31 as the primary source for gospel teaching in the Book of Mormon and thereby as the


NOEL B. REYNOLDS

Noel B. Reynolds (noel_reynolds@byu.edu) is a professor emeritus of political science and frequent Book of Mormon teacher at BYU. A former stake, mission, and temple president, he continues here a series of studies on the various elements of the gospel of Jesus Christ as taught by the Book of Mormon prophets.
intended primary source for learning the gospel in the Restoration. It is easy for modern-day readers of the Book of Mormon to miss the central importance Nephi had in mind as he wrote this passage. It seems that Nephi hoped to focus his readers’ attention on this explanation of the gospel by holding it back until the end of his writing, rather than including it at the beginning of his history, where it best fits in his chronological account. This chapter contains many intertextual references, which Nephi used to signal this chapter’s preeminent importance.

While Nephi probably saved the material in 2 Nephi 31 for the end of his writings to give it proper emphasis, the actual effect of his strategy on modern readers, in my experience, is that they tend to overlook it. It may also be difficult for readers to keep things straight when Nephi is being taught the gospel by two voices inside a vision narrated first by the Spirit of the Lord and then by an angel—voices that were not even mentioned in his original account of that great vision in 1 Nephi 11–14. Because of our modern writing methods, we don’t learn the techniques used by ancient writers to signal emphasis. For example, very few of my BYU honors students realized without some help that 2 Nephi 31 is intentionally set up as a flashback, and that the material it contains constitutes a previously unreported section of the great vision given to Nephi—and presumably to his father before him—at the first camp in the wilderness while Nephi was probably still a teenager.

Nephi starts the presentation off by casting our minds back to that great vision that was given separately to Lehi and then Nephi, in which they had seen the baptism of Jesus by a prophet of God: “I would that ye should remember that I have spoken unto you concerning that prophet which the Lord shewed unto me that should baptize the Lamb of God” (v. 4). Nephi’s earlier reportage of that vision contained a single verse briefly describing Christ’s baptism—a verse that we can now recognize as a placeholder (1 Nephi 11:27) that would be used to reorient his readers in 2 Nephi 31. Without forewarning, Nephi here relates the rest of that story by adding nineteen more verses—sharing with us what he had learned about the gospel or doctrine of Christ as he watched the baptism of Christ in vision.

We should notice in this connection with Nephi’s earlier vision of Christ’s baptism that 2 Nephi 31 is foreshadowed by the same occurrence in his father Lehi’s vision. Nephi warns us in 1 Nephi 8 that “to be short in writing” he does not “speak all the words of my father” (verses 29–30). But then two chapters later he does include Lehi’s long explanation to his sons of things
that he had learned about “a prophet which should come before the Messiah to prepare the way of the Lord” (1 Nephi 10:7). The account given by Lehi here and recorded by Nephi is three times as long and detailed as Nephi’s own account of the baptism of Jesus in his own vision. We should also notice that immediately after describing the baptism of Jesus to his sons, Lehi spoke to them “concerning the gospel” (1 Nephi 10:11). Nephi repeats that same pattern exactly in 2 Nephi 31, but with the difference that he finally provides a much longer and detailed account of how he was taught the gospel by the Father and the Son. We should assume that Lehi had that same experience and that this is what he was sharing with his sons at this point in 1 Nephi 10.

As Nephi unfolds this extended account in 2 Nephi 31, we learn that he was taught the basic gospel principles by two voices. It may be that we have trouble fitting this into our concept of that vision because Nephi never claims to have seen these teachers. Even with the huge surge in teaching and scholarly writing about the Book of Mormon in recent decades, very few readers of this chapter can remember confidently who it was that was teaching Nephi as he watched the baptism of Jesus in this vision. Through years of personal inquiry, I have learned that relatively few Book of Mormon readers seem to have been appropriately impressed with the fact that—as part of that vision—Nephi was actually team-taught the gospel by the Father and the Son! Nephi quotes each one of them three times! We do not have a comparable passage anywhere in scripture, and perhaps the only other recorded experience with the Father and the Son together that would be comparable would be Joseph Smith’s First Vision. Second Nephi 31 is clearly the most authoritative and unfiltered statement of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Father anywhere in known scripture. And of the three accounts we have of Christ teaching his gospel to Nephites, this is the only one presented by the prophet who received that teaching in the first instance and in his own original words. The other two accounts are excerpted from older records and then compiled by Mormon more than two centuries after the fact. Small wonder that Joseph was instructed in several revelations that the Book of Mormon contains “the fulness of the everlasting gospel” (D&C 42:3). But none of the revelations given to him contain a similar account. The Restoration revelations all send us to the Book of Mormon for that.

Second Nephi 31 is also the earliest comprehensive statement of the gospel message in the Book of Mormon—even though several previous passages make it clear that Lehi, Nephi, and Jacob knew the gospel—as it clearly sets
forth all six elements of that message as it is recognized in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today, including:

1. Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.
2. Repentance.
3. Baptism of water.
5. Enduring to the end.\(^8\)

These same six elements are included in both of the other Book of Mormon presentations of the gospel or doctrine of Christ that were given by Christ himself.\(^9\)

**The Loss of the 116 Pages Leads to Inclusion of 2 Nephi 31**

Once we have learned these six “parts” or “points” of his gospel from these Book of Mormon passages, we can see them all mentioned already in an early revelation to Joseph Smith in which the Lord explained the importance of their inclusion in the final configuration of the Book of Mormon. In the early summer of 1828, Joseph succumbed to the demands of Martin Harris and allowed him to take the first 116 pages of the translation manuscript home to show his family and friends. While the negative consequences of this event are well known, the subsequent revelation that came to Joseph Smith seems to suggest that these happenings actually created the opportunity to include Nephi’s account of the gospel into the combination version of the Nephite record that Joseph would be publishing. For, as Joseph learned in this revelation, these small plates of Nephi “do throw greater views upon my gospel,” and “contain all those parts of my gospel” the Nephite prophets had “desired in their prayers should come forth unto this people” (D&C 10:45–46; emphasis added). And by this means the Lord stated, they could “bring to light the true points of my doctrine, yea, and the only doctrine which is in me” (D&C 10:62; compare 2 Nephi 31:21). This passage can easily be interpreted to mention all six of the elements of Christ’s gospel or “points of his doctrine” as it will be explained in the subsequent discussion of 2 Nephi 31 and later in this essay:

1. “Whosoever should (1) believe in this gospel . . . might have (6) eternal life” (D&C 10:50).
2. “Whosoever (2) repenteth and cometh unto me (3 and 4) [baptism and receiving the Holy Ghost], the same is my church” (D&C 10:67).

3. “Whosoever is of my church and (5) endureth . . . to the end, will I (6 again) establish” (D&C 10:69).

As regrettable as the loss of the Book of Lehi was, the Lord apparently saw that loss leading to the inclusion of the most comprehensive and authoritative account of his gospel that the Book of Mormon now contains—to which the members of his restored church have been directed in order to find the fulness of his gospel.

Plain and Precious Things

The passages discussed to this point seem to suggest that the principal themes for appreciation of the Book of Mormon in LDS discourse have never quite matched up with the perspective the Lord presents repeatedly to his prophets. From the beginning of the Restoration LDS teaching has emphasized an understanding of the Book of Mormon as evidence or proof that Joseph Smith was a prophet sent in these latter days to open the last dispensation. To this day, we invite investigators to read the book and then to take Moroni’s challenge and to “ask God . . . if these things are not true” (Moroni 10:4), where we usually assume “these things” refers to the veracity of Joseph Smith’s account of the Book of Mormon and its origins. But in the preceding sentence, “these things” refers directly to the mercy the Lord has shown “unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam” down to the present time (Moroni 10:3)—a mercy most obviously identified with the gospel of Jesus Christ, which teaches all mankind how to repent and receive eternal life, through the power of his Atonement.

Again we are referred back to Nephi’s great vision in which he was shown that after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, when the Bible first went forth from the Jews to the Gentiles, “it contained the of the gospel of the Lord” (1 Nephi 13:24). But then Nephi was also shown that apostate Christianity had “taken away from the gospel of he Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious” (v. 26). Four times Nephi was told that the removal of these “plain and precious things” from the Bible, will cause “an exceedingly great many” to stumble “insomuch that Satan hath great power over them” (vv. 28–29, 34). But, Nephi was informed, the Lord will also manifest himself unto the Nephite prophets who would “write many things which I shall
minister unto them, which shall be plain and precious”—writings which will feature “my gospel . . . and my rock and my salvation” (vv. 35–36). Nephi was then promised that these Nephite writings would eventually come forth to both Gentiles and Jews “upon all the face of the earth” and “make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away from them and shall make known to all kindreds, tongues, and people that the Lamb of God is the Eternal Father and the Savior of the world and that all men must come unto him or they cannot be saved” (vv. 39–40). The Lord’s perspective on the Book of Mormon clearly describes it as a vehicle for restoring the fulness of the gospel and the plain and precious things that have been lost from the Bible. And 2 Nephi 31 is one of the key texts in the Book of Mormon’s presentation of Christ’s gospel. The repeated emphasis on “plainness” in these passages will now be examined to show how these references play an important role in Nephi’s framing of that text.

**Context and Formal Structure of Nephi’s Final Sermon**

Before discussing these gospel elements in more detail, we should first examine the context and the approach chosen by Nephi for this key passage. The eight chapters following the Isaiah chapters (2 Nephi 25–32) are presented as a final sermon delivered by Nephi to his brethren. While these chapters do contain some commentary on the prophecies of Isaiah, we soon notice that their principal content is based largely on what Nephi (and Lehi) had learned in that great vision given at the first camp in the wilderness. For example, the prophecies of the coming of “the Only Begotten of the Father” in six hundred years, his Crucifixion and Resurrection, the scattering of the Jews among all nations, and the latter-day bringing forth of his words so that all may be judged fairly in 2 Nephi 25:12–19, all go back to their early vision (“for I have seen his day,” v. 13, see 1 Nephi 11:32–33). This is significant because these prophecies are not as plainly stated anywhere in the writings of Isaiah. Nephi begins by explaining that his prophecies will focus on the same events as those described in the prophecies of Isaiah. But Nephi will prophesy (1) “according to the spirit which is in me” and (2) “according to the plainness which hath been with me” (2 Nephi 25:4). Nephi then creates the envelope that will contain the long first section of his sermon by beginning with: “I will proceed with mine own prophecy” (2 Nephi 25:7), and then ending with: “And now I Nephi make an end of my prophesying” (2 Nephi 31:1). This sermon and the prophecies it includes will convey to Nephi’s brethren the key messages that
While Nephi took the long view of human lives as a whole, Lehi's account of the same vision was very focused on the present prospects for faithful living by his own family.
he has distilled from that vision—with added insight from Isaiah’s proph-
ecies—in more than four decades of teaching the gospel and the scriptures
to his people. It also seems clear that he now goes beyond those sources to
include new prophecies “according to the spirit which is in me” (2 Nephi 25:4). The intended audience is most immediately the congregation of the
Nephites that will survive him. But it also includes eventually the Lamanites,
the Jews, and the Gentiles who will read and believe his words in the future.

The sermon itself is presented in formally delimited sections using the
technique of inclusio or envelope structure, by which an ancient writer could
mark off sections of a text by repeating at the end of the passage a phrase or
statement from the beginning of the passage. This same technique is also
used by Jesus Christ in both of the passages Mormon reports (3 Nephi 11 and
27), where the phrases “this is my doctrine” or “this is my/the gospel” are used
to mark them off from the surrounding narrative. This certainly suggests the
possibility that the Father and the Son may have used that same technique
when they presented their gospel to Nephi and Lehi in their visions, leading
Nephi to preserve the same rhetorical device in his expanded reportage of
their teaching to him. The long inclusio that constitutes the first section of the
sermon is marked off doubly—first by Nephi’s references to his own prophecy
as discussed above—and second by his introductory discussion of plainness
in writing and prophesying: “My soul delighteth in plainness” (2 Nephi 25:4),
which he repeats exactly in 2 Nephi 31:3. This long first section includes the
original chapters 11 and 12 from the 1830 edition—chapter divisions that
were made by Nephi and that come to modern-day readers directly from the
original translation.

The Three Envelopes or Inclusios that Structure Nephi’s Last Sermon

1. 2 Nephi 25:4
   “I shall prophesy according to the plainness”

2. 2 Nephi 25:4
   “My soul delighteth in plainness”

3. 2 Nephi 31:2
   “According to the plainness of my prophesying”

2 Nephi 31:3
“My soul delighteth in plainness”

2. 2 Nephi 31:2
“A few words . . . concerning the doctrine of Christ”

2 Nephi 31:21b
“This is the doctrine of Christ”

3. 2 Nephi 31:21b
“This is the doctrine of Christ”

2 Nephi 32:6
“This is the doctrine of Christ”

The second section of Nephi’s final sermon, the focus of this essay, is also marked off as an inclusio by Nephi’s two references to “the doctrine of Christ” (2 Nephi 31:2 and 21). This section is the same as chapter 13 from the 1830 edition. A third brief inclusio is created at the end of the sermon as Nephi expands the discussion to explain his phrase “voice of angels” and ends a second time repeating the full clause at 2 Nephi 31:21: “This is the doctrine of Christ” (2 Nephi 32:6). The unity of the three sections as smaller parts of the same sermon is signaled quite creatively by Nephi as he overlaps the first two sections by starting the second inclusio in the sentence preceding the sentence that terminates the first inclusio. And the small appended explanation of the voice of angels that constitutes the third inclusio, is signaled by the repetition of the full clause in 2 Nephi 31:21 that incorporates the introductory phrase from 2 Nephi 31:2 to signal the end of the second inclusio.13

The written version of the sermon as we have it in 2 Nephi 25:4–32:6 is prefaced by a few personal, context-setting sentences in which Nephi explains, “Wherefore I write unto my people” (2 Nephi 25:3). Again at the end, he provides more context for readers of this written version, and laments “I Nephi cannot say more. The Spirit stoppeth mine utterance” (2 Nephi 32:7). In a final aside to readers—also addressed as “my brethren”—Nephi goes on to urge them to seek knowledge and understanding, to “pray always and not faint” (2 Nephi 32:7–9).
Nephi's Sermon, Section 1: A Focus on Christ

Nephi’s concluding sermon has two main sections that each have a separate message. The first section (2 Nephi 25–30) integrates the view of the future as seen by Nephi and Lehi in their visions with that of Isaiah. This integrated view is presented as a prophecy about Jesus Christ and his importance for the Nephites, for all Israel, and for the nations of the world. The second section presents the gospel or way provided by the Father and the Son, through which all individuals will receive the invitation and support they may need to be able to enter into eternal life—in effect, the standard by which the eternal welfare of every individual, whether gentile or Israelite, may be predicted.

Nephi’s Christocentric reading of Isaiah becomes explicit in his own writing. Nephi begins his long sermon/prophecy by describing the future coming and ministry of Jesus Christ among the Jews, who “will reject him because of their iniquities and the hardness of their hearts and the stiffness of their necks” (2 Nephi 25:12). They will subsequently “be scattered among all nations” until a distant future in which “they shall be persuaded to believe in Christ the Son of God and the atonement . . . at that time, the day will come that it must needs be expedient that they should believe these things” (v.16). It then becomes clear that Nephi understands that his own writings will play a key role in this restoration of Israel “from their lost and fallen state” as the Lord proceeds “to do a marvelous work and a wonder among the children of men” (v. 17). For “he shall bring forth his words unto them . . . for the purpose of convincing them of the true Messiah” (v. 18). “For this cause hath the Lord God promised unto me that these things which I write shall be kept and preserved and . . . shall go from generation to generation as long as the earth shall stand;” providing for us one example of the promises alluded to by the Lord in the 1828 revelation to Joseph Smith as described above (vv. 21–22). And so it is that Nephi and his brother Jacob “labor diligently to write, to persuade our children and also our brethren to believe in Christ and to be reconciled to God” (v. 23). “We talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ; . . . that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins” (v. 26). And so, Nephi concludes, “The right way is to believe in Christ and deny him not.” Because “Christ is the Holy One of Israel . . . ye must bow down before him, and worship him with all your might, mind, and strength, and your whole soul” (v.29).

Nephi goes on to prophesy that the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ will launch a new kind of ministry among the peoples of the world.
His prophets among the descendants of Lehi will find some success, but will be persecuted and killed by the wicked. Jesus himself will come to the righteous Nephites after the wicked have been destroyed during the cataclysmic events attending his death. Several generations of righteous people will follow and will in turn provide a witness to all the world—even in future dispensations—that Jesus lives and that his gospel is true (2 Nephi 27). Nephi then details the events through which this record—compiled centuries earlier by the Nephite prophets—will come forth in the last days and will provide a means by which all men everywhere will be commanded to repent and come unto Christ. It will be a day in which false doctrines will prevail, and most of the Gentiles will fight against the Nephite record and its teachings (2 Nephi 28–29). But many of the Gentiles will believe and will use the Nephite record to teach the remnant of Lehi, the Jews, and other Gentiles. For, “the Lord God shall commence his work among all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people to bring about the restoration of his people upon the earth” (2 Nephi 30:8). The second and much briefer section of Nephi’s sermon then details the actual teaching or doctrine of Christ that his messengers will bear to the world in that day (2 Nephi 31).

Nephi’s Sermon, Section 2: The Literary Mechanics of 2 Nephi 31

It is clear from the text that Nephi wrote this account at least forty years after the great vision was received at the first camp in the wilderness (compare 2 Nephi 5: 28 and 34). The importance he placed on this part of that vision is reflected not only in its placement at the end, but also in the density and the complexity of its composition. In the process of telling us what the Father and the Son taught him on the original occasion, Nephi presents the basic gospel message five times using a total of twenty-three shorthand statements of the gospel. He is able to use this complex set of repetitions and variations to introduce a powerful set of connections between the six basic elements of the gospel and to integrate his own understanding and testimony into the whole. While space constraints will not allow exploration of all those connections, I will delineate below the basic structural features of this text.

A fivefold presentation. In 2 Nephi 31, Nephi artfully combines quotations from the Father and the Son with his own insights and testimony to present the basic gospel message five times in varied ways, which build cumulatively to a comprehensive conclusion. The first explanation features the example of the Lamb of God who showed all mankind “the straitness of the
path and the narrowness of the gate by which they should enter” by humbling himself before the Father and by witnessing unto the Father by baptism that he would keep his commandments—after which the Father sent the Holy Ghost to him in the form of a dove (vv. 4–10).

The voices of both the Father and the Son are quoted in the second variation pointing out to the young Nephi the elements of Christ’s example that are expected of all individuals; repentance and baptism are required for all who would receive the Holy Ghost (vv. 11–12). These quotations also establish the supreme authority of this articulation of basic gospel principles. The third variation (v. 13) features Nephi’s testimony that if his brethren will follow the Son by sincerely repenting of their sins and witnessing to the Father by baptism that they are willing to take upon them the name of Christ, that they, too, may receive “the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost.”

The fourth variation invokes the voices of the Father and the Son again as they repeat and further explain each of the basic elements of the doctrine of Christ (vv. 14–15). The Son first recapitulates the three principal points of repentance, baptism of water, and baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost, and then adds a warning that anyone, who “after this should deny” him, would have been better off not to have known him. The Father endorses the words of the Son as “true and faithful,” and reformulates the warning positively as a promise: “he that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved.” We see confirming evidence that this instruction was part of Nephi’s original vision when he quotes this same language in his first report of that vision (1 Nephi 13:37—“if they endure to the end”). Since 2005 the Church has officially recognized this warning and promise as an articulation of a fifth basic gospel principle.

In the fifth presentation (vv. 16–20), Nephi draws together all the gospel elements that have been introduced in the first four—combining them with his own insights and testimony. No one can be saved that will not endure to the end. Repentance and baptism by water constitute the gate by which men can enter onto the path that leads to eternal life. Those who enter sincerely will receive “a remission of [their] sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost. At this point they are “in this straight and narrow path which leads to eternal life.” The image of a path introduced here not only informs Nephi’s presentation of the gospel, but is also used repeatedly by his successors. Only now, at the conclusion, does Nephi finally introduce the requirement of faith in Christ. Christ’s new followers have only made it “thus far by the word of Christ with
unshaken faith in him, relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save” (v. 19). Further, they must continually exhibit this same “steadfastness in Christ” as they “press forward” and “endure to the end” (v. 20). And only in this fifth formulation are all six gospel elements made explicit.

It may also be helpful to notice that these five presentations are divided into two main groups, each of which starts with repentance and baptism, and then builds cumulatively to a climax that includes all six elements. The first half of the chapter (verses 4–16) begins with the vision of the baptism of Jesus and uses five quotations from the Father and the Son to establish each of the five basic gospel elements as requirements for eternal life—but with primary attention focused on baptism and repentance. In the second half (verses 17–20), Nephi restates the entire complex in his own words, developing in more detail his understanding of faith, the functions of the Holy Ghost, and enduring to the end more fully.

The method of accumulation. At no point in this chapter does Nephi simply list out the six gospel elements that he is presenting—as a modern writer would certainly do. Rather, the passage presents a series of twenty-three statements—grouped in a series of five presentations of the doctrine of Christ—each of which mentions and relates two or more of the basic gospel elements. It is only by accumulating the repeated elements in the passage that we can see clearly how Nephi understands the gospel. These six elements are mentioned a total of sixty-four times in these twenty-three statements with the following frequencies: faith (8), repentance (14), baptism (19), Holy Ghost (9), enduring (8), and eternal life (6)—all within 2 Nephi 31. The striking fact is that exactly this same method is used by the Savior in his two presentations of the gospel as reported by Mormon in 3 Nephi 11 and 27, suggesting again that this method may have also been used when the Father and the Son presented their gospel to Nephi in that original vision given at the first camp in the wilderness. If that is correct, we would then see Nephi’s late composition as preserving the formal structure of their teaching as presented originally to him. However, he also incorporates his own commentary that most likely developed during his forty-plus years of reflection and teaching.

A meristic presentation. Recognizing that there is a six-element formula that defines the gospel of Jesus Christ helps us to see another important rhetorical feature of this passage. Once we understand that the gospel features these six basic elements, we can always recognize partial listings of those elements as implicitly referring to the entire set. When Nephi quotes the Father
saying, “He that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved (v. 15),” only the last two gospel elements are stated explicitly. But we immediately understand that the four unmentioned elements are not excluded, but are assumed to be essential parts of the saved person’s life.

This rhetorical technique of using selected items from a known list to invoke the whole complex or list in the mind of a reader is the literary device called merismus and is commonly used in the Bible. For example, Mark 16:16 quotes Jesus’s statement of his gospel to his disciples as follows: “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.” This and other similar passages are often used to argue that all that is required for salvation is faith in Christ, or faith and baptism. But with the Book of Mormon presentations of the gospel, we can see that there are five things necessary for any person who wishes to be saved. Furthermore, we can see that statements that only explicitly state a lesser number of those elements are implicitly invoking the entire list. Unfortunately, there is no single passage in the New Testament that demonstrates this insight so clearly as does 2 Nephi 31 for the Book of Mormon.

In retrospect we can see that this passage constitutes a brilliant assemblage of twenty-three gospel merisms that use both repetition and the introduction of new relationships between gospel elements to develop a clear though complex understanding of the gospel message. Once that message was established in this early passage, later writers were able to use the same meristic technique to refer to the gospel hundreds of times in the Book of Mormon text. Understanding how Nephi has used merismus in 2 Nephi 31 can help modern readers to identify and appreciate these scattered references to the gospel of Jesus Christ much more effectively. And again, this exact technique was used again in this same way by the Savior in his later presentations of the gospel to Nephites as reported in 3 Nephi 11 and 27, which makes Nephi’s presentation of the gospel in this way authentic and legitimate.

Nephi’s presentation of the gospel of Christ. Unlike the two later passages in which Mormon presents Christ teaching his gospel as quotations without editorial commentary, Nephi provides us in 2 Nephi 31 with a highly developed presentation of his own understanding of the gospel as derived from what he was taught by the Father and the Son, quoting them repeatedly to make and substantiate his points. By quoting each of them three times, he makes it clear that this teaching carries the highest possible authority and veracity. No other prophet claims to have been taught the basic elements of the gospel
by the Father. And the unity of the Father and the Son in their teaching is evident, just as their separate individuality as divine beings is explicit.

Rather than proceeding directly to a presentation of the basic gospel elements, Nephi begins with a question—why did the sinless Lamb of God need to be baptized in order “to fulfill all righteousness”? If we assume that Christ was just going through the motions to provide us with an example of what we must do, we miss the essence of repentance and baptism as these were taught to Nephi. Even the Lamb of God, being holy, “according to the flesh,” needed, in order “to fulfill all righteousness,” (1) to humble himself before the Father, and (2) to witness (by baptism) “that he would be obedient unto him in keeping his commandments.” Nephi teaches us here that the essence of repentance is to humble ourselves before the Father—giving up our own agendas and ways of doing things and turning back to him, accepting by covenant the path he will show us as the one we will follow. And the essence of baptism is also an action of the convert and not something done to him. By baptism we “witness to the Father”—in the manner he has prescribed for that witnessing—that we have repented, that we have covenanted to obey his commandments, and that we will “take upon [us] the name of Christ” (v. 13). Even the Son of God, “according to the flesh,” was required to so humble himself and witness before the Father.22

The promise of the Father to all his children was that if they would enter this path, or the straight and narrow way, by repentance and baptism, they would receive the Holy Ghost (v. 18), even as Nephi had seen the Holy Ghost descend upon Christ “in the form of a dove” (v. 8). Nephi quotes the voice of the Son restating this promise: “He that is baptized in my name, to him will the Father give the Holy Ghost, like unto me” (v. 12). Nephi emphasizes with quintuple redundancy that the Father’s decision to send the baptized person the Holy Ghost depends on the sincerity of their repentance and baptismal witness: “If ye shall follow the Son, with full purpose of heart, acting no hypocrisy and no deception before God but with real intent, repenting of your sins, witnessing unto the Father that ye are willing to take upon you the name of Christ by baptism, yea, by following your Lord and your Savior down into the water according to his word, behold, then shall ye receive the Holy Ghost” (v. 13; emphasis added). The impossibility of successful deception was emphasized by Nephi’s brother Jacob, who taught that “the keeper of the gate is the Holy One of Israel. . . . He cannot be deceived, for the Lord God is his name” (2 Nephi 9:41).
Nephi then spells out a multiplicity of functions performed by the Holy Ghost in the lives of Christ’s followers—all of which are essential in bringing them to eternal life. First, and most obviously, “the remission of sins comes by fire and by the Holy Ghost” (v. 13; compare vv. 12, 14, and 17). Book of Mormon prophets consistently held this view and never characterized baptism as a washing away of sins—an understanding borrowed from pagan religions by early Christians and taught regularly throughout Christian history. Baptism is the act of the convert as he witnesses to the Father that he has repented and taken the name of Christ upon him. The Holy Ghost comes to a man or a woman at the choice of the Father, to bring the remission of sins and other essential blessings.23

Nephi identifies three additional functions that the Holy Ghost serves in the lives of Christ’s followers. First, the Holy Ghost enables its recipients to “speak with a new tongue—yea, even with the tongue of angels” (v. 14). As Nephi later realizes he needs to explain, this means that they can “speak the words of Christ” as they “speak by the power of the Holy Ghost,” even as angels speak (32:3). Second, the Holy Ghost “witnesses of the Father and the Son” (v. 18), providing the recipient with a testimony of them and of their gospel. This experience with the Holy Ghost sustains the recipient in this life and provides the basis for the hope of eventually experiencing the presence of the Father and the Son for all who will receive eternal life—the final fulfillment of the Father’s promise.24

Third, Nephi clarifies the enigmatic reference to “feasting upon the words of Christ” by explaining that the words of Christ are given by the Holy Ghost, and “the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do” (2 Nephi 32:3). For those of us who still cannot understand what he is saying (v. 4), he boils the gospel message down to this: “If ye will enter in by the way (repentance and baptism) and receive the Holy Ghost, it will show unto you all things what ye should do” (2 Nephi 32:5; emphasis added). And so, enduring to the end—to be discussed next—can also be characterized as a process of “feasting upon the words of Christ” or doing what the Holy Ghost directs us to do. While it is tempting for us in a modern context to reinterpret Nephi’s admonition as encouragement to study the scriptures, in this specific context he apparently intends us to understand “feasting upon the words of Christ” as choosing to act continually as directed by the Holy Ghost. The feasting envisioned by Nephi comprehends all the activities of our lives, and is not restricted to our time spent studying the scriptures.
In verses 14–16, Nephi reports in detail the powerful emphasis made by both the Father and the Son that none of our positive responses to this gospel invitation will lead to eternal life except for those who “endure to the end.” The point is made first negatively by the Son who states clearly that if someone who has repented and been baptized sincerely and then receives the blessing of the Holy Ghost as evidenced by speaking with the tongue of angels—and after all this should deny (reject or turn against) him, “it would have been better for” that person “that [he] had not known me” (v. 14). The Father endorses these words as “true and faithful” and goes on to state the principle positively: “He that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved” (v. 15). Leaving no doubt of how important this principle is for all men to understand, Nephi concludes: “I know by this that unless a man shall endure to the end, in following the example of the Son of the Living God, he cannot be saved” (v. 16).

Nephi understands clearly that the reason he was shown the example of Jesus Christ’s baptism in vision was so that he and his people “might know the gate by which ye should enter” (v. 17). He then offers a verbal diagram or image to help us understand the gospel as it had been taught to him. The gospel represents the path by which all might find eternal life. The strait gate that allows people onto this “straight and narrow” path “is repentance and baptism by water, and then cometh a remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost” (v. 17). But all this is only a beginning, for the new convert has only entered into “this straight and narrow path which leads to eternal life” (v. 18). He or she must now “press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ and endure to the end,” in order to receive eternal life (v. 20).

We do not know if this image of the strait gate and the straight and narrow path is original with Nephi. It bears considerable similarity to the path described by Lehi and Nephi in their great vision, but seems to be a more abstract version, possibly as a result of the decades of experience Nephi has had in explaining it to his people. His brother Jacob seems to have the same image in mind when he says, “The way for man is narrow. But it lieth in a straight course before him. And the keeper of the gate is the Holy One of Israel” (2 Nephi 9:41).25 Nephi’s late version of the path does not mention Lehi’s iconic rod of iron, but it does include the idea that the Holy Ghost “will show unto you all things what ye should do” (2 Nephi 32:5). And while eternal life as described by Nephi at the end of the path is awarded as a final judgment to those who have endured faithfully to the end, the fruit of the
tree of life described in Lehi and Nephi’s visions can be enjoyed by the faithful in this life, and can then be lost by those who may be embarrassed by the mocking of unbelievers and apostatize. While these differences do not constitute contradictions, it does seem that in his final presentation, Nephi has taken the long view of human lives as a whole, while Lehi’s account of the same vision was very focused on the present prospects for faithful living by his own immediate family.

Latter-day Saint discourse has long privileged the requirement of faith in Jesus Christ as the first principle of the gospel. Nephi also sees it as fundamental, but mentions it in last place, leading first with repentance, and thereby establishing a teaching model that is often followed by later Nephite prophets. But as he clarifies, no convert could have made it onto this path “save it were by the word of Christ with unshaken faith in him, relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save” (v. 19). On Nephi’s model, we should not see faith as just a first step. Rather, that same faith must inform and sustain believers in each step of this gospel journey as they endure faithfully to the end.

Nephi further characterizes the process of enduring to the end in terms that give new meaning to the New Testament formula of faith, hope, and charity. We are instructed by him to “press forward” on this path “with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope and a love of God and of all men.” By contextualizing this trilogy as the way in which a convert must endure to the end, Nephi provides a basis for the developed treatment faith, hope, and charity will receive in the closing chapters of the Book of Mormon from Mormon and Moroni.26 Later, Alma also appears to take his instruction on this point directly from Nephi as he uses faith, hope, and charity to characterize the lives of the faithful (Alma 7:24).

Continuing the metaphor of the gospel as a path, Nephi closes this foundational presentation of that gospel by calling it “the way,” and by affirming that “there is none other way . . . whereby man can be saved in the kingdom of God” (v. 21).27 And, as he knows from personal experience, being instructed by them directly, this gospel is “the only and true doctrine of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost” (v. 21). His own frustration with those who cannot comprehend his effort to state this gospel plainly for the understanding of all becomes evident just four verses later: “Wherefore now after that I have spoken these words, if ye cannot understand them, it will be because ye
ask not, neither do ye knock. Wherefore ye are not brought into the light but must perish in the dark” (2 Nephi 32:4).

This passage may have served the Nephite dispensation in much the same way that Joseph Smith’s First Vision has served this last dispensation by providing the highest possible authority for its central claims—including the prophetic claims of the first leader. We find the Nephite prophets across 1000 years of ministry staying true to the concepts and phraseology introduced by Nephi in this passage. This is most clearly reflected in their teachings on the gospel, baptism, and charity. Although we cannot know the extent to which later prophets had access to Nephi’s small plates, it is clear that his phrasing and teachings persist through their writings to the very end of Mormon’s volume.

The Greatest Prophecy

We saw that Nephi formally introduced this passage by announcing that he had concluded his own prophesying. But is this chapter devoid of prophecy? Is it not the case that this chapter states more clearly than any other the conditions and choices by which the long-term future of every human being will be determined? The chapter began with an explicit reminder of the prophecy given to both Lehi and Nephi in their separate visions received at the first camp in the wilderness that a prophet would baptize Jesus Christ. But now Nephi goes beyond the prophecies reported by Lehi, Isaiah, and even himself regarding the futures of the Nephites, Lamanites, Jews, and Gentiles. In this chapter we are given a comprehensive prophecy from God the Father regarding the future possibilities of every one of his children that may be born into this world.

The long discussion of prophecies about different peoples and what would happen to them in the future, depending on whether or not they accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ, turns out to depend in turn on the choices made by individual members of those groups. The groups themselves provide a metaphor for the relationship that will exist between each individual member of any such group and their Father in Heaven. Being born into one group or another does not determine one’s fate. As Nephi concludes and emphasizes that “as many of the Gentiles as will repent are the covenant people of the Lord; and as many of the Jews as will not repent shall be cast off. For the Lord covenanteth with none save it be with them that repent and believe in his Son” (2 Nephi 30:2). We also learn here that the covenant Nephi sees binding men
to God is the covenant they make at the time they individually repent, turning to God and accepting the covenant he has offered to all men and women from the beginning. It is the act of repentance that binds us to him as his “covenant people.”

Using the baptism of Jesus as an ensample for all mankind, Nephi invokes the authority of the Father and the Son as he spells out the promises of eternal life that they have offered to all men and women. But this is a conditional form of prophecy, for the outcome will be determined for each person through his or her own willingness to follow Christ and to endure to the end in faithfulness to him. The first great promise (and prophecy) from the Father was that for all who would enter in by the way (repentance and baptism), they would receive “a remission of [their] sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost” (vv. 17–18). The second great promise and prophecy the Father has extended to all his children from the beginning was that everyone who repents and chooses to be baptized and then receives “the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost,” and then endures to the end—“the same shall be saved” (vv. 14–15). Nephi also quotes the Son’s warning (and prophecy) that for all those who—after receiving the fulfillment of the first promise—should then turn away and deny him, “it would be better for [them] that [they] had not known me” (v. 14).

This Is the Way—the Doctrine of Christ

Nephi powerfully emphasizes the conclusion of this key chapter by providing a sweeping assertion of its unique validity that is announced twice in parallel statements:

21 (a) And now behold, my beloved brethren, this is the way.
   (i) And there is none other way nor name given under heaven
   (ii) whereby man can be saved in the kingdom of God.
(b) And now behold, this is the doctrine of Christ,
   (i) and the only and true doctrine of the Father and of the son and of the Holy Ghost,
   (ii) which is one God without end.30

And we are forcibly reminded that for Nephi the gospel of Jesus Christ or doctrine of Christ is also termed the way or the straight and narrow path that
leads to eternal life—and that teaching is the central and final message of all his writings.

Nephi’s concluding comments in chapter 33 make it clear that all his specific prophecies and teachings are meant to inspire his descendants, his brethren, and indeed, all mankind to respond to this greatest and universal promise and prophecy from their Father in Heaven. And so in a final prophecy, he warns all who read his words that “at the last day . . . you and I shall stand face to face before his bar. . . . For what I seal on earth shall be brought against you at the judgment bar. For thus hath the Lord commanded me” (2 Nephi 33:11 and 15).

Distinctive Teachings

I have noted previously that this foundational chapter expands our traditional summary of basic gospel principles to include “enduring to the end.” A careful reading suggests it may offer correctives to many other traditional Christian teachings and, in some cases, even to some elements of LDS gospel discourse. Here is a partial listing of distinctive insights we can take from this chapter:

1. The most comprehensive and authoritative account of the full gospel of Jesus Christ was given around 590 BCE by the Father and the Son to Nephi, a young prophet from Jerusalem—and probably as well to his father, Lehi.

2. Several terms are used interchangeably to refer to the gospel of Jesus Christ, including “the doctrine of Christ,” “the way,” “the straight and narrow path,” and “the word.”

3. Baptism is not a washing away of sins, but constitutes a person’s witness to the Father that he has repented of those sins and will keep his commandments.

4. The covenant we witness at baptism is actually made when we repent.

5. The essential elements of repentance are (1) humbling oneself before the Father, and (2) covenanting to obey him forever after.

6. Even though holy already, the Son of God was required to humble himself before the Father and to witness by baptism to a covenant that he would obey his commandments in order to fulfill all righteousness.

7. While baptism is necessary as a prerequisite for the remission of sins, this remission is a subsequent gift from the Father that comes “by fire and by the Holy Ghost.”
8. All men have been promised by the Father from the beginning that if they would repent and accept baptism sincerely, they would receive the Holy Ghost and the remission of sins.

9. Only those who endure to the end can be saved. Neither the authorized ordinances, nor the reception of the Holy Ghost can guarantee eternal life.

10. Faith, hope, and charity characterize the mode of life by which converts to Christ's gospel must endure to the end.

11. Those who receive this blessing of the Spirit and then turn away or deny Christ would have been better off “not to have known” him.

12. When we speak under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, we, like the angels, are speaking “the words of Christ.”

13. Nephi’s admonition to “feast upon the words of Christ” refers primarily to the daily guidance we can receive from the Holy Ghost and only secondarily to study of the scriptures.

14. The gospel of Jesus Christ articulates the only way by which a person can access eternal life.

Conclusions

The only known passage in ancient or modern scripture where the Father and the Son personally teach a prophet their gospel is found in 2 Nephi 31. It constitutes the second part of Nephi’s final sermon, the three sections of which are formally delimited as inclusios. Nephi did not include an account of this unparalleled experience in his initial account of the larger vision of which it was a part, but held it back for emphasized presentation at the end of his writings. The formulation of the gospel—as received by Nephi in that vision—provided the basic model of how to come unto Christ for the Nephite dispensation and is the one the Saints of the last dispensation have been directed to study and teach.

Apparently following a pattern set for him by the Father and the Son, Nephi’s summary of the gospel message is composed of a series of meristic statements based on a complex of six gospel elements. These six can be identified as fundamental when we analyze their sixty-four occurrences—using a method of accumulation. Perhaps because of the unfamiliar writing techniques Nephi used to compose this spectacular passage, modern readers can easily overlook its full significance and character. As they learn to appreciate its true value and content, it may help them understand the gospel of Jesus
Christ even more correctly and more fully than has been possible on the basis of other scriptures or traditions. And once they understand his gospel, they can understand the universal prophecy and promise given to all men and women in this world that if they will come unto Jesus Christ in the way he has specified, and endure to the end, they will receive eternal life—and that the consequences will be dire for those who reject him. 

Notes

1. Readers may notice some differences of spelling, punctuation, or even wording in quotations as I am using Royal Skousen, ed., The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), which provides the most accurate Book of Mormon text now available.


4. Another advantage of the essay approach is that it frees me from the scholarly requirement of documenting the connections between my assertions and the writings of others. Instead, I will occasionally refer to my own publications where points have been developed or documented more fully, in the hope that these references might be helpful for some readers. By taking this approach, I will be able to present a comprehensive interpretation of 2 Nephi 31 in a single paper and refer those desiring more detailed discussions of certain points to other readily available articles.

5. For an explanation of how the Book of Mormon writers use the terms “gospel” and “doctrine” of Christ interchangeably, see Noel B. Reynolds, “This Is the Way,” Religious Educator 14, no. 3 (2015): 82–83. See 1 Nephi 15:14 and Jacob 7:6, where Nephi and Jacob respectively include explicitly interchangeable use of the two terms in their records.

6. Compare Lehi’s account in 1 Nephi 10:7–10 with Nephi’s account in 1 Nephi 11:27.

7. For how Book of Mormon study and use came into its own among Latter-day Saints after the introduction of the correlated curriculum in 1972, see Noel B. Reynolds, “The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century,” BYU Studies 38, no. 2 (Spring 1999).


9. For the first demonstration of these six elements as definitional in these three presentations, see Reynolds, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets.” See also Noel B. Reynolds, “The True Points of My Doctrine,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 5, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 26–56, for a basic survey of how each of these six gospel principles is developed and used by writers throughout the Book of Mormon. Noel B. Reynolds, “The Gospel According to Mormon,” Scottish Journal of Theology 68, no. 2 (May 2015): 218–34, presents a much more technical analysis of the same materials, written for non-LDS scholars.
10. For discussion of scholarly findings on this point, see Reynolds, “Coming Forth,” 6.
11. Nephi repeats this reminder that he is speaking or prophesying by the Spirit four more times: 2 Nephi 25:11, 28:1, 32:7, and in 33:1.
12. For a detailed explanation of inclusio, or envelope structures, see Reynolds, “The Gospel According to Mormon,” 218–34, or, for a briefer account, Reynolds, “This Is the Way,” 80. In note 2 of the latter article, I explained: “Inclusio is used here in the sense developed by biblical scholars and defined by David Ulansey as “the narrative device common in biblical texts in which a detail is repeated at the beginning and the end of a narrative unit in order to ‘bracket off’ the unit and give it a sense of closure and structural integrity.” See David Ulansey, “The Heavenly Veil Torn: Mark’s Cosmic ‘Inclusio,’” Journal of Biblical Literature 110, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 123. Literary scholars also refer to the inclusio as “envelope structure—in fact a structure popular in many biblical genres—in which significant terms introduced at the beginning are brought back prominently at the end.” See an account of how these structures are used prominently in the psalms in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., “Psalms,” The Literary Guide to the Bible (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 255 and following pages.
13. Nephi’s penchant for elaborate rhetorical structures in his writing has been recognized for a long time and may be what he has in mind at the very beginning of the small plates when he points out to us explicitly that he “was taught somewhat in all the learning of [his] father.” See Noel B. Reynolds, “Nephi’s Outline,” BYU Studies 20, no. 2 (Spring 1980): 1–18, for a detailed analysis of rhetorical structures in First Nephi.
14. This discussion of Nephi’s fivefold presentation of the gospel in this chapter is drawn directly from Reynolds, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets,” 35–36.
16. See Noel B. Reynolds and Royal Skousen, “Was the Path Nephi Saw ‘Strait and Narrow’ or ‘Straight and Narrow?’” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 10, no. 2 (2001): 30–33 for an early discussion of my reasons for preferring “straight” to “strait” as the original text for this passage. Further, see Royal Skousen’s more recent and definitive exposition of this question in his Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon: Part One (1 Nephi 1–2 Nephi 10) (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 174–81, which articulates what I find to be a convincing argument for “straight” in 1 Nephi 8:20, 2 Nephi 31:18, 19, and as the more likely original text in several related passages.
17. See Reynolds, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets,” 31–50, where cumulative analysis was first used implicitly to understand this passage and Reynolds, “The Gospel According to Mormon,” 218–34, for a complete and revised technical analysis.
18. See Reynolds, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets,” 43–46, for a more developed explanation of merismus.
21. These quotations from the Father and the Son are located in 2 Nephi 31:10, 11, 12, 14, 15, and 20.


25. See Reynolds, “This Is the Way,” 79–91. In total, there are seven passages in Nephi’s record where the terms “path” and “way” are used conjointly, referring to this same thing—two occur in the Isaiah chapters (1 Nephi 8:23, 10:8; 2 Nephi 4:33, 9:41, 12:3, 13:12, 31:18).

26. See Ether 12:31–37, Moroni 7, and Moroni 10:20–23. See also Nephi’s own invocations of this developed notion of charity at 2 Nephi 26:30 and 33:7–9.

27. For a more detailed discussion of this passage and its implications, see Reynolds, “This Is the Way,” 79–91.


29. See Titus 1:2.


At an early age, Joseph discovered the key to unlock the portals of heaven as he carefully “came to the determination to ‘ask of God.’”
While incarcerated in Liberty Jail, the Prophet Joseph Smith wrote with a surge of inspiration:

The things of God are of deep import, and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out. Thy mind, O man! if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity—thou must commune with God. How much more dignified and noble are the thoughts of God, than the vain imaginations of the human heart.¹

Leading ourselves or others to God and truly communing with the Father of our spirits (see Hebrews 12:9) requires serving and loving God “with all diligence of mind” (Mosiah 7:33). In a postmodern world, this understanding is critical for devoted disciples of Christ² because a much higher level of intimate worship is available only through mentally intense work. It is indeed thought-provoking that the Hebrew word for work, avodah, is the same word used for service and worship.³ Is worship, therefore, really work? It certainly appears that a great deal of mental effort and concentration is required to develop unyielding faith, for as those who attended the School of the

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Fred E. Woods (fred_woods@byu.edu) is a professor of Church history and doctrine at BYU.
Prophets learned, “when a man works by faith he works by mental exertion.” Loving and serving God with all diligence of mind involves first desiring and then cultivating thoughtful, faithful inquiry; single-minded devotion; and serious reflection; but when we achieve such singleness of mind, few rewards are greater, for God opens to us the very portals of heaven.

The Purpose of Diligence of Mind: Coming to Know God

The highest aim of being diligent in our mind is to come to know God, our Eternal Father. Coming to know God is the ultimate end of every disciple’s devotion, for to truly know God is to reach one’s eternal potential. When Harvard University opened its doors in 1636, their mission statement was “to know God and Jesus Christ which is life eternal.” The school took the phrase from the scriptural passage “this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3). However, this ultimate gift—life eternal—cannot be obtained by studying for just a day, a week, a month, or sometimes even an entire mortal lifetime. The Greek verb for the word know (ginōskōsin) in this implies that one “should keep on knowing” the Lord continually and cultivate a lifelong relationship with Deity.

The quest to come to know the Father and the Son must involve an ongoing, continual process in loving and serving God with all one’s mind. To answer the scribe’s question which of all the commandments was foremost, Jesus said to “love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul and with all thy mind” (Mark 12:28, 30; emphasis added).

One of the reasons loving God is the greatest of all the commandments is that it leads the mindful disciple not only to come to know God but also to obey him. Professor John W. Welch provided the following insights on how loving God with all our minds leads us to mindful obedience: “When you love God with all your mind, you will mind Him and mind all His precepts. And by minding Him always, by obeying Him always, you remember Him always.” And by remembering him always, we may come to know him all the better. Therefore, single-minded commitment to God is perhaps one of the first steps in an upward-spiraling cycle of knowledge of, love for, and obedience to God, in which progressing in one area only lifts the disciple higher to the next.

We must carefully guard against anything that would halt our mindfully devoted upward progression. This means not just single-mindedly doing what is right, but also single-mindedly turning away from what is wrong. We
must be mindful of the Lord by giving careful attention to both our outward behavior as well as our inner thoughts (Mosiah 4:30). On this point, emeritus BYU professor Arnold Green queried, “How do we strengthen our intellects and our powers of intellectual discernment? First, we make intelligent choices to avoid mental Sodoms, like pornography and drivel-spewing media that stupefy our minds instead of stimulating them.”

**Diligence of Mind in Thoughtful, Faithful Inquiry**

Welch also addressed the important issue of inquiring minds in the context of mindful devotion to God: “We love God with our mind by skillful analysis of problems; it is often said that ‘God is in the details.’ But don’t forget also to love God with skillful synthesis as well, seeing things as one great whole. . . . We love God with our mind by asking good and righteous questions. There is nothing wrong with asking.”

Wise teachers and persistent students often pose thoughtful questions. In fact, great questions seem to be a catalytic factor for great learning. For example, Isidore Rabi, who won a Nobel Prize for physics, responded in this way when asked why he had chosen to become a scientist: “My mother made me a scientist without ever knowing it. Every other child would come back from school and be asked, ‘What did you learn today?’ But my mother used to say, ‘Izzy, did you ask a good question today?’ That made the difference.”

Far from being threatening to faith, such a model of inquiry is intellectually stimulating and can lead to deep spiritual satisfaction. Former BYU president Cecil O. Samuelson taught, “Some seem to believe that faith and questions are antithetical. Such could not be further from the truth. The Restoration itself was unfolded by the proper and necessary melding of both. The Prophet Joseph Smith had both faith and questions. . . . Ours is a gospel of questions, and our lives in all of their spheres require thoughtful and appropriate inquiry if we are going to progress.” Further, in dealing with the issue of inquiry, Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks wrote, “What is the asking of a question if not itself a profound expression of faith. . . . To ask is to believe that somewhere there is an answer. . . . Critical intelligence is the gift God gave to humanity, . . . one of the great ways of serving God.”

Asking thought-provoking questions also requires a measure of curiosity, a probing passion. Speaking of the importance of inquiry and curiosity, Latter-day Saint author John L. Sorensen offers this constructive criticism:
It continues to strike me how incurious many of our [LDS] people are, how they want to hear the same thing over and over again. . . . I am convinced that we have a long way to go in uncovering the stone box of meaning where the scriptures lie passively for too many of us. The first thing we need is an opening up of curiosity, a willingness to accept that it is okay to be curious, it is okay to try to learn something new. If we merely accept the status quo in our studies, we find ourselves playing the tape over and over again instead of grasping the riches of light for ourselves.14

Such earnest inquiry need not be limited to the field of religion, either, for as Brigham Young emphasized, the gospel encompasses all fields and all truths.15 The Prophet Joseph Smith himself possessed a keen curiosity and voracious appetite for secular learning. When he was studying languages in the School of the Prophets, his teacher commented that “Joseph was the calf that sucked three cows. He acquired knowledge very rapidly.”16 Such a zest for learning demonstrates Joseph’s faithful, intellectual pursuits.

Single-Minded Devotion and Serious Reflection

However, the early nineteenth-century milieu in which Joseph Smith was immersed is entirely unlike the rapid digital age (an engulfing ocean of information) we live in. When used properly, such technology can hasten the work of the Lord;17 conversely, this deluge of data can plunge us into the depths of unfathomable distractions. Elder Scott D. Whiting observed, “Being constantly ‘plugged in’ can drown out the quiet whisperings and subtle impressions of the Holy Ghost, breaking our personal connection with God and making it difficult, if not impossible, to receive personal revelation.”18 Randall L. Ridd explained, “There are countless ways technology can distract you from what is most important. . . . Your brain cannot concentrate on two things at once. Multitasking amounts to quickly shifting your focus from one thing to another. An old proverb says, ‘If you chase two rabbits, you won’t catch either one.’”19 Regarding our mindful choices, Hugh Nibley observed, “Sin is waste. It is doing one thing when you should be doing other and better things for which you have the capacity.”20

The single-minded mental exertion exhibited by Joseph Smith prior to his First Vision experience serves as an ideal model to navigate the modern informational gales that threaten to engulf us. His canonized history reveals that his “mind was called up to serious reflection and great uneasiness” (Joseph Smith—History 1:8). He wondered, “Who of all these parties [churches] are right?” (Joseph Smith—History 1:110). And in his account, he used proactive words such as “laboring” and “reading” as he “reflected” on the penetrating
invitation from the Epistle of James, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of
God” (James 1:5; as noted in Joseph Smith—History 1:11–12). At an early
age, Joseph discovered the key to unlock the portals of heaven as he carefully
“came to the determination to ‘ask of God’” (Joseph Smith—History 1:13).

Joseph’s experience outlined in his inspired history (Joseph Smith—
History 1:11–19) presents a clear view of how revelation is received: by
diligently giving our minds the time and full attention to things of “deep
import.” Although Joseph’s account explains that he was greatly impacted as
he meditated on James 1:5, perhaps Joseph was also influenced by what fol-
lowed three verses later: “A double minded man is unstable in all his ways”
(James 1:8). In order to receive revelation, we must give our whole minds to
the quest for truth. Joseph’s process—asking questions, reading, pondering,
and praying with single-minded devotion—provides a formula to prepare
the mind to receive revelation, a formula equally suitable for both prophets
and the rank-and-file members of Christ’s church.21 Joseph taught, “God hath
not revealed anything to Joseph, but what He will make known unto the
Twelve, and even the least Saint may know all things as fast as he is able to
bear them.”22

This revelatory journey often begins with a careful, word-by-word study
in the scriptures. For instance, concerning an investigation of mind (includ-
ing various forms of the word, such as minds and minded), the word occurs in
the standard works a total of 239 times: in the Old Testament, 46 times; New
Testament, 76; Book of Mormon, 61; Doctrine and Covenants, 43; and Pearl
of Great Price, 13. Select passages from prophets and apostles in both ancient
and modern scripture provide many thoughts on this important topic.

Paul’s Instruction on Serving God with All Our Mind

The Pauline Epistles give illuminating instruction on coming to know the
mind of the Lord and learning how to serve him with all our mental capacity.
On one occasion, Paul queried, “Who hath known the mind of the Lord?”
(Romans 11:34). He then offers a partial answer: “the things of God knoweth
no man, but the Spirit of God” (1 Corinthians 2:11).

Paul explained that compliance is required to receive divine tutoring,
complete mental submission “bringing into captivity every thought to the
obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). Such strict compliance heightens
our spiritual vision and allows us to see more clearly the pathway necessary
for our eternal progression.23 In contrast, Paul revealed that the Jews became
spontaneously blind by looking beyond the redemption which Christ offered (2 Corinthians 3:14; see also Jacob 4:14).

Regarding corruption of mind, Paul wrote in his epistle to the Romans of those “who did not like to retain God in their knowledge; [therefore] God gave them over to a reprobate mind” (Romans 1:28). He further warned, “To be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace” (Romans 8:16), and he later offered the hope of a transformation “by the renewing of . . . mind” (Romans 12:2). Paul described certain men with “corrupt minds, and destitute of truth” (1 Timothy 6:5).

In another letter, Paul extended the invitation to repent of mental mire. To the Saints of Ephesus, he charged: “Be renewed in the spirit of your mind” (Ephesians 4:23). The Corinthian Saints were encouraged to have “a willing mind” (2 Corinthians 8:12), and a “ready mind” (2 Corinthians 8:19).

In an attempt to protect the Saints of Thessalonica from deception, Paul warned them to “be not soon shaken in mind” (2 Thessalonians 2:2) and encouraged the Saints to look unto Christ “lest [they] be wearied and faint in [their] minds” (Hebrews 12:3), for “God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of a sound mind” (2 Timothy 1:7).

Concerning vanity (minding only ourselves) and humility (minding others), Paul counseled the ancient Saints of Colossae to “put on . . . humility of mind” (Colossians 3:12), and pointed out those who “were sometime alienated and enemies in . . . mind by wicked works” (Colossians 1:21). In visiting Ephesus he hoped those assembled would “walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind” (Ephesians 4:17), but “be renewed in the spirit of [their] mind” (Ephesians 4:23). Further, Paul extended the Saints of Philippi the invitation to “let this mind [of esteeming others above oneself] be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5).

Paul also addresses the need for unity, to “be of one mind” (2 Corinthians 13:11). We were also told in our dispensation that if we are not one, we are not Christ’s (D&C 38:27). The people of Enoch were a Zion people “because they were of one heart, and one mind” (Moses 7:18). This unity of mind and heart includes being one with the Father and Son and being full of gratitude for the diversity of gifts we each possess, for our Father in Heaven, and for his Son Jesus Christ, “the King of Zion” (Moses 7:53). Cornelius Plantinga explained, “the life of the mind has nothing to do with carving a niche for ourselves, or making a name for ourselves. . . . It is an act in which we get pulled out of our nervous little egoisms and combine together in a kingdom
“With All Diligence of Mind”

The plan of salvation often centers around working together as a team, whether it be as families, as colleagues, or as fellow citizens of Christ’s church.

**The Book of Mormon on Serving God with Our Mind**

Through his inspired selection and editing of sacred records, the prophet Mormon also emphasizes the importance of serving God with our mind. Mormon gleaned this inspired question from the writings of King Benjamin: “How knoweth a man the master whom he has not served, and who is a stranger unto him, and is far from the thoughts and intents of his heart?” (Mosiah 5:13). He also recorded the words of Limhi, who had taught his people, “If ye will turn to the Lord with full purpose of heart, and put your trust in him, and serve him with all diligence of mind . . . , he will . . . deliver you” (Mosiah 7:33). Further, after Corianton had been involved in serious sexual transgression, Alma sought to restore him by exhorting him to “turn to the Lord with all [his] mind” (Alma 39:13).

The Book of Mormon often illustrates changes in mind and heart. In writing of Alma’s mission to reclaim the apostate Zoramites, Mormon observed that “the preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just—yea, it had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else; . . . therefore Alma thought it was expedient that they should try the virtue of the word of God” (Alma 31:5). Mormon was familiar with such things and described himself as “being somewhat of a sober mind,” and at the tender age of fifteen he “was visited of the Lord, and tasted and knew of the goodness of Jesus” (Mormon 1:15). In an epistle to his own son, Moroni, Mormon explained that angels show themselves “unto them of strong faith and a firm mind in every form of godliness” (Moroni 7:30; see also Jacob 3:1).

In another impassioned letter to his son, Mormon pled that Moroni would “be faithful in Christ” and desired that “the hope of [Christ’s] glory and of eternal life [would] rest in [his] mind forever” (Moroni 9:25). With his father’s teachings imbedded in his mind and heart, Moroni concluded his writings with a powerful and persuasive invitation to “come unto Christ, be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your . . . mind . . . that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ” (Moroni 10:32; emphasis added).25
Teachings from Modern Scriptures, Prophets, and Apostles

The theme of devoting our minds fully to God is reiterated in modern scriptures and by Latter-day prophets and apostles.

The weekly renewal of sacramental covenants regularly reminds us of our mindful labor “to always remember him [Christ],” a phrase mentioned in partaking of both the bread and the water (D&C 20:77, 79). Elder Russell M. Nelson explained, “The word sacrament comes from two Latin stems: sacr meaning ‘sacred,’ and ment meaning ‘mind.’ It implies sacred thoughts of the mind. Even more compelling is the Latin word sacrament, which literally means ‘oath or solemn obligation.’ Partaking of the sacrament might therefore be thought of as a renewal by oath of the covenant previously made in the waters of baptism. It is a sacred mental moment.”26 The Savior himself declared, “Look unto me in every thought” (D&C 6:36).

The word always invites us to have the Lord uppermost in our minds constantly, which implies continually pure and holy thoughts. The conditional promise is that if we “let virtue garnish [our] thoughts unceasingly; then shall [our] confidence wax strong in the presence of God; and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distill upon [our minds] as the dews from heaven” (D&C 121:45).

Those who attended the School of the Prophets learned to “seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118). One reason for such diligent, faithful study is because the enlightened man has the advantage in the next life. “Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection. And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come” (D&C 130:18–19). This passage may possibly suggest that while knowledge is gained through diligence, intelligence is obtained through obedience.27

After one obtains knowledge by study and faith (D&C 88:118), it then becomes incumbent upon him or her to bless and serve others (D&C 88:79–80). Brigham Young University adopted this theme as its unofficial motto: “Enter to learn, go forth to serve.”28 Those who serve diligently with all their minds receive additional blessings. For example, a modern-day revelation promises, “And any man that shall go and preach this gospel of the kingdom, and fail not to continue faithful in all things, shall not be weary in mind” (D&C 84:80). A faithful disciple’s mind is invigorated and illuminated with the specific inspiration necessary for those the disciple serves.
Yet Elder Maxwell cautions that some “find it easier to bend their knees than their minds.” When we choose to be less faithful or to be proud, we forfeit the blessings of a faithful, humble mind. Early Church members were reproved for not using the Book of Mormon nor abiding by its precepts. They were told that their minds had “been darkened because of unbelief and because [they] treated lightly the things [they] received” (see D&C 84:54, 57). Others, such as David Whitmer, struggled to focus his mind on the things of God. He was chastised in a revelation, “Your mind has been on the things of the earth more than on the things of me, your Maker, and the ministry whereunto you have been called” (D&C 30:2).

To avoid darkness of mind, we must focus on the source of all light, God. We must “serve him with all [our] heart, might, mind and strength” (D&C 4:2). In order to serve God, we “keep the commandments, yea, with all [our] might, mind and strength” (D&C 11:20; emphasis added).

Church members who were willing to strive to serve God with all their minds received a sacred invitation from the Lord to abide his very presence: “Sanctify yourselves that your minds become single to God, and the day will come that you shall see him; for he will unveil his face unto you” (D&C 88:68). Yet some early Saints had been told that they were not then “able to abide the presence of God” and were encouraged to not let their “minds turn back” (D&C 67:14), but rather to “remain steadfast in [their minds] in solemnity and the spirit of prayer” (D&C 84:61). Those who did so had “their minds pointed to by the angels” (D&C 121:27), had “the veil” taken from their minds (D&C 110:1), and saw the Lord Jesus Christ in his glory (D&C 110:2–3).

Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon realized this glorious blessing while actively engaged in translating and restoring the Bible. As they prepared themselves for instruction by thoughtful reflection and diligent inquiry, they experienced a series of glorious visions, a portion of which is now known as Doctrine and Covenants section 76. A marvelous blessing and implicit invitation appears in the synopsis of this section for verses 114–19: “All the faithful may see the vision of the degrees of glory.” Elder Bruce R. McConkie elaborated on this invitation:

God is no respecter of persons. He will give revelation to me and to you on the same terms and conditions. I can see what Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon saw in the vision of the degrees of glory—and so can you. I can entertain angels and see God, I can receive an outpouring of the gifts of the Spirit—and so can you. There are goals to gain, summits to climb, revelations to receive. In the eternal scope of things, we
have scarcely started out on the course to glory and exaltation. The Lord wants his saints to receive line upon line, precept on precept, truth upon truth, revelation upon revelation, until we know all things and have become like him."

This gradual process of receiving revelation often necessitates a keen, mindful recognition. Oliver Cowdery was told he would receive divine instruction in both his mind and heart (see D&C 8:2), and he was counseled to study things out in his own mind and then ask for the Lord’s confirmation (see D&C 9:8). He learned that revelation flowed when his mind was enlightened (see D&C 6:15; 11:13) and at peace (see D&C 6:23). Joseph Smith taught, “A person may profit by noticing the first intimation of the spirit of revelation; for instance, when you feel pure intelligence flowing into you, it may give you sudden strokes of ideas, so that by noticing it, you may . . . grow into the principle of revelation.”

Joseph and Oliver enjoyed this flow of pure intelligence to their minds shortly after their baptisms. In Joseph’s history, he observed that they “were filled with the Holy Ghost, and rejoiced in the God of our salvation. Our minds being now enlightened, we began to have the scriptures laid open to our understandings, and the true meaning and intention of their more mysterious passages revealed unto us in a manner which we never could attain to previously, nor ever before had thought of” (Joseph Smith—History 1:73–74). Such an unveiling of spiritual thought is given to faithful disciples who “treasure up in [their] minds continually the words of life” with the promise that “it shall be given you in the very hour that portion that shall be meted unto every man” (D&C 84:85). In addition, the Lord promised that “whoso treasureth up my word shall not be deceived” (Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:37).

If we are faithful and mindful, not only can the Holy Ghost enlighten our minds, it can transform them. Elder Parley P. Pratt enumerated the transforming effects of the Holy Ghost, which “quickens all the intellectual faculties, increases, enlarges, expands and purifies all the natural passions and affections; and adapts them, by the gift of wisdom, to their lawful use. . . . It invigorates all the faculties of the physical and intellectual man.”

Conclusion

Loving and serving God with all diligence of mind opens the heavens and transforms us. It is a process involving thoughtful obedience, implementation of faithful inquiry, single-minded devotion, and serious reflection. Serving God mindfully is our work, and it is vital to our eternal progression.
Single-minded devotion must lie at our core, for as the Proverbs declare, “As [a man] thinketh in his heart [mind], so is he” (Proverbs 23:7). The divine promise beckons: “Sanctify yourselves that your minds become single to God, and the day will come that you shall see him; for he will unveil his face unto you” (D&C 88:68). If we fully love and serve God with all our minds, we will become like God and eventually know him as he knows us (see 1 Corinthians 13:12).

Notes

1. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 267.


3. The root of the Hebrew word *avodah,* bd, is attested in Semitic languages and generally means the word *serve.* It means to work in a general way and also specifically in cultic service such as the Levitical work of presenting offerings or attending to service in the tent of meeting. It may be best described as a physical manifestation of worship. See U. Rüterswörden, H. Seimian-Yofre, and H. Ringgren’s article on the word *abad* along with other forms of it in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament,* ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. Douglas W. Stott, 15 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 10:377, 403–4. Also see Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 715, wherein the authors define *avodah* as labor or work. In addition, this word is used when speaking of repairs to the temple or when erecting the tabernacle as well as other aspects of temple and tabernacle service. Based upon the lexical work of Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, William Holland also translates the word *avodah* as “work,” “labor,” “forced labor,” “service,” “(cultic) service” and “worship” in *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1971), 262.


7. See also Matthew’s account of this incident, in which he notes that Jesus told an inquiring lawyer which was the greatest commandment: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind” (Matthew 22:37).


13. Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, “Did You Ask a Good Question Today?”


19. Randall L. Ridd, “The Choice Generation,” Ensign, May 2014, 68. For a summary on the ability of the brain to focus on only one thing at a time, see John J. Medina, a developmental molecular biologists’ research: “Brain Rules,” brainrules.net/about-brain-rules. For more detail on this topic, see the book by John J. Medina, Brain Rules: 12 Principles for Surviving and Thriving at Work, Home, and School (Edmunds, WA: Pear Press, 2008); Nigel Calder, The Mind of Man (London: British Broadcasting, 1970), 25, cited in Hugh Nibley, “Zeal without Knowledge,” in Approaching Zion, ed. Don E. Norton (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1989), 63. On the other hand, it can be soundly argued that the brain and the mind are two separate entities. For example, Joseph Fielding Smith wrote, “The mind is not the brain. No one has, by the aid of science ever been able to discover the mind, to circumscribe it, to declare its length or breadth, or to weigh it. It has been to all most elusive and yet they know it exists, and the brain is the seat of its operation. . . . The mind, or intellect, with which we do our thinking is not composed of physical matter. . . . It is from [the] Spirit that we obtain our understanding; it is this Spirit that quickens our mind, that helps us to think, to gain knowledge, and even with those who pervert the ways of the Lord and rebel against him, it is the light of truth or Spirit of Christ which they attempt to prostitute and turn from its rightful channel. Where, then, do we search for the mind? It is not a part of the mortal body although the mortal body—brain—is the agency through which it works. The Mind is in the Spirit which inhabits the body, or the source from which comes our thinking, our love of knowledge, our power to know and understand.” Joseph Fielding Smith, Man, His Origin and Destiny (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), 255–58. The author wishes to express thanks to Jerry Reynolds, who reviewed this article and shared this reference with him.

20. Hugh Nibley, “Zeal without Knowledge,” 66. Nibley (67) also notes the capacity of human ability by citing Arthur Clarke’s observation that we use only about one percent of our brains “and glimpse the profounder resources of our minds only once or twice in a lifetime.” Further, “doctors and trainers often see perfectly developed bodies, but nobody can even begin to imagine what a perfect mind would be like; that is where the whole range


23. Alma taught that those who obeyed with “heed and diligence” would receive “the greater portion of the word [of God], until it is given unto him to know the mysteries of God until he know them in full” (Alma 12:9). The Prophet Joseph Smith further noted, “God has created man with a mind capable of instruction, and a faculty which may be enlarged in proportion to the heed and diligence given to the light communicated from heaven to the intellect.” Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1948), 2:8.


25. JST, Matthew 16:26 explains, “For a man to take up his cross, is to deny himself of all ungodliness, and every worldly lust and keep my [God’s] commandments.”


27. Intelligence is also defined as “light and truth” (D&C 93:36). Such intelligence brings a true sense of reality, “of things as they really are” (Jacob 4:13). In contrast, Satan, the rebel, sought to destroy man's agency. He had knowledge, but he “knew not the mind of God” (Moses 4:3–6). Those who do not yield their minds to obedience are often limited by their poor choices and therefore do not receive the additional light to put the pieces of the life’s puzzle together. Rather, they remain “ever learning and never able to come to a knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7). Though learned, they are foolish, “supposing they know of themselves” (2 Nephi 9:28), while those who continue to follow the truths Jesus taught are made free (see John 8:32).


30. The verse they were translating was John 5:29, which dealt with the resurrection of those who had done good and evil.


In King Noah’s court, Abinadi quotes Isaiah’s great poem on the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53) as evidence that “God himself” would indeed “come down among the children of men and . . . redeem his people.”
Perhaps the most important of the texts that Alma the Elder heard Abinadi quote in King Noah’s court was Isaiah’s great poem on the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53) as evidence that “God himself” would indeed “come down among the children of men and . . . redeem his people” (Mosiah 15:1; italics throughout indicate authors’ emphasis). Abinadi begins his citation thus: “Yea, even doth not Isaiah say: Who hath believed our report, and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?” (Mosiah 14:1; see also Isaiah 53:1). Of all the priests and other observers in King Noah’s court, only Alma believed Abinadi’s report, or testimony (Mosiah 17:2; 26:15). Alma’s faith in Abinadi’s words led to his becoming a prophet—one who would become the Savior’s “seed” and “declare [the Savior’s] generation” (Mosiah 15:10–13)—as Alma himself would go forth and proclaim the hallowed message of Isaiah in efforts to prick the hearts of listeners (Mosiah 18:1–3).

Among all of Isaiah’s prophetic reports, Isaiah 53 has particularly proven to be the source of conversion for individuals seeking truth, the medium through which faith in Christ is instilled within them by the power of its message.¹ Alma, Alma the Younger, and their audiences become additional
witnesses to the power of Isaiah’s message, as they continue to use the text of Isaiah 53 (and 52:7ff) in their sermons and teachings. The significance of Abinadi’s usage of Isaiah, and the role it plays in the conversion of Alma, as well as for his son Alma the Younger, is evident as it becomes the catalyst for numerous later conversions.

Our paper will discuss Isaiah’s prophecies that were used by the prophet Abinadi as he warned the priests of Noah that they were not saved by the law of Moses alone, but by the one to whom the law pointed and represented, the one who has the ability to make us his “seed” (Isaiah 53:10; Mosiah 14:10; 15:10–13). In this paper we particularly examine the implications of Abinadi’s use of Isaiah 53:1 and 53:10 as an exegetical response to Isaiah 52:7–10 for Alma personally, whom we believe is the unnamed priest posing the questions surrounding these Isaiah passages, and to whom these Hebrew verses poignantly speak, resulting in the revelation which would cause Alma to believe and then become the proclaimer of this message to his later converts who would be blessed by Isaiah’s message of redemption, a process started by Abinadi’s recitation of Isaiah’s testimony of Christ.

“One of Them”

It is both inspiring and instructive how Abinadi uses Isaiah 53 to answer the exegetical question raised by one of Noah’s priests about Isaiah 52:7–10 (see Mosiah 12:20–24). The exchange between Noah’s priests and Abinadi over Isaiah’s words began when an unnamed priest quoted these Isaiah passages (see Mosiah 12:24–27). “One of them” had asked for the interpretation (Mosiah 12:21–24), the theme of which revolves around publishing “peace” and “salvation.” If the phrase “one of them” (Mosiah 12:20) corresponds to the phrases “one among them, whose name was Alma” (Mosiah 17:2) and “Amulon knew Alma, that he had been one of the king’s priests, and that it was he that believed the words of Abinadi” (Mosiah 24:9), we have several strong narratological suggestions that Alma was the “one” asking the question, just as he is the only one who ends up listening and eventually “believing.” What may further lead us to the conclusion that Alma is the one asking the question is that all of the priests declare, after Abinadi accuses them of wickedness, that they are “guiltless” (Mosiah 12:14); however, they are all astonished when “one” seems to inquire about a message of hope, not the destruction that accompanies unrighteous behavior. Abinadi’s words cut them to their hearts (Mosiah 13:7) and they are all filled with “wonder and amazement,
and with anger” (Mosiah 13:8). However, through all of this it is “one among them whose name was Alma” who will know “concerning the iniquity which Abinadi had testified against them” (Mosiah 17:2), and believes and seeks to spare Abinadi’s life. Alma must then flee and hide himself from Noah and the priests, and he will “write all the words which Abinadi had spoken” (Mosiah 17:4).

Perhaps Alma’s heart was beginning to be softened and pricked by Abinadi’s message detailing the consequences of sin and the hope of repentance, even as the priests’ efforts to ensnare Abinadi began. While it is possible that the questions raised in and by the citation of Isaiah 52:7–10 (Mosiah 12:20–24) represent a continuation of the ensnaring efforts of Noah’s priests (Mosiah 12:19), it is also possible that they constitute a sincere desire for an answer from a “young man” (Mosiah 17:2) with a troubled soul, who would later preach “the redemption of the people, which was to be brought to pass through the power, and sufferings, and death of Christ, and his resurrection and ascension into heaven” (Mosiah 18:2). The identification of the unnamed priest as Alma is thus crucial in understanding how and why Alma so frequently turns to these passages as he describes not only his own conversion, but how he uses these principles to lead others to repentance and peace. 5 Ironically, because Noah, his priests, and his people refuse to repent and instead assent to Abinadi’s death, they will instead suffer what the Suffering Servant will suffer (Isaiah 53; see also especially D&C 19:16–17, 20). Contrary to what they believed, the blessings described in Isaiah 52:7–10 and 53, including “see[ing] eye to eye”, are predicated upon individuals adjusting their vision to see through revelation the benefits of Christ’s Atonement (Isaiah 53) and applying it, rather than God redirecting his vision to tolerate their sins. They will suffer on account of their spiritual stubbornness and self-presumed innocence and strength (Mosiah 12:14–15, “we are strong, we shall not come into bondage”), in contrast to the power of the arm of God.7

In conjunction with Isaiah’s message of deliverance based on the merits of the Atonement, Abinadi prophesies that King Noah, his priests, and his people, rather than enjoying peace in Christ, the Suffering “Servant” (the ʿebēd of Isaiah 53), will suffer and be brought into “bondage” (Hebrew ʿābōdā, i.e., “servitude,” another wordplay recalling the one who could have helped them avert this). This will happen as a result of their refusal to repent of their sins (Mosiah 11:20–26; 12:2–8)—sins which will eventually include rejecting the Lord’s servant Abinadi and the Lord himself (the “Suffering
Servant”). Because of Abinadi’s martyrdom, eventually even Alma and those who “believe” his words will, in the process of becoming the Lord’s servants, come to know suffering and bondage themselves at the hand of Amulon. But their suffering and burdens will be made light (Mosiah 24:15) and they will eventually be delivered from bondage through the grace of Christ and his Atonement because of their repentance and faith in him (Mosiah 24:16, cf. Isaiah 14:3). In a telling turn of events, Amulon and his brethren, who are heaping these burdens upon Alma and the believers, teach their followers nothing concerning Alma’s “God, neither the law of Moses; nor did they teach them the words of Abinadi” (Mosiah 24:5).

If we look at the big picture of these episodes—assuming Alma is indeed the one asking the question leading to Abinadi’s exposé on Isaiah 53—what follows becomes even more significant within the context of Abinadi’s sermons, as he uses the Hebrew text to highlight the redemptive power of Jesus. Abinadi makes clear that the “peace” and “salvation” mentioned in Isaiah 52:7–10 (Mosiah 12:20–24) are not obtained through wickedness,8 or even by outward obedience to the law (Mosiah 13 passim, especially vv. 27–28), but only through the “salvation” (yĕšūʿ ā)9 and redemption of “Jesus” (yēšūa)—a play on the Savior’s name. As John W. Welch has observed concerning the efforts of Noah’s priests to justify their wickedness and their efforts to convict and discredit Abinadi, “Abinadi’s rebuttal was an extensive and brilliant explanation of the true essence of redemption and how it brings good tidings to those who accept Christ (see Mosiah 12:29–37 and chapters 13–16). . . . The priests had taken Isaiah 52:7–10 out of context in accusing Abinadi; he averted their attack by putting that passage of scripture back into its surrounding context.”10 Abinadi used Isaiah 53 to describe a different kind of “peace” (“the chastisement of our peace was upon him,” 53:5) and to identify the one “publish[ing] peace” as “the founder of peace” (Mosiah 15:18), Jesus Christ.11 He also uses this text to identify Christ’s other servants, as his seed, especially the prophets and saints who preach the “good tidings.”

Alma Believes Abinadi’s Report (Mosiah 17:2)

Alma’s miraculous conversion, and the backdrop of Abinadi’s usage of Isaiah, begins when, two years after having been driven out by King Noah and his people for prophesying of their wickedness and resulting bondage (Mosiah 12:1), and having given them ample time to repent, Abinadi returns among the unrepentant people. After citing Isaiah, Abinadi begins the explanation
of his message with an uplifted hand (Mosiah 16:1). David M. Calabro notes one important aspect of the gesture’s significance:

Here Abinadi switches from referring to the Lord in the third person to speaking on behalf of the Lord. Since this introduces God as the speaker, the speech following the outreached-hand gesture both proclaims the identity of the new participant (“the Lord”) and includes a prediction about the future (“It shall come to pass that this generation . . . shall be brought into bondage”). . . . It seems likely that there is an intended connection between Abinadi’s stretched-forth hands (v.1) and the Lord’s extended arms (v.12). It is as if Abinadi, through his own intensifying and pleading gesture of stretching forth the hands, is providing an illustration of the Lord’s extended arms of mercy.12

With this poignant gesture Abinadi prophesies that the Lord would “visit” Noah and his people “in their iniquities.”13 Abinadi’s hand gesture is emblematic of the Lord’s hand being stretched out in judgment against Israel, as seen repeatedly in Isaiah: “for all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still.”14 Abinadi has “prophesied evil” against Noah and his people (Mosiah 12:9, 29) for failing to repent and rely on the “arm of the Lord” to save.15

Abinadi’s quotation of Isaiah’s Suffering Servant poem begins with Isaiah 53:1.16 Abinadi seems to have started here for strategic reasons.17 For instance, Isaiah 53:1 invokes an important terminological connection with “report” and 52:7, namely the root *šm* is used in both. The “report” (šemūa’) alludes to the “reporter” or “proclaimer of peace” (mašmîa’ šālôm) and the “reporter” or “proclaimer of salvation” (mašmîa’ yěšû’â). By using Isaiah’s own language to recall the priest’s original question regarding Isaiah 52:7–10, Abinadi, in effect, garners the attention of that very priest! The “peace” that Abinadi reports or proclaims is the glad tidings of the Atonement, and the “salvation” (yěšû’â) that Abinadi reports is Jesus—Yēšûa’. Contrary to what Noah and his priests—including Alma at first—believed, “peace” (Isaiah 52:7; Mosiah 12:21) is not a covenant entitlement, but a covenant blessing predicated upon the law of covenant obedience (D&C 82:10; 130:18–21), i.e., “hearing” or hearkening (Deuteronomy 6:4).

When Abinadi turns to the text we know as Isaiah 53 he hopes to convince and touch the hearts of his audience and prove to them the truthfulness of his words and the reality of the Savior. He poignantly asks, “Who hath believed our report? And to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?” (53:1; Mosiah 14:1). Abinadi clarifies that Isaiah had posed this as a question to his audience, this evidently in connection to the content of Isaiah 52:7–15.18
When King Noah and his priests attempt to get Abinadi to contradict himself and give them a pretext on which to get rid of him, Abinadi “answered them boldly, and withstood all their questions, yea, to their astonishment; for he did withstand them in all their questions, and did confound them in all their words” (Mosiah 12:19). In fact, Abinadi’s message filled Noah and his priests “with wonder and amazement, and with anger” (Mosiah 13:8), especially when Abinadi’s “face” or visage “shown with exceeding luster, even as Moses’ did while speaking in the mount of Sinai, while speaking with the Lord” (13:5). The Lord’s “arm” was truly being revealed “upon” Abinadi! At one point, “king Noah was about to release him, for he feared his word; for he feared that the judgments of God would come upon him” (17:11).

The “astonished,” “amazed,” and angry response echoes the description of the Suffering Servant that prefaces the poem of Isaiah 53 but is not directly quoted by Abinadi:

> Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high. As many were aston[ied] at thee; his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men: So shall he sprinkle [JST, gather] many nations; the kings shall shut their mouths at him: for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider. (Isaiah 52:13–15).19

But Abinadi and his visage were, in the end, also “marred” (cf. Mosiah 17:13–20). This suggests that the narrator (Mormon or his source) is depicting Abinadi as a type of “lesser” Suffering Servant—not one who dies to remit sins as the Savior does, but a prophet proclaiming the “peace” and “salvation” offered by the Lord Jesus Christ, “founder of peace”—rather than the “comfort” offered by Noah and his priests—who must suffer, like the greater Suffering Servant, and ultimately die for his message and testimony (see especially Mosiah 18:9 in light of Mosiah 12:20–24). In the end Abinadi, like the Savior Jesus Christ, was “exalted” and “very high” (Isaiah 52:13; 3 Nephi 20:43).20 Although only one man, Alma, fully saw the Lord’s arm revealed and believed Abinadi’s “report,” that report would eventually “startle,”21 “purify” (i.e., atone for), or “gather” many nations, as it does today (see Isaiah 52:15; 3 Nephi 20:45).

The Making Bare of the Lord’s Arm

The image of the Lord’s “arm” being “made bare” (Isaiah 52:10; Mosiah 12:24), i.e., “revealed” (Isaiah 53:1; Mosiah 14:1), to which the inquiring
priest alluded in Mosiah 12:20–24, is Abinadi’s scriptural proof that “salvation” did not come from the law, but that the “salvation of . . . God” or the “redemption of God” would be “seen” by all nations, and this in a person, not just the law. If this priest is Alma, we can begin to see why he draws so heavily upon these Isaian images in his later preaching and calls to repentance, as they had made such an impact on himself. Abinadi, after quoting Isaiah 53 in its entirety, would bring the discussion back to Isaiah 52:8–10 and the idea of “salvation” in 52:10, particularly in Mosiah 15:28–31 and 16:1, focusing on declaring and baring the arm of the Lord, and revealing his arm and salvation to the people.

The emergent symbol of the “arm” of the Lord that is “made bare” or “revealed” in Isaiah 52:10 (Mosiah 12:10); 53:1 (Mosiah 14:1) and Mosiah 15:31 (cf. 12:1; 16:1) is that of “salvation” by means of divine intervention. From the period of Israel’s exodus from Egypt, the “strong arm” became a symbol of the Lord’s “strength” and “salvation” (Exodus 15; Isaiah 12). The arm of the Lord to be revealed “is a metaphor of military power; it pictures the Lord as a warrior who bares his arm, takes up his weapon, and crushes his enemies (cf. 51:9–10; 63:5–6). But Israel had not seen the Lord’s military power at work in the servant.” The implication here is that the “arm” to be revealed pertains to the Lord’s power to redeem, and in this case, crush his enemy, the adversary, and extend salvation to the repentant. The phrase “arm of the Lord” (zĕrôa ʿYhwh) seems to constitute a homonymous play on the word for “seed” (zera) mentioned in verse 10 and symbolizes the power of the Atonement to enable us to become the seed of Christ. Along with the revelation that makes bare the arm of the Lord, the repentant sinner could also have their sins “covered” (atoned for) thanks to the sacrifice of the lamb.

“Who Shall His Seed Be?”

Abinadi, by quoting the entirety of Isaiah 53:1 as a testimony of Christ and his redemption, implicitly includes himself among the “we” or “our” in “who hath believed our report?” But here we note another very intriguing aspect of the text. As implied above, the term “believed” (Mosiah 17:2) recalls the question, “who hath believed our report?” and “to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” (mi he ʾemin līšmū ʾātēnū ʿüzĕrôa ʿYhwh ʿal-mî niglātā? Isaiah 53:1 [Mosiah 14:1]). The phrase “to whom” in the Hebrew is ʿal-mî. This may be a significant datum in the context of Alma’s biography: he was the only one to “believe” Abinadi’s “report” about Christ and it was to him alone
that the arm of the Lord was revealed at that time (see Mosiah 17:2; 26:15). The evident homophony between “Alma” and ‘al-mî might seem an astounding coincidence to some, but we suggest that its occurrence in this narrative context may instead be astoundingly deliberate on the part of Abinadi, for whom the recitation of this phrase would have been an opportune moment to turn his glance upon Alma (and perhaps also a deliberate inclusion on the part of a narrator who recognized the irony). Abinadi speaking directly to him a Hebrew phrase from Isaiah that sounds so close to the pronunciation of his own name may have pierced the soul of Alma as he heard both Isaiah’s and Abinadi’s “report.”26 In the context of Abinadi’s prophetic testimony regarding the Redeemer, Alma comprehends a message that is not simply, “to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?” (Isaiah 53:1; Mosiah 14:1) but also “the arm of the Lord, my (dear) Alma [‘al-mî], has been revealed,” i.e., “the arm of the Lord has been revealed to—or upon—you!”27 Alma was, by then, feeling the truth of Abinadi’s words and he “knew concerning [cf. Hebrew ‘al] the iniquity which Abinadi had testified against them [‘alêhem]” (Mosiah 17:2). This was part of the revelatory process: having the “arm” or “salvation” of the Lord revealed to him as he “believed” in the words of Abinadi and was redeemed from his iniquity.

Thus in Abinadi’s quotation of Isaiah, Alma comprehends a message directed to him personally. In Isaiah 53:1 (Mosiah 14:1) we see potential lexical clues that perhaps suggest that the Lord was reaching out to him personally—extending the arm of his mercy and “salvation” toward and upon Alma. With the Lord’s “arm” (zêrôa’) extended upon Alma (cf. Mosiah 16:1), Alma was being invited to “become” the Lord’s “seed” (zera’) spoken of by Isaiah (Isaiah 53:10 and Abinadi (Mosiah 14–15), or one who “believed that the Lord would redeem his people” (Mosiah 15:10). Perhaps Abinadi knew Alma had been touched and sensed some sincerity in his earlier questions. Whatever the case, after hearing the content of Isaiah 53, as well as Abinadi’s expounding of it, we read of the result that Alma “believed” (Mosiah 17:2).

Abinadi fully understood the exegetical implications of the “righteous servant” having “seed”: he was a “father,” but because he was a “tender plant,” a “root out of dry ground” and a “man of sorrows” (Isaiah 53:2 [Mosiah 14:2]), he was also a scion, or a “son.”28 In other words, he was both divine “Father” and “Son”: “because he dwelleth in flesh he shall be called the Son of God, and having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father, being the Father and the Son— The Father, because he was conceived by the power of
God; and the Son, because of the flesh; thus becoming the Father and Son (Mosiah 15:2–3). But Abinadi also understood the exegetical implications for the “seed,” namely that one—through the servant’s redemptive suffering—could become the “seed” of the one who became “the Father and the Son” (i.e., a giver of life and salvation). Abinadi further explains the concept of becoming the “seed” of Christ mentioned in Isaiah 53:10 (Mosiah 15:7–12), a process that eventuates from Christ’s intercessory offering of himself as a “guilt offering”:

And now I say unto you, who shall declare his generation? Behold, I say unto you, that when his soul has been made an offering for sin he shall see his seed. And now what say ye? And who shall be his seed? Behold I say unto you, that whosoever has heard the words of the prophets [i.e., their “report”], yea, all the holy prophets who have prophesied concerning the coming of the Lord—I say unto you, that all those who have hearkened unto their words, and believed that the Lord would redeem his people, and have looked forward to that day for a remission of their sins, I say unto you, that these are his seed, or they are the heirs of the kingdom of God. For these are they whose sins he has borne; these are they for whom he has died, to redeem them from their transgressions. And now, are they not his seed?

Through this process we are not directly subjected to the demands of justice if we will repent (D&C 19:15–20), but have an advocate with the Father who can stand betwixt us and justice, offering mercy as “with his stripes (ûbaḥāburātô, or, by his embrace/partnership/joining) we are healed.” The implications of “becoming” his “seed” are that those who “hear,” “believe” and partake of the Atonement—i.e., those who “believe” in Christ’s redemption and “look forward . . . to a remission of their sins” eventually “become” divine through the doctrine of Christ (2 Nephi 31–32) and his embrace or partnership, just as he “became” both “the Father and the Son.”

All of this brings us back to the issue surrounding the performance of the law of Moses in Mosiah 13. The temple and the sacrificial system was a major component of that law, and represented the efforts of the repentant (or one wishing to make a vow with God), to bring forth an offering in similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten Son of God. The pattern of the temple thus represented how one was enabled to live divine law, relying upon the merits of Christ, and thus become worthy to enter into God’s presence. Moreover, all of this underscores the meaning and importance of becoming the “seed” of Christ, as he becomes the father of our salvation and reclaims us, and returns the repentant back to our Heavenly Father’s presence.
Like natural progeneration, the preaching of the message of becoming the Lord’s seed perpetuates the process of others becoming the Lord’s seed, who then preach the same message.34 Through Abinadi’s testimony-sealing death, another servant will have a testimony “sealed” upon him: Alma will experience a “mighty change of heart” and thus receive “the image of God engraven upon [his] countenance” (Alma 5:11–14). He will then continue to preach this same message of salvation through Christ, baptize and teach others of these truths (Mosiah 18:7–10), and eventually set up the Church of Christ, thus uniting the people and helping them become the seed of their Redeemer (Mosiah 18:16–21). When all is said and done, Abinadi preaches a masterful discourse that costs him his life, but saves countless others in the process. As with the Savior and his disciples, Abinadi’s legacy would live on after his death, beginning with Alma. Abinadi was a true disciple who had “become” the seed of Christ by becoming a Suffering Servant himself for the word (see below), with Alma and others soon following in his footsteps.35

Abinadi Following Christ as the Suffering Servant

After a full description of the life and suffering of our Savior, Jesus Christ, including his life as a tender plant arising out of dry ground, being despised and rejected, a man of sorrows, bearing our grief, bruised for our iniquities, stricken for our sins, Mosiah 14:10/Isaiah 53:10 describes the reason for all of this: “Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.” We learn here that it pleased the Lord, i.e., Jehovah to “bruise him.”36 Due to the ambiguity of the text, there are at least a few possibilities that might help explain the intended meaning of the passage and the subject and object of the verbs in question.

Since the Hebrew text uses Jehovah as the initial subject of the sentence (and this seems to be Abinadi’s own primary exegetical approach), we can view the passage in light of it as the will of Jehovah—or the will of Christ’s divine nature in premortality—that he himself undergo the “crushing” and “grief” of Gethsemane, in order that he might come to know experientially what he already knew cognitively.37 From another perspective (and it should be noted that Abinadi himself does not completely exclude God our Heavenly Father from his interpretive picture),39 if the reference has some bearing on God the Father, of course, it did not “please” our Heavenly Father to watch his Only
Begotten be beaten and scourged; it did not please him to watch his Son faint under the load of carrying his cross to his crucifixion; and it certainly did not please him to watch his Beloved Son nailed to a cross.\(^4^0\) The meaning of the word ḥāpēṣ/ḥēpeṣ (translated “pleased”) rather reflects that this was the “purpose” or “will” of Jehovah himself and his Father, so that they could bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of the children of our Heavenly Father by offering the blessing of the Atonement to be performed by his son, Jesus Christ. In fact, the text tells us the Savior will make a “guilt offering” or “trespass offering” on our behalf.\(^4^1\) By claiming the blessings of that offering our guilt is taken away, transferred to Christ who heals us by extending the blessed, desired forgiveness, whereby we obtain peace—peace only available to the righteous through him.

It seems clear that Christ is the focus of Isaiah 53. It is possible, however, in light of Abinadi’s explanation of the chapter, that he also may have seen a reference to the Father, as well as the Son, in 53:10. Abinadi will immediately proclaim following his citation of Isaiah 53:

I would that ye should understand that God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people. And because he dwelleth in flesh he shall be called the Son of God, and having subjected the flesh to the will of the Father, being the Father and the Son—The Father, because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son, because of the flesh; thus becoming the Father and Son—and they are one God, yea, the very Eternal Father of heaven and of earth. (Mosiah 15:1–14)

Abinadi evidently sees Christ as “the Father,” the Only Begotten of the Father who became our Redeemer through the mortal life, Atonement, death, and Resurrection he experienced—“the baptism with which [he] was baptized,” as the evangelist Mark quotes the Savior as saying (Mark 10:38; cf. Luke 12:50). Abinadi thus defines how Christ became like the Father and how we can become like him through repentance and emulating him. He was sent here by his Father, to do his will, and make us all “heirs of the kingdom of God” (Mosiah 15:11). It was thanks to Christ, who foresaw and knew what would be required of him to make us “his seed” that the will of the Father came to fruition as Christ became the Suffering Servant.\(^4^2\) Once Alma was convinced by Abinadi’s testimony that Jesus was the “founder of peace, yea, even the Lord who has redeemed his people, yea, him who has granted salvation unto his people” (Mosiah 15:18), he not only “believed” (17:2; cf. especially 15:11), but he began to plead with King Noah that Abinadi “might
depart in peace.” He himself became the messenger of “peace” that Abinadi had been, and that Jesus would be.

Pragmatics and Conclusion

Regarding Isaiah’s words in Isaiah 53:1 (Mosiah 14:1), Elder Bruce R. McConkie declared the following:

Some who are true and faithful will perish along with the wicked and ungodly in the days ahead. But what does it matter whether we live or die once we have found Christ and he has sealed us his? If we lay down our lives in the cause of truth and righteousness or in defense of our religion, our families, and our free institutions, why should we worry? We are not hanging on to life with greedy hands, fearful of the future. Once we have accepted the gospel and been reconciled to God through the mediation of Christ, what matters it if we are called to the realms of peace, there to await an inheritance in the resurrection of the just? Having a hope in Christ, we know we shall rise in glorious immortality and find place or “sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of God, to go no more out [Helaman 3:29]. Now, as Isaiah expressed it, “Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?” (Isa. 53:1) Who will believe our words, and who will hear our message? Who will honor the name of Joseph Smith and accept the gospel restored through his instrumentality? We answer: the same people who would have believed the words of the Lord Jesus and the ancient Apostles and prophets had they lived in their day.43

Those who “believe” in the “salvation of the Lord,” i.e., the “secret” or “plan” (Hebrew sôd) of salvation as declared through the Lord’s servants the prophets (cf. Amos 3:7), can count on seeing the arm of the Lord revealed to them, whether in life or in death. If the saints are called to die, and they “die in the Lord” (D&C 63:49), “they shall not taste of death, for it shall be sweet unto them” (D&C 42:46). They shall at that time see the salvation of God. The themes of Isaiah 53 may have been preparing Abinadi for the fate which awaited him, and given him the courage to declare (when death was decreed upon him): “I will not recall the words which I have spoken. . . . Yea, and I will suffer even until death, and I will not recall my words, and they shall stand as a testimony against you” (Mosiah 17:9–10).

Elder Dennis B. Neuenschwander offered the following reflection on Isaiah 53 to which Abinadi bore witness, and which is reflected in the life of Alma—the “one”:

Who better than the Savior can reach, support, and ultimately rescue the one among the crowd? He understands what it is to persevere among a disrespectful crowd and still remain true. The worldly crowds do not recognize Him, saying that “he hath no
form nor comeliness" and that "there is no beauty that we should desire him." King Benjamin says that the world “shall consider him a man.” Isaiah further describes Christ’s place among the crowds of the world with these words:

“He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief . . . ; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

“Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.”

“Nephi writes that “the world, because of their iniquity, shall judge him to be a thing of naught.”

Yet ultimately this Firstborn Son of God, who is so often misjudged and misunderstood, will emerge from being one among the crowd as the Anointed One, the Savior and Redeemer of the world. This emergence is humbly predicted in the Savior’s own statement to certain chief priests and elders that “the stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner.”

Alma emerged from being “one among the crowd” and became a proclaimer of “peace” when he pled with Noah and his priests that Abinadi be allowed to “depart in peace” (Mosiah 17:2). But Alma also believed Abinadi’s message, and in consequence of this belief, the Lord’s Church would be established. Alma’s response to Abinadi’s message demonstrates the power of Isaiah’s message.

If we, like Alma, believe Abinadi, then Isaiah 53 is unquestionably about Christ, and his seed are those who take up their crosses and become justified and forgiven. And yet, Abinadi’s story shows that Isaiah 53 is also a kind of martyrs’ template for following Christ. Abinadi shows that to take up one’s cross and follow Christ is not merely a rhetorical platitude, and Abinadi, as Christ’s servant, would suffer and die like Christ, the Suffering Servant. John Welch writes:

Abinadi’s words and his blood stand as a testimony of this crucial declaration, for which Abinadi too went like a lamb to the slaughter. He also was innocent—another servant of the Lord who suffered death and was cut off from the land of the living. The Book of Mormon says nothing about Abinadi’s children or posterity, but his legacy or prophetic seed lived on in Alma and his converts. Abinadi was more than a witness in word alone; his life and death show that he also knew that meaning of Isaiah 53 from the inner workings of personal suffering and testing to the extreme.

Alma too, as the Lord’s servant (Mosiah 26:20–24), will have to suffer as will those who believe his words (see Mosiah 18:3–11 and chapters 23–24).

To become the seed of Christ, is, in some measure, to become a Christlike figure and this will, of necessity, include suffering of some kind—an Abrahamic trial which requires one to “offer sacrifice in the similitude of the great sacrifice of the Son of God” and suffer “tribulation in the Redeemer’s
name” (D&C 138:13). This is what Paul means when he refers to “the fellowship of [Christ’s] sufferings.” And this is, in part, what it means to take upon us the name of Christ. Perhaps even in death, however, Abinadi took solace in the Lord’s words to Isaiah: “As for me, this is my covenant with them, saith the Lord; My spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed’s seed, saith the Lord, from henceforth and forever” (Isaiah 59:21). We become the “children of the prophets” (Acts 3:25; 3 Nephi 20:25) or their “seed” and children of the covenant, when we hear and obey their words. Just as the Lord’s words were in Isaiah’s mouth, Isaiah’s words were in Abinadi’s mouth, Abinadi’s words were in Alma’s mouth, and Alma’s words were eventually in the mouths of his son and many others.

Thus, what began with Alma’s response to Abinadi’s use of Isaiah continued for many generations amongst the Nephites and Lamanites, and continues today as a discourse on the reality of the living Christ, and leads people to his redemptive power through the Atonement. It teaches not only of his love, but of his power to claim us in his Father’s kingdom. If we too will believe the report, these Isaiah passages can inspire change and facilitate the transformation of soul that can enable us to become the seed of Christ, bask in the joy of that message, and declare the report to others as the message of the Suffering Servant evokes the atoning power of Christ to save us from sin and death. Truly, “how beautiful upon the mountains” this message and the feet of its messengers have become. “To whom” or “upon whom” (’al-mî) was “the arm of the Lord revealed?” Upon Alma! May we too believe the Lord’s servants so that the power of Christ may be revealed to us, and so that—in very real terms—the power of the Lord’s arm may be mercifully placed upon us, as he assists us in becoming his seed.

Notes
1. Bruce R. McConkie has stated, “As our New Testament now stands, we find Matthew (Matt. 8:17), Philip (Acts 8:27–35), Paul (Rom. 4:25), and Peter (1 Pet. 2:24–25) all quoting, paraphrasing, enlarging upon, and applying to the Lord Jesus various of the verses in this great 53rd chapter of Isaiah. How many sermons have been preached, how many lessons have been taught, how many testimonies have been borne—both in ancient Israel and in the meridian of time—using the utterances of this chapter as the text, we can scarcely imagine.” Bruce R. McConkie, The Promised Messiah: The First Coming of Christ (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 235.

2. The intricacy with which the prophets wove Isaiah into these conversions consistently includes Isaiah 52:7ff and chapter 53. See, e.g., Alma the Younger’s story of repentance which
echoes many of Isaiah’s themes (Alma 36:15–28). Additionally, John W. Welch believes that earlier Book of Mormon prophets such as Nephi and Jacob may also have drawn upon Isaiah 53 in their teaching. John W. Welch, “Isaiah 53, Mosiah 14, and the Book of Mormon,” in Isaiah in the Book of Mormon, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 305–6. The magnitude of these verses in the grand scheme of things cannot be overstated.


4. The only two priests from the story ever mentioned by name are Alma and Amulon. Another example of this ambiguity followed by an explanatory reference occurs in Mosiah 10:22 where Zeniff conferred his kingdom “upon one of my sons,” and Mosiah 11:1, where we learn that the conferral was upon, “Noah, one of his sons.”

5. See Mosiah 12:21; 18:30; and 27:36–37 for some of the language of Isaiah reflected in conversion stories.


7. To highlight the concept that Christ could have removed the suffering from the people if they would have listened and repented, it is probably not a coincidence that Mosiah 12 uses language that echoes Isaiah 53 as to how the Redeemer takes burdens upon himself in order to free and liberate us. Mosiah 12:2 describes the people who will be “smitten” (cf. Mosiah 14:4) and slain (Mosiah 14:8; see also 12:8), which Christ’s Atonement would require him to submit to; Mosiah 12:5 describes the people who would have burdens upon their backs (cf. Mosiah 14:4), which Christ again can help remove from the repentant soul; in Mosiah 12:8 we read that their abominations would be discovered (the arm of the Lord revealed/uncovered in 14:1); in Mosiah 12:11 the people would be a dry stalk trodden under foot contra Christ who would be a tender plant out of dry ground (14:2); and in 12:31 they would be smitten for their iniquities, whereas Christ would have been bruised for their iniquities (14:5) and healed them upon their repentance.


9. Another key term in the exchange that follows is the word “salvation” (Hebrew yēšūʿat in the phrase yēšūʿ at ʾelōhēnû, Isaiah 52:7,10) as connected with the Lord’s “arm”—an important theme throughout Isaiah (see especially Isaiah 33:2; 51:5; 52:10; 59:16; 63:5; cf. further the use of this theme in restoration scripture: Enos 1:13; Mosiah 12:24; 15:31; 3 Nephi 16:20; 20:35; D&C 90:10; 123:17; 133:3), and one to which Abinadi himself will return repeatedly (see, e.g., Mosiah 15:31; 16:12). King Noah, his priests, and his people will live to see Abinadi’s words “justified” or vindicated (cf. Isaiah 50:8 [2 Nephi 7:8]; Isaiah 53:11 [Mosiah 14:11]).


13. In the OT when the Lord “visits” his people it is often within the context of describing horrible consequences associated with sinners bringing upon themselves war (the sword), plagues, and the unpleasant circumstances that could have been averted had the people kept the commandments, repented, and followed God’s instruction. This is an interesting segue
into the image of the “arm of the Lord”—a representation of his power; either in the form of judgment, or in the form of forgiveness.


15. Compare Michaiah in the court of Ahab of Israel (1 Kings 22). Ahab’s chief complaint against Michaiah is that he will not rubberstamp Ahab’s evil acts and policies like the other prophets attached to the royal court, i.e., he will not tell Ahab what he wants to hear: “I hate him; for he doth not prophesy good concerning me, but evil” (v. 8); “And the king of Israel said unto Jehoshaphat, Did I not tell thee that he would prophesy no good concerning me, but evil” (v. 18). See also Jeremiah 38, and the exchange between Jeremiah and Zedekiah’s court.


17. Joseph M. Blenkinsopp writes: “The contextual isolation of 52:13–53:12 is also emphasized by the apostrophe to Zion that precedes and follows it (52: 1–2, 7–10; 54:1–17). If this arrangement is intentional, it may have had the purpose of relating the fate of the Servant to some of the major themes that permeate these chapters. The passage begins and concludes with an asseveration of Yahveh that the Servant, once humiliated and abused, will be exalted; once counted among criminals, will be in the company of the great and powerful (52:13–14a, 15; 53:11b–12). This statement encloses the body of the poem (53:1–11a), in which a co-religionist who had come to believe in the Servant’s mission and message, one who in all probability was a disciple, speaks about the origin and appearance of the Servant, the sufferings he endured, and his heroic and silent submission to death.” Joseph M. Blenkinsopp, Isaiah 40–55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, AB 19A (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 349. As Victor L. Ludlow observes, “The servant to be revealed by the Lord’s power is not named, but both the prophet Abinadi and the evangelist Philip identify him as Jesus Christ (Mosiah 15; Acts 8:26–35) Additionally, Matthew, Peter, and Paul apply various verses of Isaiah 53 to Christ (Matt. 8:17; 1 Pet. 2:24–25; Romans 4:25). Modern Apostles, such as James E. Talmage, Joseph Fielding Smith, and Bruce R. McConkie, have also stated that Jesus is the subject of Isaiah 53 (Jesus the Christ, p. 47; Doctrines of Salvation, 1:23–24; Premortal Messiah, pp. 234–35).” Victor L. Ludlow, Isaiah: Prophet, Seer, and Poet (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 448. “The report is most naturally taken as the announcement that has just been made in 52:13–15.” The NET Bible First Edition Notes (Biblical Studies Press, 2006), entry for Isaiah 53:1.

18. See Pike’s discussion of the Septuagint’s interpretive interpolations which describe the Messiah as the deliverer of the message. Pike, “How Beautiful upon the Mountains,” 276.

19. For a distribution of these passages in the Book of Mormon and other sources, see Pike, “How Beautiful upon the Mountains,” 249–91.

20. “LXX has a stronger expression, ‘he will be greatly glorified,’ doxasthēsetai sphodra” Blenkinsopp, Isaiah 40–55, 346. δοξασθῆσαται σφόδρα implies he will be gloried to the highest degree. “This piling up of synonyms emphasizes the degree of the servant’s coming exaltation.” The NET Bible First Edition Notes, entry for Isaiah 52:13.

21. “Traditionally the verb יָזֶה (yazzeh, a Hiphil stem) has been understood as a causative of יָצָב (natzab, ‘spurt, spatter’) and translated “sprinkle.” In this case the passage pictures the servant as a priest who “sprinkles” (or spiritually cleanses) the nations. Though the verb יָצָב does occur in the Hiphil with the meaning “sprinkle,” the usual interpretation is problematic. In all other instances where the object or person sprinkled is indicated, the verb is combined with a preposition. This is not the case in Isaiah 52:15, unless one takes the following יָצָב.
(‘alayv, “on him”) with the preceding line. But then one would have to emend the verb to a plural, make the nations the subject of the verb “sprinkle,” and take the servant as the object. Consequently some interpreters doubt the cultic idea of “sprinkling” is present here. Some emend the text; others propose a homonymic root meaning “spring, leap,” which in the Hiphil could mean “cause to leap, startle,” and would fit the parallelism of the verse nicely. The NET Bible First Edition Notes. The Joseph Smith Translation has “gather.”


23. All of these expressions draw on the ancient Israelite conception of Yahweh’s arm (zērôa) as an instrument of deliverance and judgment (a theme found throughout Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the Psalms). Isaiah’s use of the verb “reveal” (gely, which in the Niphal stem here denotes to “be made bare, revealed, uncovered,” constitutes a vivid example of the “revealing” or “unveiling” of the arm or hand of the Lord—the word “revelation” (revelatio, revelare < re + velum) literally means to draw back the veil (Psalm 44:3; 60:5; 108:6; 109:3; 11; 138:7; see also especially Exodus 15:6; 9, 12, 17). Similarly, the saving “right hand” or “arm” is prominently featured in Israel’s temple hymns—the Psalms—making it a key motif in Israel’s temple worship. The revelation of the Lord’s hand or arm is emblematic of uncovering the knowledge of him who has power to kpr (“atone,” “cover” sins). In Mosiah 12:8 the unrepentant people are told after two years of ignoring Abinadi that their abominations will now be “discovered.” This did not have to be and Alma is now heading down a road of repentance, having his sins remitted by the healing power of the Suffering Servant of Christ, thanks to the preaching of his servant Abinadi. Alma will then become the preacher of truth following Abinadi’s martyrdom and will proclaim the same message of peace through the Atonement as we find in Isaiah 53.

24. It is noteworthy that in Mosiah 16:1, immediately after paraphrasing, quoting, then again paraphrasing Isaiah 52:10 (cf. Mosiah 12:24), Abinadi stretches forth his hand(s) as a prophetic gesture. The Lord was “making bare” or “revealing” his “arm,” i.e., “declaring” his “salvation” through his authorized “servant” (see further below). But Abinadi has a further and perhaps more important point to make regarding the saving “arm” of the Lord. The “carnal and devilish” (Mosiah 16:3), he declares, have “gone according to their own carnal wills and desires; having never called upon the Lord while the arms of mercy were extended towards them, and they would not [i.e., they were unwilling to come to Christ]; they being warned of their iniquities and yet they would not depart from them [i.e., they were unwilling to depart from them] and they were commanded to repent and yet they would not repent” (Mosiah 16:12). The same arms or hands that are “extended” or “stretched out” in judgment (“for all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is outstretched still”) are “spread out all the daylong” (Isaiah 65:3), i.e., or “he stretches forth his hands unto them all the day long” (Jacob 6:4). The language of the “outstretched” arm or hand of power is especially prominent in Deuteronomy (see Deuteronomy 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 9:29; 11:2: 26:8; cf. 2 Chronicles 6:32). In Isaiah 53:1 (Mosiah 14:1), the Exodus image of the “arm” (zērôa) becomes a symbol of the power of the atonement which makes us the “seed” of Christ (zera’, Isaiah 53:10), “his sons and his daughters.” In other words, the aforementioned wordplay in Mosiah 14–17 that turns on the homophony of zērôa’ (“arm”) and zera’ (“seed,” “posterity”) emphasizes that it is Christ’s “arms of mercy” that make us his “seed” or “posterity” on whom “power” (sometimes associated with priesthood and authorized servants and service) can rest eternally (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:9; D&C 39:12; 113:4). The image of the Lord’s extended arms in Mosiah 16:12 is a representation of the “divine embrace” that “consummates the final escape from death.” Hugh Nibley, “The Meaning of the Atonement,” in Approaching Zion, ed. Don E

25. The arm of the Lord (cf. Isaiah 51:9; 2 Nephi 8:9) can not only be equated with being encircled in the arms of his love (see previous note), but also serves as an instrument of deliverance and judgment. See for example, Deuteronomy 26:8; Psalm 79:11. The arm is salvation and does the work of saving or atoning (D&C 27:1–2). Thus, the “making bare” or “revelation” of the Lord’s arm, in an important sense, is having “salvation” declared, and received and understood through revelation.

26. When all is said and done we do not have the original text, or even know with certainty what the dialect of Abinadi would have sounded like. We are taking Isaiah 53 as it occurs in the Hebrew Bible, working under the assumption that Abinadi’s recounting of the passage may have sounded similar enough so as to attract Alma’s attention.

27. The preposition ʿal properly denotes “upon” or “concerning” as opposed to simply “unto” (although it can take this meaning).


29. “How can Jesus Christ be both the Father and the Son? It really isn’t as complicated as it sounds. Though He is the Son of God, He is the head of the Church, which is the family of believers. When we are spiritually born again, we are adopted into His family. He becomes our Father or leader. . . . In no way does this doctrine denigrate the role of God the Father. Rather, we believe it enhances our understanding of the role of God the Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. God our Heavenly Father is the Father of our spirits; we speak of God the Son as the Father of the righteous. He is regarded as the ‘Father’ because of the relationship between Him and those who accept His gospel, thereby becoming heirs of eternal life.” M. Russell Ballard, “Building Bridges of Understanding,” Ensign, June 1998, 66–67. For further explanation of how Christ is both the Father and the Son in these passages, see Joseph Fielding Smith, “The Fatherhood of Christ,” address to seminary and institute of religion personnel, Brigham Young University, July 17, 1962, 5–6; Paul Y. Hoskisson, “The Role of Christ as the Father in the Atonement,” in By Study and by Faith: Selections from the Religious Educator, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Kent P. Jackson (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2009), 91–98; Jared T. Parker, “Abinadi on the Father and the Son: Interpretation and Application,” in Living the Book of Mormon: Abiding by Its Precepts (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2007), 136–50; and Robert L. Millet, “Jesus Christ, Fatherhood and Sonship of,” in Encyclopedia of Mormonism, ed. Daniel Ludlow. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 2:739–40.


31. See John 1:12; 1 John 1:3; Moroni 7:48; D&C 39:4; 45:8; 76:58.


33. For a description of the relationship of Jesus as high priestly “servant” and sacrifice—which come together in Isaiah 53—in the Mosaic sacrificial system, see Hebrews 9:11–14, 24–26. Jesus became the great High Priest and entered into the holy place not made with hands, but into heaven (i.e. he fulfilled the law and everything it symbolized and pointed to). He is salvation in every sense of the word, and no man cometh unto the Father but by him (John 14:6). “For were it not for the redemption which he hath made for his people, which was prepared from the foundation of the world, I say unto you, were it not for this, all
mankind must have perished. But behold, the bands of death shall be broken, and the Son reigneth, and hath power over the dead [i.e., his hand or arm over the dead]; therefore, he bringeth to pass the resurrection of the dead” (Mosiah 15:19–20, emphasis added). Because of his sacrifice, and the sacrificial system which pointed to him and the return of all of us to his father, this great type became a reality through his Atonement. “The seed of Christ are those who are adopted into his family, who by faith have become his sons and his daughters. (Mosiah 5:7.) They are the children of Christ in that they are his followers and disciples and keep his commandments (4 Nephi 1:7; Mormon 9:26; Moroni 7:19).” Bruce R. McConkie, Mormon Doctrine, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 700. The divine destiny of the “seed” of Christ is to “become his sons and daughters” (Mosiah 5:7), “found at the right hand of God” (Mosiah 5:9), and “seal[ed] … his” (5:15). See Matthew L. Bowen, “Becoming Sons and Daughters at God’s Right Hand: King Benjamin’s Rhetorical Wordplay on His Own Name,” Journal of Book of Mormon and Restoration Scripture 21, no. 2 (2012): 2–13. On Benjamin’s use of the expression “seal you his,” see further John Gee, “Book of Mormon Word Usage: ‘Seal You His,’” Insights 22, no. 1 (2002): 4.

34. Blenkinsopp writes: “The Servant has died, or rather has been put to death, there is no doubt about that, yet we are now told that he will have descendants (zera’, literally, ‘seed’), his life span will be extended, he will see light and attain satisfaction, and (to return to the beginning of the passage) the undertaking in which he is involved will ultimately succeed. The most natural meaning is that the Servant’s project will be continued and carried to fruition through his disciples. Thus, Isa 59:21 is addressed to an individual possessed of Yahveh’s spirit and in whose mouth Yahveh’s words have been placed. He is a prophetic individual, in other words, who is assured that the spirit of prophecy will remain with him and with his ‘seed’ (zera’) into the distant future.” Blenkinsopp, Isaiah 40–55, 355.

35. Blenkinsopp further observes: “The usage therefore expresses a crucial duality between the people as the instrument of God’s purpose and a prophetic minority (the servants of Yahveh) owing allegiance to its martyred leader (the Servant) and his teachings. These disciples take over from the community the responsibility and the suffering inseparable from servanthood or instrumentality and, if this view of the matter is accepted, it is to one of these that we owe the tribute in 52:13–53:12.” Blenkinsopp, Isaiah 40–55, 356–57.

36. This portion of the Hebrew text is extremely problematic, and it carries enormous theological ramifications that are, unfortunately, still unresolved from a scholarly perspective. The interpretative issues at hand revolve around the verb describing putting to “grief.” The word is a causative form and it seems that a direct object, which is missing, would be attached to the verb, and such is the case with the preceding verbal form which includes the object. Many scholars see the reading here as uncertain, or opine that an emendation is necessary. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, the scribe who transmitted this Isaiah passage did indeed supply the text with a direct object in efforts to try and explain who was doing what to whom in this verbal construction: 1QIsae 17777 (“he pierced him”) in contrast to the Masoretic Text 17777 (“he brought sicknesses [upon him],” “he made [him] suffer”). On the latter two readings, see Blenkinsopp, Isaiah 40–55, 346, 348 and Donald W. Parry, Harmonizing Isaiah: Combining Ancient Sources (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001), 212, 280. The grammatical difficulties which arise here thus call for caution in attempting to limit the meaning of the subject and object in this portion of the verse.

38. Isaiah 53:11 can be translated in several different ways. One possibility may highlight that it was Christ’s experience in Gethsemane that makes him the subject (and object) of verse 10 as the one who was grieved. Verse 11 may be translated as something along the lines of, “out of the toil of his soul, he shall see; by means of his knowledge (presumably the knowledge he gained from Gethsemane), he shall be satisfied” (filled full—the will of the Father will be completed). The next phrase in the text calls him “righteous,” the result of this process. Orson Hyde said of Isaiah 53 that “this particular prophecy speaks of Christ all the way through.” Orson Hyde, “The Marriage Relations,” in Journal of Discourses (Liverpool: latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 2:75–87, October 6, 1854. Todd B. Parker, (“Abinadi: The Man and the Message (Part 1) and The Message and the Martyr (Part 2) [Transcript],” FARMS Preliminary Reports (1996), 1–22, argues in favor of viewing the subject of the verbs and doer of the action as Christ. See also Hoskisson, “The Role of Christ as the Father in the Atonement,” 91–98; Parker, “Abinadi on the Father and the Son,” 136–50; Millet, “Jesus Christ, Fatherhood and Sonship of” 2:739–40.

39. Abinadi’s statement that Christ can be called and was “the Father, because he was conceived by the power of God; and the Son, because of the flesh; thus becoming the Father and Son” is a theologically rich declaration. The term God in the phrase “power of God” can only refer to God the Father. Thus, Abinadi does not exclude God the Father from his exegesis of Isaiah 53. Clearly Jesus was not self-conceived. Even though Jesus was already in a sense “the Father” because he was in all things like God the Father in premortality excepting mortal experience (i.e., the same level of experiential knowledge), it was still necessary for him to become the Father. This involved Jesus also becoming the Son with respect to the flesh. Through Jesus and his Atonement, we are offered the same opportunity: to become.

40. Ludlow describes the Father in this verse who is not pleased to see his Son experience such things. Ludlow, Isaiah: Prophet, Seer, and Poet, 456. The grammatical issue discussed in note 36 thus becomes extremely significant in all of its theological ramifications.

41. אָשָׁם [ʾāšām] means offense, guilt, or trespass-offering. The Messianic servant offers himself as an אָשָׁם in compensation for the sins of the people, interposing for them as their substitute Isaiah 53:10. Francis Brown, Samuel R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000). Leviticus 19:22: “And the priest shall make atonement for him with the ram of the guilt offering before the Lord for his sin that he has committed, and he shall be forgiven for the sin that he has committed.”

42. Abinadi seems to further explain this conception of the will of the Father, and the Son’s submission to it, in Mosiah 15:1–8. The flesh becomes subject to the Spirit, or the Son to the Father, being one God, he suffers himself to be mocked, scourged, and crucified, all as “the will of the Son [is] swallowed up in the will of the Father” (recalling that in Luke 22:42 the Savior cries out in Gethsemane for God, if he be willing, to remove the cup from him). If any human being ever had merited an answer to a prayer according to one’s own will (“the will of the Son,” human will, or the will of the child), it was the Savior on this occasion. However, divine will (“the will of the Father”) prevailed so that “God [could] break the bands of death, having gained victory over death; giving the Son power to make intercession for the children of men” (Mosiah 15:8). Thus, Christ, the literal Son of God in the flesh, became the giver of life, and became the Father of our salvation, and received all that the Father has (D&C 93:4). See also 3 Nephi 1:14, where just prior to his birth, Jesus explains this delicate relationship of the will of the Father and the Son which would be manifested at his birth and through his ministry.
46. Blenkinsopp writes: “Isaiah 52:7–10 provides one of the best illustrations of the power of a canonical text to shape the identity of the community that accepts it. From this text early Christians derived both the unique form in which to tell the story of their founder—euaggelion, 'good tidings, gospel'—and the essence of his message—the coming of the kingdom of God. Both come together in the first statement attributed to Jesus in Mark’s Gospel: ‘The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the [good tidings]’ (Mark 1:15; cf. Matt 10:7–8 with echoes of Isa 52:3, and Luke 4:16-21 referring also to Isa 61:1–2). The messenger and the message in the Isaian text provided both paradigm and warranty for Christian preachers, as we see from the tendency to refer to it wherever the preaching of the gospel is the issue (e.g. Rom 10:15; Eph 6:15).” Blenkinsopp, Isaiah 40–55, 344.
48. See Philippians 3:10; see also 1 Corinthians 1:19; 10:16–17 (cf. 10:20); 2 Corinthians 8:4; 13:14; Ephesians 3:9 (cf. 5:11); Philippians 2:1.
One day the arm of the Lord will be revealed.
Which arm of the Lord is revealed to us depends entirely on what we choose to do here and now.
A Different Way of Seeing the Hand of the Lord

John Gee (john_gee@byu.edu) is the senior research fellow and the William Gay Research Professor at the Neal A. Maxwell Institute.

Synonyms can be tricky things. Synonyms, of course, are words that mean more or less the same thing. The “more or less,” however, can sometimes make all the difference. Such is the case with a pair of idioms in the Book of Mormon; two English synonyms are used where the idioms, in fact, end up being almost antonyms—that is, they mean almost the opposite. These two idioms, to stretch out the hand and to extend the arm, describe two gestures in the Book of Mormon that, because stretch out and extend are synonyms in English, are easily confused.

Stretching Out the Hand

The idiom to stretch out the hand occurs seven times in the Book of Mormon (2 Nephi 15:25; 19:12, 17, 21; 20:1; 24:26–27), all of them in quotations of Isaiah (Isaiah 5:25; 9:12, 17, 21; 10:1; 14:26–27). Five of these occurrences are in Isaiah’s refrain: “For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still” (Isaiah 5:25; 9:12, 17, 21; 10:1). The refrain occurs in Isaiah after passages wherein Isaiah discusses the various punishments that
will befall the wicked. This includes having their carcasses strew the streets (2 Nephi 15:25; Isaiah 5:25), the Syrians and the Philistines devouring Israel (2 Nephi 19:12; Isaiah 9:12), having no mercy on the fatherless and widows (2 Nephi 19:12; Isaiah 9:17), burning up the people and subjecting them to cannibalism (2 Nephi 19:18–21; Isaiah 9:18–21), and subjecting the people to captivity, slavery, and death (2 Nephi 20:4; Isaiah 10:4). So, whatever “stretching out the hand” is, it occurs in the context of punishing the wicked.

The English sentence is constructed to say that in spite of the punishments afflicted (“for all this”), the punishments do not satisfy the Lord’s anger (“his anger is not turned away”). In other words, to the contrary (“but”), the hand of the Lord is still “stretched out.” So a stretched forth hand, by any careful reading of the English translation, is a hand administering punishment.

The Hebrew is also clear on the subject. The idiom is ידה נטעים, which means that the hand is hanging over, threatening, or bent.¹ It is thus a threatening gesture.

The cultural context reveals even more about this idiom. Canaanite deities are often depicted as having arms that are bent, hanging over, threatening, or stretched out. There is a good example in a stele from Ugarit, now in the Louvre (Louvre AO 15775). This stele shows the god holding a weapon over his head, ready to strike. His hand and upraised arm are נטעים—stretched out, bent, hanging over, and threatening. The same pose is known from statues from the same area (BM 134627, BM 25096).

This “punishing” imagery is in the language that Isaiah is using in the Bible (and that Nephi is quoting in the Book of Mormon), and would have been familiar to his audience, because there are many other examples of this sort of iconography in statues and steles of gods from Canaan. The iconographic motif comes from Egypt, where it seems to mean the same thing and is connected with the expression pr ʿ, meaning to lift up the hand.² The Egyptian expression and accompanying iconographic motif spread throughout the ancient Near East where it was translated into Akkadian as tarāṣu qāti, “to stretch forth the hand (against),”³ and from there was translated into Sumerian as á-nir-da, “arm of murder,” or á-šer7-da, “the arm of punishment” (both literally “the stretched forth arm”).⁴

Egyptian usage is also well documented. The earliest Egyptian use of the phrase is the famous boat-fight scene from the tomb of Ti, where an Egyptian is told: “Lift up your hand against him, my lad.”⁵ Egyptian generals also
describe themselves as “lifting up the hand as his lord wishes.”6 One Egyptian peasant complains to an official: “Behold, you are mighty and powerful; your arms uplifted; your heart rapacious; mercy has passed you by.”7 The Middle Kingdom pharaoh, Sesostris I, was hailed as “also a victor, who acts with his mighty arm, with uplifted hand, who has no peer.”8 The New Kingdom pharaoh Thutmosis III borrowed these same lines to describe himself,9 as did King Tutankhamun.10 Thutmosis III also said of himself that he was “a warrior of uplifted hand on the battlefield—no one can stand in his presence.”11 Several of the pharaohs, such as Seti I and Ramses III, depicted themselves as having an uplifted hand, and therefore as being in the image or stead of a deity.12 Indeed, the epithet of “outstretched arm” is frequently applied to Egyptian deities.13

This Egyptian background comes to permeate the ancient Near East and is documented for ancient Israel. This is the background of God as a punishing warrior that Isaiah utilizes in his prophecies, which are then quoted in the Book of Mormon.

Excursus: Why Does God Stretch out His Hand?

What causes God to stretch out his hand against people? Isaiah enumerates the individuals whom God deems worthy of punishment in his discussion:

1. those who “call evil good, and good evil, that put darkness for light, and light for darkness, that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter” (2 Nephi 15:20; Isaiah 5:20),
2. those who are “wise in their own eyes and prudent in their own sight” (2 Nephi 15:21; Isaiah 5:21),
3. those “who justify the wicked for reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him,” the “righteousness” here being a vindicating verdict given in a law court (2 Nephi 15:23; Isaiah 5:23),
4. those who “have cast away the law of the Lord of Hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel” (2 Nephi 15:24; Isaiah 5:24),
5. those who speak “in the pride and stoutness of heart: The bricks are fallen down, but we will build with hewn stones; the sycamores are cut down, but we will change them into cedars,” in other words meaning those that boast that they (not the Lord) will make things better, even though things are in shambles (2 Nephi 19:9; Isaiah 9:9),
6. those who fail to “seek the Lord of Hosts” (2 Nephi 19:13; Isaiah 9:13),
7. those “that teacheth lies,” in other words, “the leaders of this people cause them to err; and they that are led of them are destroyed” (2 Nephi 19:15–16; Isaiah 9:15–16),
8. those who “decree unrighteous decrees, and that write grievousness which they have prescribed; to turn away the needy from judgment, and to take away the right from the poor of my people, that widows may be their prey, and that they may rob the fatherless” (2 Nephi 20:1–2; Isaiah 10:1–2).

Those guilty of such things should expect the wrath of the Lord to descend upon them. Even after terrible punishments have come upon them, “his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still” (Isaiah 5:25; 9:12, 17, 21; 10:4).

An example of how these punishments played out is the history of the people of Zeniff, Zeniff’s son, Noah, and his cronies that he appointed as priests. Note how Noah and his priests fit the same set of circumstances that Isaiah outlined would cause the hand of the Lord to be stretched out against people (Mosiah 11:5):

They called evil good and good evil (“O king, what great evil hast thou done, or what great sins have thy people committed, that we should be condemned of God or judged of this man? And now, O king, behold, we are guiltless, and thou, O king, hast not sinned; therefore, this man has lied concerning you,” Mosiah 12:13–14).

They were wise in their own eyes (“Are you priests, and pretend to teach this people, and to understand the spirit of prophesying, and yet desire to know of me what these things mean?” Mosiah 12:25).

They justified Noah while sentencing Abinadi to death (“we are guiltless, and thou, O king, hast not sinned,” Mosiah 12:14; “Abinadi, we have found an accusation against thee, and thou art worthy of death,” Mosiah 17:7).

They cast away the law of God (“king Noah hardened his heart against the word of the Lord, and he did not repent of his evil doings,” Mosiah 11:29; “if ye understand these things ye have not taught them; therefore, ye have perverted the ways of the Lord,” Mosiah 12:26).

They spoke in pride (“they were lifted up in the pride of their hearts; they did boast in their own strength,” Mosiah 11:19) and built costly buildings
“king Noah built many elegant and spacious buildings; and he ornamented them with fine work of wood, and of all manner of precious things, of gold, and of silver, and of iron, and of brass, and of ziff, and of copper,” Mosiah 11:8.

They failed to seek the Lord (“If ye teach the law of Moses why do ye not keep it?” Mosiah 12:29).

They taught lies (“they were deceived by the vain and flattering words of the king and priests; for they did speak flattering things unto them,” Mosiah 11:7; the priests “should speak lying and vain words to his people,” Mosiah 11:11).

They decreed unrighteous decrees to take away from the poor (“And he laid a tax of one fifth part of all they possessed. . . . And all this did he take to support himself, and his wives and his concubines; and also his priests, and their wives and their concubines; thus he had changed the affairs of the kingdom,” Mosiah 11:3–4).

As a result of this, after Abinadi’s death and the departure of Alma and his people, there were a series of divine punishments. First, civility broke down: “There began to be a division among the remainder of the people. . . . And there began to be a great contention among them” (Mosiah 19:2–3). This ended in an attempt on the king’s life by his own people (Mosiah 19:4–6), but King Noah was spared because at that moment “the army of the Lamanites were within the borders of the land” (Mosiah 19:6). Though the people fled, “the Lamanites did pursue them, and did overtake them, and began to slay them” (Mosiah 19:10). Though Noah escaped (Mosiah 19:11–12), only to be tortured and burned alive by his own army (Mosiah 19:20), the people pled for mercy, and “the Lamanites did spare their lives, and took them captives and carried them back to the land of Nephi, and granted unto them that they might possess the land, under the conditions that they would deliver up king Noah into the hands of the Lamanites, and deliver up their property, even one half of all they possessed” (Mosiah 19:15).

During all these terrible chastisements, the Lord’s anger was not turned away, but his hand was stretched out still. And the punishments did not stop there. The people of Limhi, Noah’s son appointed in his stead (Mosiah 19:26), were attacked in punishment for a crime they did not commit (Mosiah 20:1–8). Then, because the Lamanite king would not allow Limhi’s people to be killed, the Lamanites “would smite them on their cheeks, and exercise authority over them; and began to put heavy burdens upon their backs, and drive them as they would a dumb ass” (Mosiah 21:3). Again, these are just more
examples of the Lord’s hand being stretched out still. “Yea, all this was done that the word of the Lord might be fulfilled” (Mosiah 21:4).

Then, when they could bear it no longer, “they gathered themselves together again, and put on their armor, and went forth against the Lamanites to drive them out of their land. And it came to pass that the Lamanites did beat them, and drove them back, and slew many of them. And now there was a great mourning and lamentation among the people of Limhi, the widow mourning for her husband, the son and the daughter mourning for their father, and the brothers for their brethren. Now there were a great many widows in the land, and they did cry mightily from day to day” (Mosiah 21:7–10).

So “they went again to battle, but they were driven back again, suffering much loss. Yea, they went again even the third time, and suffered in the like manner” (Mosiah 21:11–12). Still, the Lord’s anger was not turned away, and his hand continued to be stretched out.

Only when “they did humble themselves even to the dust” did the Lord hear their cries. They “subject[ed] themselves to the yoke of bondage, submit[ed] themselves to be smitten, and to be driven to and fro, and burdened, according to the desires of their enemies. And they did humble themselves even in the depths of humility; and they did cry mightily to God; yea, even all the day long did they cry unto their God that he would deliver them out of their afflictions. And now the Lord was slow to hear their cry because of their iniquities; nevertheless the Lord did hear their cries” (Mosiah 21:13–15).

Thus, extraordinary sin requires extraordinary repentance. Now in the depths of humility, “they themselves had entered into a covenant with God to serve him and keep his commandments” (Mosiah 21:31).

Yet, even so “the Lord did not see fit to deliver them out of bondage” (Mosiah 21:15). It would be some time yet and after some vain attempts (Mosiah 21:25–26) before messengers would arrive from outside (Mosiah 21:23) and Limhi’s people would be delivered from their bondage by escaping to Zarahemla (Mosiah 22:11–13).

If the punishment seems out of proportion considering that Noah and his wicked priests disappeared from the people early in the stage of the punishments, recall that Mosiah admonished his people to “remember king Noah, his wickedness and his abominations, and also the wickedness and abominations of his people. Behold what great destruction did come upon them; and also because of their iniquities they were brought into bondage. And were it not for the interposition of their all-wise Creator, and this because of their sincere
repentance, they must unavoidably remain in bondage until now” (Mosiah 29:18–19; emphasis added). Mosiah also reminded the people how fortunate Noah’s people had been to get rid of Noah since “ye cannot dethrone an iniquitous king save it be through much contention, and the shedding of much blood. For behold, he has his friends in iniquity, and he keepeth his guards about him; and he teareth up the laws of those who have reigned in righteousness before him; and he trampleth under his feet the commandments of God; and he enacteth laws, and sendeth them forth among his people, yea, laws after the manner of his own wickedness; and whosoever doth not obey his laws he causeth to be destroyed; and whosoever doth rebel against him he will send his armies against them to war, and if he can he will destroy them; and thus an unrighteous king doth pervert the ways of all righteousness” (Mosiah 29:21–23).

The Book of Mormon thus provides an illustration of exactly what Isaiah’s prophecy referred to: the kind of unrighteousness that would cause the Lord’s hand to be stretched out against a people.

**Stretching Forth the Hand**

Another Book of Mormon idiom is easily confused with the idiom of **stretching out the hand**; it is the idiom of **stretching forth the hand**. These two expressions might seem to be synonyms, and at least some of the time, they are—but **stretching forth the hand** seems to cover at least five different meanings. Previous discussion of the latter idiom has focused on the meaning of prophesying, but it is clear that **stretching forth the hand** is not always connected with speaking or prophesying in the Book of Mormon.

The two idioms are used as synonyms in one of the Isaiah quotes: “Therefore, is the anger of the Lord kindled against his people, and he hath stretched forth [wayyēţ] his hand against them, and hath smitten them; and the hills did tremble, and their carcasses were torn in the midst of the streets. For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out [netūyâ] still” (2 Nephi 15:25; Isaiah 5:25). In this verse the same (irregular) verb is translated as both **stretched forth** and **stretched out**, indicating that the two translations might be equivalent. This passage indicates that they can be different translations of the exact same idiom.

When Nephi is working with his brothers building a ship, the idea of prophesying does not communicate the passage’s meaning as well as the idea of smiting:
And it came to pass that the Lord said unto me: *Stretch forth thine hand* again unto thy brethren, and they shall not wither before thee, but I will shock them, saith the Lord, and this will I do, that they may know that I am the Lord their God. And it came to pass that I *stretched forth my hand* unto my brethren, and they did not wither before me; but the Lord did shake them, even according to the word which he had spoken. (1 Nephi 17:53–54, emphasis added)

In this case Nephi stretches forth his hand and the Lord smites Nephi’s brethren; the gesture is not accompanied by any verb of speaking, much less one of prophesying. From this example, we learn that stretching forth one’s hand is closer to the idea of smiting.

Later in the Book of Mormon, the idea of smiting is still present. King Lamoni’s father, himself a king, “stretched forth his hand to slay Ammon” (Alma 20:20). This shows that the smiting gesture is still being used as such well into Nephite history.

In a few cases, the idea behind *stretching forth the hand* seems to indicate not smiting so much as exertion. For example, in the parable of the olive tree, the idiom may also take on this idea. The Lord says, “I have stretched forth mine hand almost all the day long, and the end draweth nigh. And it grieveth me that I should hew down all the trees of my vineyard, and cast them into the fire that they should be burned” (Jacob 5:47). Once again, the expression is not accompanied by a verb of speaking, and thus is not a mention of prophesying. Rather, here the idiom might be taken as meaning “to exert oneself.” But while there is some evidence that it meant that at one time in Egypt, the last known usage dates at least a millennium before Lehi’s day. Instead the expression is invoked just before suggesting hewing down the trees of the vineyard—another example of the idiom being used in the context of smiting. Jacob also quotes this phrase in his explication of the parable (Jacob 6:4).

The use of the expression in the book of Ether seems to match the usage in the parable of the olive tree, but may simply be a Jaredite, rather than a Nephite, idiom. In Ether, “the Lord stretched forth his hand and touched the stones one by one with his finger” (Ether 3:6). In Israelite usage, a stretched out hand is made into a fist, which is the wrong hand position to touch something with a finger. Thus, the Lord’s stretching forth of his hand here could be another example of the idiom being used in exertion.

A few passages in the Book of Mormon indicate that the English idiom may not always (indeed, probably does not always) indicate smiting or exertion. Sometimes, the idiom seems to convey the idea of blessing or healing. This can be seen when Alma and Amulek find Zeezrom “upon his bed, sick,
being very low with a burning fever; and his mind also was exceedingly sore because of his iniquities; and when he saw them he stretched forth his hand, and besought them that they would heal him” (Alma 15:5). It does not seem that Zeezrom would make a smiting gesture while asking a favor. Nor does it seem to be the case when Lamoni “arose, . . . stretched forth his hand unto the woman [his wife], and said: Blessed be the name of God, and blessed art thou” (Alma 19:12). A gesture of blessing seems expected here. One is also expected when Alma “stretched forth his hand, and cried unto those whom he beheld, who were truly penitent, and said unto them: I behold that ye are lowly in heart; and if so, blessed are ye” (Alma 32:7–8).

As mentioned previously, in the past, the idiom of stretching forth the hand has been connected with prophesying and the Book of Mormon provides some clear instances of that usage. For example, Abinadi uses this imagery when prophesying of doom: “And the Lord said unto me: Stretch forth thy hand and prophesy, saying: Thus saith the Lord, it shall come to pass that this generation, because of their iniquities, shall be brought into bondage, and shall be smitten on the cheek; yea, and shall be driven by men, and shall be slain; and the vultures of the air, and the dogs, yea, and the wild beasts, shall devour their flesh” (Mosiah 12:2). The same thing happens later in Abinadi’s story: “[After] Abinadi had spoken these words he stretched forth his hands and said: The time shall come when all shall see the salvation of the Lord; when every nation, kindred, tongue, and people shall see eye to eye and shall confess before God that his judgments are just. And then shall the wicked be cast out, and they shall have cause to howl, and weep, and wail, and gnash their teeth; and this because they would not hearken unto the voice of the Lord; therefore the Lord redeemeth them not” (Mosiah 16:1–2). While it is possible that the use of the plural (hands as opposed to hand) might change the meaning of the idiom—as we will mention later, to stretch forth the hands is an idiom for prayer—this passage seems like an example of the idiom being used to describe prophesying.

Jesus also seems not to have used the smiting gesture, neither when he “stretched forth his hand and spake unto the people, saying: Behold, I am Jesus Christ, whom the prophets testified shall come into the world” (3 Nephi 11:9–10), nor when “he stretched forth his hand unto the multitude, and cried unto them, saying: Blessed are ye if ye shall give heed unto the words of these twelve whom I have chosen from among you to minister unto you”
Both of these instances could certainly be an example of the idiom, once again, being used as prophesying.

In many cases the usage is simply ambiguous and because of the context either smiting or prophesying might be understood. These are mostly passages dealing with prophecies of punishment. For example, Abinadi uses this imagery when prophesying of doom: “And the Lord said unto me: Stretch forth thy hand and prophesy, saying: Thus saith the Lord, it shall come to pass that this generation, because of their iniquities, shall be brought into bondage, and shall be smitten on the cheek; yea, and shall be driven by men, and shall be slain; and the vultures of the air, and the dogs, yea, and the wild beasts, shall devour their flesh” (Mosiah 12:2). The same thing happens later in Abinadi’s story: “Abinadi had spoken these words be stretched forth his hands and said: The time shall come when all shall see the salvation of the Lord; when every nation, kindred, tongue, and people shall see eye to eye and shall confess before God that his judgments are just. And then shall the wicked be cast out, and they shall have cause to howl, and weep, and wail, and gnash their teeth; and this because they would not hearken unto the voice of the Lord; therefore the Lord redeemeth them not” (Mosiah 16:1–2). While the use of the plural might change the meaning of the idiom (as we will see later in the Book of Mormon, to stretch forth the hands is an idiom for prayer), it is clear that this example could be either one of smiting or one of prophesying.

Amulek also uses the gesture as one of condemnation: “Amulek stretched forth his hand, and cried the mightier unto them, saying: O ye wicked and perverse generation, why hath Satan got such great hold upon your hearts? Why will ye yield yourselves unto him that he may have power over you, to blind your eyes, that ye will not understand the words which are spoken, according to their truth? For behold, have I testified against your law? Ye do not understand; ye say that I have spoken against your law; but I have not, but I have spoken in favor of your law, to your condemnation” (Alma 10:25–26). Here the gesture could yet again either refer to smiting or prophesying.

Alma also uses this gesture in condemnation: “Behold, the scriptures are before you; if ye will wrest them it shall be to your own destruction. And now it came to pass that when Alma had said these words unto them, he stretched forth his hand unto them and cried with a mighty voice, saying: Now is the time to repent, for the day of salvation draweth nigh” (Alma 13:20–21). This passage could also refer to either smiting or prophesying.
Alma and Amulek even have a discussion of the appropriateness of using this particular gesture: “And when Amulek saw the pains of the women and children who were consuming in the fire, he also was pained; and he said unto Alma: How can we witness this awful scene? Therefore let us stretch forth our hands, and exercise the power of God which is in us, and save them from the flames. But Alma said unto him: The Spirit constraineth me that I must not stretch forth mine hand; for behold the Lord receiveth them up unto himself, in glory; and he doth suffer that they may do this thing, or that the people may do this thing unto them, according to the hardness of their hearts, that the judgments which he shall exercise upon them in his wrath may be just; and the blood of the innocent shall stand as a witness against them, yea, and cry mightily against them at the last day” (Alma 14:10–11).

Samuel the Lamanite may have also used the condemning gesture when he “went and got upon the wall thereof, and stretched forth his hand and cried with a loud voice, and prophesied unto the people whatsoever things the Lord put into his heart. And he said unto them: Behold, I, Samuel, a Lamanite, do speak the words of the Lord which he doth put into my heart; and behold he hath put it into my heart to say unto this people that the sword of justice hangeth over this people; and four hundred years pass not away save the sword of justice falleth upon this people. Yea, heavy destruction awaiteth this people, and it surely cometh unto this people” (Helaman 13:4–6). Both the smiting and the prophesying gestures are appropriate here.

Finally, stretching forth the hands (in the plural) is used for prayer. When a Zoramite desired to pray, he would “stretch forth his hands towards heaven” (Alma 31:14) in a gesture of prayer. In this case the plural use of hands indicates a different gesture.

So, to sum up the discussion so far, to stretch out the hand is to lift it up to smite, to stretch forth the hand may or may not refer to the same thing. To stretch forth the hand is more likely to indicate smiting in earlier passages in the Book of Mormon and less likely to indicate it in later passages. To stretch forth the hand probably covers a number of different gestures that can indicate smiting, but also might indicate exertion, prophesying, or praying (and probably does indicate praying when the plural, hands, is used). The English translation possibly covers a number of different idioms expressed on the plates.
Extending the Arm

The idiom to *extend the arm*, even though it uses synonyms for *stretch out the hand*, is a much different idiom and has a very different meaning.

For instance, Jacob begs his people to repent “while his [God’s] arm of mercy is extended towards you in the light of the day, harden not your hearts” (Jacob 6:5). This idiom does not come from the Hebrew Bible. The passage in Jacob 6:5–6 quotes language from Psalm 95:7–8, but the arm of mercy is not mentioned in that Psalm. Though the Hebrew Bible talks about “extending mercy” mainly in texts written after the exile and thus many years after Lehi (Ezra 7:28; 9:9; Psalms 109:12), it does not talk about extending arms in mercy or arms of mercy, or any sort of arms at all. The idiom may instead be our first demonstrable example of something that can only be an Egyptianism and not a Hebraism, although a gesture originating in a New World culture cannot be completely ruled out.

The ancient Egyptians had an expression 3wỉʿ, “to extend the arm” or “extend the hand,” which meant “to make long . . . the arm ‘to offer,” and was “used in parallel with other verbs of offering” (the noun form was 3wȓʿ).19 There was also a gesture associated with this expression. It is usually depicted with the hands out, palms facing up. It is extremely common in all kinds of temple scenes. A funny thing, however, has happened in modern depictions of this gesture. In Egyptian scenes, the hand or hands are holding the offering. Modern artists, depicting the human figures the way the Egyptians portrayed humans, would leave out the offering. The resultant human figure would end up with the hand looking completely contrived, contorted, and empty. This has produced the habit of caricaturing the Egyptians as walking around with contorted hand positions with nothing in their hands, and has produced the expression *to walk like an Egyptian*. Ironically, no ancient Egyptians are actually depicted according to the caricature that modern people have of them. That is merely the modern mocking of the sacred experience of Egyptian offerings.

Therefore, in Egyptian, *to extend the arm* is usually something that humans do when making offerings to various deities. But the Egyptians also used the expression to express deities offering blessings to humans.20 In the Book of Mormon, too, it is God who is offering mercy to humans. Although Book of Mormon authors speak of using Egyptian (1 Nephi 1:2; Mosiah 1:4; Mormon 9:32), it is not clear if it was their primary language or how fluent even people like Lehi and Nephi were in Egyptian.
In the Book of Mormon, extending the arm is something that the Lord does. The Lord is the one who “extended his arm in the preservation of our fathers” (Mosiah 1:14), and he is the one “extending the arm of mercy towards them that put their trust in him” (Mosiah 29:20; similarly Alma 5:33; 19:36; 29:10; 3 Nephi 9:14) So people need to call upon the Lord “while the arms of mercy were extended towards them” (Mosiah 16:12).

So if extending the arm is an idiom to show God offering blessings to humans, under what conditions does God extend his arm? Jacob notes that God extends his arms of mercy to those who “harden not your hearts” (Jacob 6:5) but instead “repent, and come with full purpose of heart, and cleave unto God as he cleaveth unto you” (Jacob 6:5). Alma concurs that repentance and coming to Christ are the keys to receiving the arms of mercy: “repent, repent, for the Lord God hath spoken it! Behold, he sendeth an invitation unto all men, for the arms of mercy are extended towards them, and he saith: Repent, and I will receive you” (Alma 5:32–33). Alma assures his readers that “[the Lord’s] arm is extended to all people who will repent and believe on his name” (Alma 19:36). Alma recalls his own experience: “When I see many of
my brethren truly penitent, and coming to the Lord their God, then is my soul filled with joy; then do I remember what the Lord has done for me, yea, even that he hath heard my prayer; yea, then do I remember his merciful arm which he extended towards me” (Alma 29:10).

Jesus himself confirmed the process of extending his arm when he spoke to the Nephites after his death:

O all ye that are spared because ye were more righteous than they, will ye not now return unto me, and repent of your sins, and be converted, that I may heal you? Yea, verily I say unto you, if ye will come unto me ye shall have eternal life. Behold, mine arm of mercy is extended towards you, and whosoever will come, him will I receive; and blessed are those who come unto me. (3 Nephi 9:13–14)

Finally, King Benjamin notes that those to whom the Lord extended his arm to preserve (Mosiah 1:14) would lose that protection if they “should fall into transgression, and become a wicked and an adulterous people” (Mosiah 1:13).

Conclusions

The Book of Mormon uses three phrases composed of synonyms in completely different ways. To stretch out the hand and to stretch forth the hand both exemplify God’s justice; to extend the arm exemplifies God’s mercy. The Book of Mormon also warns us: “Do ye suppose that mercy can rob justice? I say unto you, Nay; not one whit” (Alma 42:25). The bridge between the two ends of the spectrum is repentance; “There is a law given, and a punishment affixed, and a repentance granted; which repentance, mercy claimeth; otherwise, justice claimeth the creature and executeth the law, and the law inflicteth the punishment” (Alma 42:22).

Both justice and mercy are typical of God, and the Book of Mormon seems to use the stretched out hand more than the extended arm. This is interesting, because Latter-day Saints often talk about seeing the hand of the Lord in their lives, but generally only discuss or emphasize the positive aspects. The Book of Mormon has its emphasis in a different place. We may not acknowledge the hand or arm of the Lord in our lives, but one day the arm of the Lord will be revealed (Mosiah 14:11; Isaiah 53:1) or made bare (1 Nephi 22:11; Mosiah 12:24; 15:31; 3 Nephi 16:20). Which arm of the Lord is revealed to us depends entirely on what we choose to do here and now.
Notes


4. Åke W. Sjöberg, *The Sumerian Dictionary of the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: The Babylonian Section of the University Museum, 1994), 1.2.90, 101–2. All references listed come from Izi Ugarit 65–66, in Miguel Civil, *Materials for the Sumerian Lexicon XIII* (Rome: Pontificum Institutum Biblicum, 1971), 129. It is probably significant that the only Sumerian use of this phrase is a lexical list from an area under Egyptian influence.


10. Urk. IV 203.49.


12. KRI 1:12/1; 5:573.


15. For a slightly different analysis, see Calabro, “Hand Gestures in the Book of Mormon,” 51–52.


17. Following the reading of the Printer’s manuscript.


Each of us may engage with scripture for different purposes, be motivated by different goals, and value the journey for different reasons.
Current empirical studies investigating youths’ religious literacies are broadening our understanding of the diverse literacy practices that youth from a variety of faiths use as part of their religious learning and development. Yet, notwithstanding our knowledge that Latter-day Saint youth engage in scripture study groups, talk in their families about religious things (including scripture), and “tend to be the ‘spiritual athletes’ of their generation,” there is a noticeable lack of research that explores Latter-day Saint youths’ literacy practices. Surely we know that youth in the Church should read scripture and that many of them do, but we know next to nothing empirically about how they read scripture: What are their purposes for reading? What are their motivations? Are there certain ways they prefer to read scripture? Are these productive? If so, why? If not, why not? What struggles do they face while reading scripture? Do they overcome their struggles? If so, how? If not, why not? What value does scripture hold for them? What strategies do they use while they read? These are just a few of the key questions about our youths’ scripture reading that we have yet to develop a substantive body of research to address. Because we know so little empirically about the
nature of our youths’ scripture reading practices, instructional and curricular decisions may be informed more by rhetoric than reality.5

The purpose of this study is to identify how Latter-day Saint youth read scripture, which I operationalize by focusing on the strategies they use as they read. The knowledge produced by this study may be useful to parents and religious educators in the Church because it contributes to a more robust understanding of the nature of our youths’ scripture reading practices. Once we know how our youth read scripture, we are better positioned to make more-informed instructional and curricular decisions about how best to facilitate their learning of gospel truths with and through scripture. Moreover, this research may also sensitize parents and religious educators to the realities of scripture reading from a youth’s perspective, which can inform the development of instructional practices that can help youth address their struggles with scripture and leverage their strengths. Given the enormous temporal and spiritual importance of scripture in the Church, it behooves parents, as well as professional and lay religious educators, to develop a clearer understanding of how young people actually read it. This study is an attempt to begin developing that knowledge.

Relevant Literature

Ancient and modern prophets have taught the importance of scripture. For example, scripture helps us know what to teach and can develop faith that spans generations (see Mosiah 1:4). Scripture also enlarges our memories, convinces us of the error of our ways, and brings us to the knowledge of God “unto the salvation of [our] souls” (see Alma 37:8–9). Furthermore, as we develop a testimony of scripture, we are brought to “rejoice in Jesus Christ [our] Redeemer” (Alma 37:9). President Hinckley hoped that our scripture study would “become a love affair with the word of God,” promising that “as you read, your minds will be enlightened and your spirits will be lifted . . . [and you will have] a wondrous experience with thoughts and words of things divine.”6

In the April 2014 general conference, leaders of the Church taught that scripture is a source of spiritual power7 and a foundational part of our training for life,8 and that as we study it carefully and prayerfully, it can “invite impressions and revelations and the whisperings of the Holy Spirit.”9 Moreover, scripture can reduce stress, provide direction in our lives, and protect our homes from such things as pornography.10
Explaining the importance of the Book of Mormon, President Joseph Fielding Smith stated, “No member of this Church can stand approved in the presence of God who has not seriously and carefully read the Book of Mormon.” Without serious attention to studying scripture, we, as the Lamanites of old, may suffer “in ignorance . . . not knowing the mysteries of God” (Mosiah 1:3) and may dwindle in unbelief, knowing “nothing concerning” the Lord (Mosiah 1:5). Clearly, anciently and today, scripture matters a great deal in terms of gospel learning and spiritual development. Yet, as a Church we know very little empirically about how young people actually read it.

Current research suggests that LDS youth and young adults struggle to read the Book of Mormon and may engage in literacy practices that some may see as prescriptive and thin. For example, in a two-phase study exploring the Book of Mormon and “conventional text” reading achievement of 1,623 LDS high school students, young adults, and full-time missionaries, data identified five key findings related to what the author called “scripture literacy.” First, participants struggled to comprehend scripture; specifically, less than half of the participants demonstrated proficient comprehension of the Book of Mormon. Second, reading conventional texts well did not transfer into reading scripture well, suggesting that there was more to reading scripture that was not accounted for by facility with non-scripture. Third, participants’ struggles comprehending the Book of Mormon were informed by numerous language features, rather than a single one. Fourth, instruction and maturity appeared to improve reading achievement, with the greatest gains occurring after high school. Finally, compared to narrative and expository content, doctrinal content appeared to be the most difficult for participants to understand. As an outline of youths’ struggles with scripture, this study provides important insights, but it does not address the techniques that they do use to make sense of scripture.

In a recent two-year study comparing the literacy practices of Latter-day Saint and Methodist youth, data suggested that LDS youth engaged in religious literacy in unique religio-cultural ways. Informed by the religious beliefs, values, and practices of their families and their faith, the Latter-day Saints in this study read scripture regularly (with the intention of believing what they read) and engaged in scripture games to commit key passages to memory. Situated within a culture of listening that privileged passive reception of meaning from scripture, these practices were marked by low-level
cognitive investigations of scripture and infrequent verbal interactions between the teachers and the students, and among the students themselves.

The existing empirical work on Latter-day Saint youths’ literacy practices suggests that our young people may struggle with scripture and may engage with it in ways that are sometimes seen as restrictive and naive. Yet this work also highlights key issues that remain open for investigation; namely, what approaches do Latter-day Saint youth use to construct meaning from scripture? Addressing this question may provide insights into the development of practices and programs to help our youth more effectively engage with scripture to develop their gospel knowledge and their faith.

Methodology

Research contexts and participants. The present study is part of a larger investigation of Latter-day Saint youths’ literacy practices and the motivations that drive them. It took place in a midwestern Latter-day Saint community, primarily in a seminary classroom, which I observed three days per week for nine months, and the various classes during Sunday worship services, which I observed each Sunday for nine months. All of the youth lived in a middle-class community influenced economically and intellectually by a large public university. Many of the youths’ parents had completed advanced degrees at the university or were employed by the university. Demographically, the youth were thirteen to sixteen years old at the beginning of the study, and they were all of European descent. They all attended local public schools known for their academic rigor. Moreover, all of the youth in the study had grown up in the faith, indicated that they believed in the tenets of the Church and practiced them, and regularly attended their Sunday meetings and weekday activities, and as appropriate, seminary. They all stated that scriptures were the most important texts in their lives and that they read them every day or nearly every day on their own or with family.

To recruit for this study, I emailed all of the active youth in a selected ward and their parents, soliciting the youths’ participation. Nine of the eighteen youth agreed to participate. In this study, I focus on the five who completed the reading process interview (see below): Jonathan, Paul, Priscilla, Samantha, and Vincent (all personal names are pseudonyms.) Because the youth were from the same ward, they may have had the same teachers and leaders and similar experiences with scripture. Rather than seeing this as a constraint of the study, sharing similar scripture and non-scripture experiences in a single
religio-social context can enhance our understanding of that context and the richness embedded therein.

**Reading process interviews.** For the larger study, data consisted of five semi-structured interviews over a two-year period, nine months of participant observations, and the collection of relevant artifacts. For this paper, I draw primarily from the interviews, focusing on one of the reading process interviews. As a means of gaining access to individuals’ thinking processes, verbal protocol methodologies may be particularly effective because they ask learners to verbalize their thought processes, or think aloud, as they are engaged with a task. Because the purpose of the study was to explore how Latter-day Saint youth actually read scripture, I asked the youth to verbalize what they were thinking as they read a self-selected passage from scripture. First, I asked questions about their conceptualization of literacy, their perception of their reading abilities, and the nature of their scripture reading practices. Next, I explained the purpose of the verbal protocol and what I expected of them. I did not instruct youth in specific reading processes or practices because I did not want to influence the manner in which they read the passages. Instead, I provided them with an opportunity to practice verbalizing their thinking with 1 Samuel 17:32–37. As they read, I prompted them throughout with the phrases “please keep talking” and “what are you thinking?” After I felt that they were comfortable verbalizing their thinking with the practice passage, youth thought aloud as they read their self-selected chapters, all of which were from the Book of Mormon. All of the reading process interviews were audio recorded, lasted between twelve and fifteen minutes, and were transcribed in their entirety prior to analysis. Although completing the chapter was not the purpose of the interview, it usually marked a logical stopping point.

**Analytic procedures.** Informed by data-driven inductive thematic procedures, I analyzed the reading process interviews by focusing on the manner in which the youth read scripture. I read and reread the reading process interviews, focusing on the youths’ verbalized thinking. During these initial readings, I identified and annotated specific approaches used by each youth. The unit of analysis was a single approach or strategy. Sometimes this was as short as a phrase, other times it was several sentences long. A single analytic unit could be coded more than once because it could represent more than one approach to reading scripture. After all of the interviews were coded I
counted the reading approaches used by each youth and how many times they used each approach. I created a matrix to visually represent their strategy use.16

Informed by the matrix, I reread the interviews, looking for larger patterns within and across the youth and the strategies. Analyses revealed groups of reading approaches used by various youth. Although all of them used summary more than any other strategy, they each demonstrated a preference for a particular approach. For example, Paul favored making personal connections to the chapter, Priscilla focused on fact-based comments about what she was reading, and Samantha and Vincent made numerous inferences, although they differed in the nature of their inferences. Because each youth had a signature approach for reading scripture, the data suggested a set of five distinct cases,17 or profiles, to explain their scripture reading practices rather than a single, overarching approach. As such, I created a brief profile of each youth as a reader of scripture, drawing upon the four other interviews completed for this study to inform their views of and experiences with scripture.

**Exploratory qualitative research.** Qualitative research is especially well suited to explore or uncover processes in emerging areas of study about which we may know very little. Because it focuses on identifying, describing, and understanding specific processes in contexts, such as the scripture reading processes of Latter-day Saint youth in one community, qualitative research does not typically seek to generalize findings beyond the targeted context, nor does it demand large numbers of participants.18 As exploratory, qualitative research, this study describes the processes by which five youth in one context read scripture. It does not aim to conclude that there are only five ways to read scripture or that these five ways are representative of the ways Latter-day Saint youth in other contexts read scripture. Instead, as one of the first published, empirical studies of Latter-day Saint youths’ scripture reading processes, this small-scale study is relevant because it makes an initial contribution to understanding the nature of youths’ scripture reading by identifying and describing some of the unique ways that youth read scripture, each of which focuses on different meaning-making processes. Moreover, because this five-participant study seeks to gain insights into youths’ scripture reading, it can provide lenses through which teachers, researchers, and parents can “see” or learn to understand the scripture readers with whom they work. Additional research may seek to verify or generalize the nature and frequency, as well as the complexity, of these five reader profiles, which may require a larger number of participants and more than one research context.
In the end, because it is consistent with the nature and purposes of qualitative research, this study explores a specific, contextualized phenomenon within an emerging area of study rather than attempting to verify the phenomenon or generalize it for broader contexts, although such may be the aim of future research.

**Findings**

To demonstrate how these five Latter-day Saint youth read scripture, I first provide a brief description of their experiences with scripture to contextualize their actual scripture reading practices. Next, I detail how they read scripture, highlighting the characteristics that situate them as certain types of readers (table 1). By positioning these young people thus I do not mean to suggest that they were always and only these types of readers; indeed, many factors influence the manner in which one reads. What I aim to show is that there are a number of ways to read scripture and youth actually read scripture in many different ways, each of which offers certain affordances and constraints.

**Table 1. Five Profiles of Latter-day Saint Readers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Reader Profile</th>
<th>Key Reading Question</th>
<th>Conception of Reading</th>
<th>Reading Behaviors</th>
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| Jonathan  | 13  | Summarizing    | What does the text say? | Knowing literal meaning of the text. | - Translate unfamiliar passages into modern equivalents  
- Attend to word-level features or phrases |
| Priscilla | 16  | Commenting     | What do I think about the text? | Making personal observations about the text. | - Make fact-based comments |
| Paul      | 13  | Connecting     | What is the text like? | Connecting prior knowledge and experience (the old) with the text (the new). | - Privilege prior knowledge.  
- Develop a heightened sense of the novel |
Summarizing: What does it say? Notwithstanding the importance of scripture in Jonathan’s life, he struggled to understand it. He said, “I’ll just be reading it, but my mind would stray away, so I’d just be looking at the page, just like going down slowly . . . but I’d be thinking about something else.” Jonathan attributed his reading difficulties to the unusual words in scripture. To manage this, Jonathan developed a strategy that he called “translating,” in which he reworded confusing phrases or verses into more familiar equivalents. He claimed that “it’s easier to understand it that way . . . especially if I’m really confused.” In effect, to get the gist of what he read, Jonathan read every verse twice.

For the reading process interview, Jonathan chose to read Jacob 7 because he thought it was an interesting story that was not talked about much. He estimated that he had read this chapter about five times. Jonathan clearly favored summarizing and translating in his reading. Of the thirty-eight coded units, thirty were summaries. The other strategies he used included recognizing when he was confused (1), making connections (1), empathizing with the characters (1), inferring (1), visualizing (2), creating an analogy (1), and predicting (1). Jonathan’s literal orientation toward scripture reading seemed to focus on the question “What does scripture say?” In response, Jonathan spent almost all of his energy summarizing what he read into more understandable, modern-day equivalents.
For example, as he was reading Jacob 7:7, Jonathan said the following: “And make sure that you have changed to the right way of God. And keep the law of Moses, which is the right way. And changed the law of Moses into the worship of someone who is supposed to come a hundred years from now and Sherem said that this is blasphemy. And no man can know such things. You can’t tell of such things like this to come . . . in the future. And this is the way that Sherem fought against Jacob.”

Unusual insofar as it represents an uncommonly long summary for him, this excerpt captures the essence of Jonathan’s translation practice. Most of Jonathan’s summaries were one or two phrases long interspersed between one or two phrases from scripture at a time. Jonathan summarized phrase by phrase as he read, presumably to create as clear a representation of the passage as he could. In these shorter summaries and the longer one above, Jonathan’s translations were not entirely of his own making. His summaries borrowed phrases from the verses he was reading. This makes sense because he was trying to identify what the words meant in the context of the other words. Ostensibly, all of the words and ideas were not challenging for Jonathan, so he used what made sense to him and then translated the others so that, on the whole, he could capture the spirit of the verse.

For Jonathan, summarizing appeared to be his reading goal. He did not conceptualize reading scripture as much more than being able to paraphrase the narrative, verse by verse, which may have restricted his ability to see the larger picture of the chapter. As Jonathan demonstrated, it was as if summarizing scripture meant knowing scripture, which may have limited his ability or willingness to go any further mentally, personally, or spiritually with his reading.

Commenting: What do I think about it? Priscilla said that scripture gave her “a better understanding of religion,” provided her with “standards and basics to make decisions on,” and helped “make [her] happier.” Although she stated that she had never “been uncomfortable reading the scriptures,” she was hesitant to claim that she was good at it. When asked how well she read scripture, Priscilla stated, “Um, I mean, I do it a lot [laughs]. I don’t know.” Part of her hesitation may have been influenced by the confusion she felt as she read. “Things are written differently,” she said, “and there’s a lot of symbolism in the scriptures that you don’t really get.”

Priscilla selected 3 Nephi 12 for the reading process interview, stating that she had read it “a few times” in her life. During the interview she
summarized (13), made fact-based comments (5), identified when she was confused (3), applied passages to her life (3), made text-to-text connections (3), inferred (2), created an analogy (1), and identified, but did not use, textual resources (1). One of the things that made Priscilla’s reading stand out was her commentary, which was usually about a sentence or two in length. She introduced her commentary with statements such as “I think” or “it’s interesting,” which suggest that her comments were often statements of intellectual curiosity. As such, Priscilla’s conception of reading was partially informed by what she thought about what she read with little or no additional investigation of the text.

In 3 Nephi 12:1, for example, Priscilla commented, “It is interesting that he calls the disciples ‘servants.’” In the next verse she stated, “It’s interesting how he says ‘more blessed’ and not just ‘blessed.’ That people of faith are ‘more blessed.’” In verse 10 she said, “I think that’s interesting that being persecuted for our beliefs will accumulate blessings in the end.” In each of these statements, Priscilla made fact-based observations about the content she was reading. Although clearly interested in the passage, Priscilla’s commentary could actually limit her understanding of scripture insofar as each of these comments marked the end-point of her line of thinking, indicating that making an intellectual observation could mark the culmination of her scripture reading.

Connecting: What is it like? Paul stated that reading scripture was about developing a “deeper understanding instead of just reading it for fun.” He explained: “It’s more like reading the same thing several times just to better understand it. Or, you know, reading it more in-depth instead of just reading the words on the page, trying to think about what they’re saying.” Across our interviews, Paul talked about scripture reading providing him with “a deeper understanding” and helping to explain “why we do certain things” in the Church. Unlike Jonathan, who viewed scripture reading as a language-translation process, or Priscilla, who privileged fact-based commentary, Paul viewed reading scripture as a cognitive activity that could inform his knowledge of the Church and Church doctrine.

For the reading process interview, Paul chose to read 3 Nephi 9 because he was reading it over several weeks with his Young Men class. In his reading, Paul summarized (14), made connections to the text (12), inferred (4), identified when he was confused (3), and critiqued the text (3). Second only to summarizing, Paul favored text connections. Interestingly, ten of the
twelve connections were text-to-text connections. The question that seemed to guide Paul’s conception of reading was “What is it like?” To address this question, Paul drew heavily from his prior knowledge of scripture to connect with, or make sense of, the chapter. Put another way, to understand what he read, Paul connected the old—what he already knew—with the new—what he was reading.

At the beginning of 3 Nephi 9, for example, Paul stated, “I guess the voice is Jesus because I think that’s what happened in the earlier [chapters].” Here, Paul first inferred what he thought was happening, then defended his inference with evidence he drew from his knowledge of previous chapters in 3 Nephi. Elsewhere, Paul stated, “He talks about people coming up to him as a little child, which also gets mentioned in the Bible a lot.” In this instance, Paul first summarized what he read and then made an intertextual connection between 3 Nephi and the Bible. During the reading process interview, it was as if Paul was sifting through his knowledge and experiences, looking for ways to cohere what he was reading with what he already knew. That is, he seemed to be trying to understand scripture in terms of previously established knowledge and experience from other scripture.

Because Paul focused on making text-to-text connections, he demonstrated a heightened sense of the novel. Four of his twelve connections were actually recognitions of things that were new to him or different from what he thought he knew. For example, when he read about the cities that were destroyed, Paul stated, “I don’t think I ever heard this mentioned in any other chapter like this one.” Later, he stated, “And so now there are the cities that I’ve actually read before, as opposed to cities I’ve never heard of.” Relying heavily upon his previous knowledge of and experiences with scripture, Paul demonstrated a sensitivity to the “new,” ostensibly because he struggled to connect it to anything that he had previously known.

**Inferring: What lesson or conclusion can I draw?** Vincent used colorful metaphors to explain his view of scripture. He called it “a time machine you can kind of step into” and “this giant diamond sitting in front of you.” Although Vincent believed that he was “pretty good” at reading scripture, he said that he still found it difficult “because of the language in it. It’s often mis-interpreted or interpreted different ways, and so it’s really easy to kind of get off track when you’re reading the scriptures.” When he read, Vincent stated that he usually “would take [scripture] apart verse by verse.”
Like Paul, Vincent selected 3 Nephi 9 for the interview because he was already reading it in Young Men. Vincent estimated that he had read this chapter two or three times. During his reading process interview, Vincent summarized (22), inferred generally (7), inferred lessons or morals (6), made connections (3), critiqued the text (1), and made a fact-based comment (1). Vincent’s reading was characterized by special attention to inferences, or logical interpretations based on evidence from the text and his own reasoning. Inferring requires attention to text content, skillful marshalling of background knowledge, and careful reasoning to reach justifiable conclusions.

Half of Vincent’s inferences were general inferences that functioned as specific interpretations of pieces of the text. For example, as he read the first part of 3 Nephi 9:22 about becoming as a little child, Vincent stated, “You often hear things like, ‘You should become as a little child.’ Just because children are—they’re just really pure because they haven’t been exposed to as many things. So it is harder for them to question things and to deny things.” Drawing upon the verse, Vincent activated his background knowledge about children, purity, conceptions of “the world,” faith, “worldly” experience, and so forth to reach what he thought was a logical conclusion about why Jesus Christ would command these people to become as little children. Vincent had to develop a reasoned interpretation of the rationale behind the Savior’s statement because the verse did not provide one.

The other half of Vincent’s inferences were life lessons or morals that he drew from the chapter and phrased as statements that he could presumably apply to his life. For example, after his general inference above, Vincent stated, “And Christ wants you to have that faith . . . that you are not questioning or denying, like the scripture or the spoken word or that sort of thing.” After drawing an inference based on the chapter, Vincent took the next step and inferred additional understanding from the verse that meant something to him personally. In effect, Vincent applied the principle of becoming childlike to his own life, interpreting it to mean that he, or the general and ubiquitous “you,” should not question or deny ancient and modern scripture. That, to him, was being childlike.

Interestingly, after Vincent drew a general inference or inferred a moral or lesson, he stopped that particular line of thinking and continued reading the chapter. This suggests that inferring may have been the goal of Vincent’s scripture reading. So, after he drew a logical conclusion about a verse or idea or generated a reasonable lesson that he could live by, Vincent may have
believed that his immediate work of taking the scriptures “apart verse by verse” was done.

_Problem solving: What could it mean?_ When I asked if she was good at reading the scriptures, Samantha stated firmly, “No. Because I don’t understand them.” Samantha justified her lack of facility with scripture by explaining, “the scriptures are written in a different format. And the scriptures are written in a different way of talking. They are from a different time. . . . Sometimes it just doesn’t make sense to me.” Although Samantha struggled with understanding scripture, she did not give up. Indeed, Samantha conceptualized scripture reading as a multimodal problem-solving process, stating that reading scripture is “more of discovering your own opinion and then having others sort of tell you what they think and then you can sort of morph them all together and sort of really learn what you believe.” For her, the question guiding her reading of scripture was “What could it mean?”

Samantha chose to read Alma 32 because her father said that it was a good chapter to read for our interview. She estimated that she had read Alma 32 about five times. During the reading process interview Samantha summarized (21), inferred (13), recognized when she was confused (5), made connections to the chapter (5), applied concepts to her life (3), identified resources she could draw from as she read (2), and critiqued the text (1). Based on these approaches, nothing really seemed to stand out about Samantha’s scripture reading; however, closer analyses revealed two important elements of Samantha’s approach to scripture.

First, Samantha was plumbing the depths of the chapter by engaging in reading as a problem-solving process. As the reading process interview unfolded, Samantha’s think-aloud responses became longer and more complex. Instead of reading a phrase and then commenting in a phrase, as did many of her peers, Samantha began making mini exploratory epistles as she read. I call them “exploratory” because she seemed to be trying to find answers and discover truths buried within the verses. She did not appear to be looking for a “right answer”; rather, she seemed to be guided by the exploration of possible meanings until she felt satisfied with one. I call them “epistles” because they were religious in nature and, by comparison to her peers’ observations, they were quite long. Although conscious of space limitations, I cite the following single verbal response in its entirety to demonstrate how Samantha plumbed the depths of Alma 32:
It's talking about how when the seed starts to grow and sprout it begins to grow and asks is it a good seed and it says, “Yes, it’s a good seed,” but that the knowledge isn’t perfect yet. So you have faith in something, but you don’t have faith in the whole concept of the thing. You have a good feeling about it, but you’re not sure if it will turn out exactly how you want it to. And so then, it says that if the seed begins to grow, then you know that the seed is good and then your knowledge will be perfect because you know that your faith is dormant. And I don’t know what dormant means. And so it seems to mean that if your faith starts to grow, then you know that you’re on the right track, but if you’re just trying to cause it to grow but nothing is happening and you feel like you’re playing mind games with yourself then it’s not a good seed, I guess. And they say the spiritual food is like reading scriptures, so if you’re planting your seed of faith, then you have to read the scriptures to feed the seed otherwise it will just sort of wither and not be as full as it used to be, because it’s sort of like when you have something strike you and you have to write it down and talk about it right then, otherwise it just won’t seem important later. And if you neglect your tree of faith it won’t get any root and then if something bad happens, then you just won’t have faith anymore and you didn’t really work on it. And it says that it’s not always because the seed wasn’t good, but sometimes crops just don’t grow because farmers don’t take care of them. It’s not the seed’s fault. It says that you have to be patient and look forward to the fruit. If you put a lot of care into developing faith and belief in the Lord then the end result will be good and you’ll have the fruit of faith. . . . And there will be fruit, which is good.

Among the striking features of this excerpt is its extended focus on a single line of thought, which demonstrated Samantha’s vigilance in her pursuit of meaning and her ability to wallow through a problem—in this case, the meaning of “faith is a seed,” or more to the point, “trying to understand when exactly your faith turned into a perfect knowledge.” Notice how Samantha used a variety of different approaches to deepen and extend her understanding of a single piece of the text and explore her confusion. She summarized, inferred, recognized when she was confused, used context clues to overcome her confusion, made connections and comparisons to prior knowledge, and created analogies. Samantha’s approach to scripture demonstrated here is indicative of her statement that “sometimes there’s stuff that you have to analyze more than just read the words.”

Second, Samantha was conscious of and used the resources that she had available to make sense of Alma 32. This multimodal approach to reading provided Samantha with several sources to assist her construction of knowledge.19 Struck by the rapidity and fluency with which she verbalized her responses, I asked her after the interview about her experience reading. Sparked by the phrase “faith is a seed,” Samantha said that she saw a previously watched video in her head as she was reading, explaining, “So, it has this
song. And there was Alma planting a seed of faith and then you got to see it grow as the song went on. And there was a sort of a montage of the time of his faith growing and him preaching to the multitudes with the music in the background.” Samantha also explained that as she read, she recalled her father explaining that Alma 32 was “about faith being a seed.” When she remembered this, she said, “I was like, ‘Oh, that is what I’m reading!’ And it made a lot more sense.” Furthermore, Samantha stated that verbalizing her thinking helped her “absorb” the chapter, which she was pleased to say “makes sense now.”

In addition to the text of Alma 32, Samantha utilized video, music, her father’s words, and the nature of her reading practice to help her construct knowledge of the chapter. A general formula of the multiple modalities Samantha used while she read might look like this:

$$\text{Scripture} \times \text{Supporting Texts and Experiences} \times \text{Nature of Reading} = \text{Knowledge}$$

Clearly, Samantha was conscious of the resources she had available to help her construct a more robust understanding of Alma 32. Not only that—she used these resources to good effect to dig into scripture and not “just read the words.”

**Implications and Conclusion**

Clearly, reading scripture is a critical part of learning religious truths, including the gospel of Jesus Christ. This study extends our current knowledge of Latter-day Saint youths’ religious literacy by investigating the nature of the scripture reading practices of youth in one Latter-day Saint community. With this study, we now have a clearer understanding via empirical evidence about how Latter-day Saint youth can read scripture, which raises some important issues for religious literacy instruction.

**Summarizing plus.** By a factor of four, summarizing was the most common approach used by the youth in this study, and it played an intriguing role in the youths’ scripture reading. Jonathan summarized almost extensively, point by point, phrase by phrase, but the four other youth used summaries as launching points for further investigation of the texts. For example, Paul’s summaries seemed to clarify ideas so that he could see if he could make connections before he actually made them, and Vincent’s summaries appeared to help him explain what the passage said before determining if he could infer a life lesson from it. This might be called “summarizing plus” because it suggests
that for these youth, knowing what a text says serves as a critical precursor to delving into the text in informed and strategic ways.

Summarizing may be an especially appropriate element of reading scripture because of the complexity of scripture. All of the youth in this study claimed that scripture was hard for them to understand. They all also used summaries more than any other approach. On the surface, summarizing may appear to be a simple skill, but when done well it helps develop students’ abilities to generalize important points, use supporting details to defend their selection of main ideas, identify text structures, filter out less important details, and see how ideas are related to one another. The ability to summarize also allows youth to remember what they have read and use that knowledge later to construct meaning with other texts or in other situations. Although summarizing may be an important element of reading complex texts such as scripture, on its own it is not sufficient. Instructionally, it may be more appropriate to conceptualize helping students develop robust summaries as building the infrastructure for more in-depth investigations of what scripture means because they would already have a clearer understanding of what scripture says.

A complex meaning-making process. Given the nature of scripture as the word of God, the complex demands it places on young readers, and the importance of knowing what scripture says, what it means, and why it matters, it seems appropriate to conceptualize reading scripture as a complex meaning-making process. By this, I mean that one cannot simply read the printed words in scripture and hope to understand them. Indeed, the youth in this study demonstrated a variety of ways in which they tried to make sense of their respective passages. When engaged with difficult and fundamentally important texts, such as scripture, reading is usually anything but simple. It involves false starts, confusion about unfamiliar or unusually used words, and rereading to regain conceptual or narrative coherence. We might also engage in internal conversations about what we are reading, why it matters, and what we think about it. We may need to stop and activate our prior knowledge of the chapter or the content to help us understand the passage. Moreover, we may find ourselves enraptured by the lilt of the language, disagreeing with what we have read, or confused by the dislocation between what we think we have read and what we think we know. As these examples demonstrate, reading, particularly complex texts like scripture, is not usually a simple, straightforward procedure. It is a complex process of making sense of words,
ideas, people, places, and events from the text that are often highly anachronistic, as they come into contact with individual readers’ thoughts, experiences, penchants, skills, knowledge, purposes, and so forth. For religious educators, viewing scripture reading as a complex meaning-making process changes the game, if you will. It signals to youth that understanding scripture requires strategic effort, persistence, and heavenly intervention. It also provides a conceptual and practical entry point to teach youth the skills required to navigate the complex demands of scripture and how to use these skills purposefully and flexibly in the construction of gospel knowledge and faith.

Demystifying thinking. The verbalization protocol appeared to be a useful way to capture how the youth read scripture. It also appeared to be a useful practice for the readers insofar as all of them spoke favorably about the effects of verbalizing their thinking on their understanding of their self-selected chapter. Jonathan stated that his reading was “more detailed.” Priscilla claimed that verbalizing her thinking as she read helped her realize that “I didn’t understand quite as much as I thought.” Paul said it helped him “better understand the structure of the chapter,” “draw comparisons between various verses in this chapter and other chapters,” and “read more carefully.” Vincent agreed, stating that verbalizing his thinking clarified his understanding of what he read and “really helped me to take a closer look at [the scriptures].” And Samantha said that after verbalizing her thinking, the chapter “makes sense now.”

Given the value of verbalizing one’s thinking as one reads, thinking aloud may hold promise in religious education. Specifically, parents and religious educators could model their own reading practices, demonstrating and capturing the processes they go through to make meaning as they read scripture. Moreover, they could articulate why and when they would do certain things. For example, “Because I am starting the Isaiah chapters in 2 Nephi, I know I’m going to need some help. Let’s see what resources I have.” To make thinking aloud an even more productive learning tool, students could write down what parents or teachers do to make meaning, identify places where parents or teachers become confused, and note how they overcome their confusion. Following a conversation about the parent/teacher model, students could practice thinking aloud during their own scripture reading.

Highlighting the manner in which we engage with scripture can demystify scripture reading for young people. It can help them see that scripture is supposed to make sense and that they can do things to improve their
comprehension of it even, or especially, when it gets difficult. Additionally, thinking aloud can bring to a conscious level what it takes to understand scripture and can pave the way for rich discussions not only about what scripture might mean, but also about how we have come to know what it means, particularly the doctrine, which may be most difficult for our youth to understand.22

**Being vs. becoming literate.** Because we are continually developing our scripture literacy, or our meaning-making practices with scripture, there is no such thing as being scripturally literate. If we believe that scripture has things to teach us over the course of our life experiences, then we must understand our relationship with scripture as constantly evolving, and by extension, we must see the process of constructing knowledge from scripture as always a work in process—a fluid state of perpetual becoming—that requires time, attention, and careful, strategic nurturing. Instructionally, viewing ourselves as becoming literate with scripture not only highlights the process of developing facility with scripture, but it honors that process by recognizing that each of us may engage with scripture for different purposes, be motivated by different goals, and value the journey for different reasons. Yet we are all on the same journey with scripture, seeking to become literate with the word of God so that we might know Deity for ourselves (see John 20:31).23

Notes


5. See Dennis A. Wright, “Realities of Scripture Literacy,” faculty forum, Brigham Young University, McKay School of Education, Provo, UT, February 1997.


12. See Wright, “Realities of Scripture Literacy.”

13. See Rackley, “Scripture-Based Discourses.”


16. The Scripture Reading Strategies Matrix that I developed as part of the analytic procedures for this article is available upon request.


19. Multimodality claims that meaning is constructed through various modes, or signs and symbols, including print, writing, speech, gesture, music, and so forth. Each of these modes is partial insofar as no single mode in a communicative event carries all of the meaning; instead, all of the modes in a communicative event contribute to the construction of meaning in different ways. See Carey Jewitt, “Multimodality and Literacy in School Classrooms,” *Review of Research in Education* 32 (2008): 241–67.


22. See Wright, “Realities of Scripture Literacy.”
Each member might contribute to temple and family history work in different ways at different stages of life.
One of the hallmarks of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has long been its doctrine regarding the status of deceased individuals who never had an opportunity to hear the restored gospel during their mortal existence. This doctrine states that living persons are to stand as proxies for the deceased when the deceased can be identified properly. Thus, members of the Church are often intensely interested in the spiritual welfare of family members who died without priesthood ordinances—and these ordinances can be performed only in modern temples by embodied persons.

Modern Latter-day Saints and their leaders have proved themselves to be well aware of this sacred stewardship, constructing more than 140 temples around the world and filling them with patrons and workers. Hundreds of thousands of saving ordinances are performed for the living and the dead every week. Because Church leaders have urged us to hasten the work, instructors should be more aware of proper research methodologies and procedures.
Duplication of Effort

The Church’s databases include the names of nearly one billion deceased persons for whom temple ordinances have been performed by proxy. Anyone who has spent significant time studying those databases has noticed the substantial duplication of effort reflected therein. For example, George Washington’s endowments have been performed several times; Abraham Lincoln has been sealed to his wife Mary Todd several times. Such duplication occurred in literally millions of cases before the introduction of computerized records in 1970 as the International Genealogical Index. Unfortunately duplication of ordinances continues to this day—despite the best efforts of teams of excellent computer programmers.

President Gordon B. Hinckley reminded us of the importance of avoiding such duplication of temple ordinances:

One of the most troublesome aspects of our temple activity is that as we get more and more temples scattered across the earth there is duplication of effort in proxy work. People in various nations simultaneously work on the same family lines and come up with the same names. They do not know that those in other areas are doing the same thing. . . . To avoid such duplication, the solution lies in complex computer technology.

One way to reduce duplication of temple ordinances is to educate the members of the church more extensively in the process of determining whether temple work has already been done for an individual of interest. In addition, researchers may need more instruction in research sources and methodologies in the effort to more precisely identify deceased ancestors. Religious educators have an excellent opportunity to contribute to the improvement of the process and thus the product, as discussed below.

Perhaps the principal cause of duplication of temple ordinances is the submission of names of an ancestor to the temple when only partial data have been collected, i.e., the person is not sufficiently identified. For example, the standards for temple names submission allow work to be done for a person who has an incomplete name, whose birth date can only be estimated, or for whom only a nation or state can be identified as a birthplace. Veteran temple patrons can attest to seeing temple cards with names such as “boy Wilson” or “child Jorgensen” or the often meaningless “Mrs. Hansen” or “Mr. Long” (who is the son of “Mr. Long” and the grandson of “Mr. Long”). When Latter-day Saints learn how to convert the estimated date (for example) “about 1820” to a precise and verifiable date such as “8 May 1818” (which in many cases
is possible), then the detail submitted to the temple will be more “worthy of all acceptation” (D&C 128:24). Providing precise detail reduces the chance that members of the Church will hurry to the temple when more exact details might be located through additional research.

Another close look at the computer databases will show that many hundreds of thousands of deceased persons were first represented at the altar or the veil of the temple when only incomplete genealogical data were available, then again one or more times after a researcher succeeded in converting an ancestral birth from an estimate of “about 1820 in Indiana” to “8 May 1818 in Lawrenceburg, Dearborn County, Indiana.” Thus, doing precise research the first time around would potentially eliminate such duplications.

**Genealogy Versus Family History**

As a first step, members of the Church would profit by learning the difference between *family history* and *genealogy*. After all, it is the latter and not the former that provides the data needed before temple ordinances can be performed properly and finally for deceased individuals.

*Genealogy: the science of identifying ancestors and descendants.* Genealogists collect names of relatives and dates and places for vital events (birth, marriage, and death) in their lives.

*Family history: the field of study of all aspects of living and deceased persons.* Family historians collect every kind of information about relatives, such as height/weight, property ownership, education, occupations, hobbies, military service, travel, photographs, etc.

By definition, all genealogists are family historians, but many family historians are not genealogists. The submission of ancestral names for proxy
temple ordinances is a function of genealogy. In regard to proxy temple work, family history should be the means to the end—not the end itself. Although we enjoy learning family history details, such as the fact that great-grandmother Constance Faith Geurts was five feet two inches with blonde hair or that her brother Dale Geurts served in World War I, these facts do not allow us to represent those persons in temple ordinances.

**Inquiry before Research**

The next step toward gathering vital data is to understand the difference between inquiry and research.

*Inquiry:* the process of determining what is known about our ancestors.

*Research:* the process of identifying and compiling new data about our ancestors.

All efficient genealogical research begins with inquiry, because it is only if the researcher studies what is already known about an ancestor that duplication of effort can be avoided. Sometimes the inquiry can be accomplished quickly, especially if the researcher can determine that no one has ever made this effort on behalf of the ancestor in question (such is often the case with recent converts to the Church). On the other hand, most researchers who descend from persons who joined the Church before 1900 learn that a great deal of temple work has been done. Indeed, there are people who can claim reliably that “it’s all been done” (meaning that all ancestral lines have been extended back in time to the beginning of original records in the location in question).

The following simplified methodology will help members of the Church conduct efficient inquiry into the status of their ancestry:

1. Study all possible records in your possession and in the possession of your relatives.
2. Interview all older relatives using questions designed to elicit genealogical data.
3. Consult *FamilySearch/Family Tree*.
4. Study family history publications (principally books on individuals and families).
5. Search websites (using caution in determining the veracity of the data).
The Role of the Internet

One of the great innovations in genealogy is the Internet, with its countless websites dedicated to ancestral research. Consultation with reliable websites is essential during the inquiry process. Unfortunately, a most misleading axiom is heard among novices with increasing frequency: “It’s all on the Internet; all you have to do is find it!” Those who espouse this theory will tell you, “If you can’t find it on the Internet, you just haven’t looked in the right places!” Such statements can be both misleading and incorrect.

The Church has invested great efforts and substantial funding for many years to improve our access to genealogical data. Several major databases compiled over the decades have given rise to FamilySearch/Family Tree. This resource is extremely helpful to Church members who endeavor to determine what genealogical data have already been compiled for their ancestors and what temple ordinances have been performed. Unfortunately, some Latter-day Saints now seem to come to the conclusion: “It’s all in Family Tree. All you have to do is find it!”

Just what is so wrong about the notion that “it’s all on the Internet” and that you simply have to “keep looking until you find it”? One example will
make this point sufficiently clear: only about 10 percent of European church records (the best source of genealogical data for most United States residents before 1800) can be viewed as digital images in the Internet. Thus, the Internet can’t be the only resource researchers use. Researchers desiring to locate vital data in records not digitized will need to gain access to them by some other means (principally the Family History Library Catalog).

Inquiry may be conducted in the home and from the home to an extent, but it might be necessary to visit the local LDS family history center or public library. It is a necessary step in genealogy research, and researchers should be prepared to be flexible. Access to the Internet is indispensable; telephone calls or letters and emails to relatives may be of great value. One of the first lessons many Church members learn is that the process cannot be completed in a day. The inquiry process may take an extended period of time, but it must be done and it must be done with diligence. Most of our ancestors have waited for centuries for their temple ordinances and will likely be patient for a few more earthly months or years. Once the inquiry process is truly complete (at least for one or more specific branches of the family tree), the research process can begin.

Primary and Secondary Sources

Initial instruction for a genealogical researcher should incorporate such terms as primary and secondary records.

Primary records: records kept at the time and the place of the event (especially birth, marriage, or death) by a person or an agency charged with that responsibility (principally government and church entities)

Secondary records: all other sources that might feature vital data (newspapers, journals and diaries, school records, occupational records, military records, census enumerations, tax and resident lists, real estate and probate records, county histories, personal and family histories, local and regional histories, indexes of all varieties, etc.)

Because secondary records can and do feature incorrect data (sometimes called “transfer errors”) it is an excellent idea for researchers to consult secondary records principally in an effort to locate primary records. This tactic is illustrated in the following abbreviated case study.

A case study. Our search for information about a specific relative began with a copy of his obituary (a secondary source) in a Pemberville, Ohio, newspaper in 1904. Victor H. Meinert had been born in Hannover, Germany,
had lived in the United States for seventy years, and had died in his ninety-first year. The obituary indicated that he had “resided continuously” on the same farm.

At this point we could have submitted Victor H. Meinert’s name for temple ordinances as such: “Victor H. Meinert, male, born 1814, Hannover, Germany.” However, we considered the data to be not yet “worthy of all acceptation.” We wanted to identify him with a complete name, an exact birth date, and an exact birth place.

Possibly the easiest source to consult for additional information about this man was the US Federal Census for Wood County, Ohio. We found a John V. Meinert in 1900 as an eighty-four-year-old who was born in Germany. Hoping the V. stood for Victor, we next looked for an official death record compiled by the state of Ohio and learned in the FamilySearch Wiki that state death records were required beginning in 1867. The Family History Library Catalog showed that microfilm number 955453 contains death records for Wood County. We located the official death record on the microfilm, but did not find additional vital data.6

At this point we decided to study the obituary again and found that Mr. Meinert’s funeral service was conducted in the Sweitz Lutheran Church in Pemberville. Back in the Family History Library Catalog, we were pleased to see that the records of that church for the time period in question are also on microfilm.7 It was there that we hit the jackpot: a family page lists this man with three given names, one wife, and fourteen children. His hometown is identified as Jeggen, Osnabrück County, Hannover, Prussia (a former kingdom of Germany).8

Our search was finally completed. The records of the Salem Lutheran Church qualify as primary source documents. We could now submit the name of this relative for temple ordinances as such: Johann Daniel Viktor Meinert, born 2 March 1814 in Jeggen, Osnabrück, Hannover, Germany. The next step was to check FamilySearch/Family Tree to see if temple ordinances were already completed, and we did indeed find a very good candidate: “Johann Viktor Daniel Meinert, who was born on 2 March 1814 in Jeggen, Hannover [Germany], and died in Wood County, Ohio, on 26 May 1904.” This had to be my relative, but we still had no primary record for his birth date and place.

A German gazetteer shows that the town of Jeggen was included in the Lutheran parish in nearby Schledehausen. A letter to the office of that parish resulted in the confirmation of the birth date and the identification of
his parents—thus creating the beginnings of additional research into the Meinert ancestry in Germany. Now the temple work could be done with *precise* genealogical assurance: “Johann Daniel Victor Meinert, male, born 2 March 1814 in Jeggen, Osnabrück, Hannover, Germany.” Now there is only a small chance that another descendant will duplicate temple ordinances for this man in the future.

### Our Responsibility in Genealogy

Recently, Richard G. Scott encouraged members of the Church to be involved in both the compilation of the required genealogical data and the performance of the proxy temple ordinances:

> I have learned that those who engage in family history research and then perform the temple ordinance work for those whose names they have found will know the additional joy of receiving both halves of the blessing. Father in Heaven wants each of us to receive both parts of the blessing of this vital vicarious work. He has led others to show us how to qualify.\(^\text{11}\)

This modern mandate given in the Church’s general conference in October 2012 discussed numerous ways to serve in the realm of family history, temple work, and genealogy. He suggested that not every Latter-day Saint must do genealogical research. He would likely agree with Dallin H. Oaks, who indicated in his remarks in general conference years ago that each member might be able to contribute to this great work in different ways at different stages of life.\(^\text{12}\) Even for those who wish to conduct research, there may be significant limitations in available time, effort, and money.

Other significant obstacles can hinder researchers. For example, what does the layman do when confronted with the complexities of old New England families, Scottish clans, or Scandinavian patronyms? How can researchers confront the archaic handwriting and spelling of sixteenth-century German church records, the lack of records among Swiss nonconformists, or the oral family history traditions of Native Americans? To combat many of these challenges, specific training is available.

### Family Organizations

What can we do now to participate in genealogical research? As early as 1978, LDS families were encouraged to form committees for genealogical research and temple work. As the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* explains, “The purpose of the ancestral organization is to coordinate genealogical activity on
common lines. Such organizations frequently raise money for family history research, publish family histories, and generally direct the activities of the larger. The existence of such committees could be an excellent step towards the reduction of duplication of research and ordinance work.

The following recommendations are designed to guide the members of the Church toward effective use of their time, talents, and resources in their efforts to serve their kindred dead and others. These steps need not be taken in strict order.

1. Study the most recent FamilySearch/FamilyTree to determine what is already known about the ancestor(s) in question.
2. Seek the assistance of the ward family history consultant, staff members in the local family history center, other experienced researchers, or professionals in specific areas.
3. Inquire about the existence of genealogical committees in the extended family and offer to assist (including making financial contributions).
4. Diligently collect or copy available genealogical data and documents from personal collections of relatives and organize readily available copies of public records and extract genealogical data.
5. Once possible secondary sources have been exhausted, identify and study primary source documents.
6. Record all data found and the corresponding sources (whether primary or secondary) in a reputable computer database program (outside of FamilySearch/FamilyTree).
7. Seek the assistance of qualified experts to confirm interpretations of primary records found, especially in the case of documents with old handwriting or in foreign languages.
8. Do not submit names for proxy temple ordinances for persons with incomplete data until it has been established that more precise details about names, dates, and places truly cannot be found (this may require additional patience and perseverance).
9. If personal involvement in the research process is currently not possible or appropriate, consider conducting research for other families or becoming involved in the indexing program (www.familysearchindexing.org).
The Role of Church Leaders and Educators

What can Church leaders and religious educators do to assist in this work? More than anything else, they can encourage the Saints to consider what time, effort, and resources they can invest in this work without interrupting or hindering other stewardships and callings. Above all, Elder Oaks suggests that while we are to promote temple and family history work, we should not “impose guilt on [Heavenly Father’s] children” who may not currently be actively involved in this work of salvation.15

President Boyd K. Packer emphasized the importance of this work in these words: “No work is more of a protection to this Church than temple work and the genealogical research which supports it. . . . No work requires a higher standard of righteousness.”16

Elder John A. Widtsoe explained in 1934 the role that each Latter-day Saint can play in the spiritual advancement of deceased ancestors who knew nothing about temples and temple ordinances during their earthly lives. He taught this:

In our preexistent state . . . we made a certain agreement with the Almighty. . . . We agreed, right then and there, to be not only saviors for ourselves but measurably, saviors for the whole human family. . . . We promised to provide those ordinances . . . [and] committed to the great plan of offering salvation to the untold numbers of spirits.17

With the proper approach to this sometimes demanding and even daunting task of genealogical research, with the patient guidance of the Holy Spirit, and with the efficient use of all appropriate resources, Latter-day Saints can fulfill the mandate given to Joseph Smith and eventually “present in his holy temple . . . a book containing the records of our dead, which shall be worthy of all acceptation” (D&C 128:24). When this is done, the redemptive work of Jesus Christ becomes complete.

Notes

1. See especially section 128 of the Doctrine and Covenants.
2. Years ago, it was still possible to see the dates of all temple ordinances performed for a given individual, but now the Church’s database simply indicates that the ordinances are completed.
4. For example, the recording of consistent church records (baptism, marriage, burial) in Germany began in the city of Nuremberg in 1524. Before that time, there are essentially no records that include vital data on the common German—only on nobility and royalty.
8. Because vital records did not begin in Prussia until 1874, the church record used here is the only one existing for documentation purposes.
10. Throughout the process, we were careful to enter complete source citations for and to make copies of all records found.
14. In the 1990s my wife asked the chair of her family genealogical committee what she could do to help. Her extended family was first associated with the Church in Nauvoo, Illinois, and thousands of proxy temple ordinances had been done over decades. She was given this instruction: “Don’t do anything! We have it all under control and you’d probably just get in our way.” That response may sound impolite, but it was likely based on negative experiences of committee members and thus was the correct advice. My wife was encouraged to help someone else such as a ward member or a recent convert; anyone who wishes to do family history research can find someone to help.
We can draw some conclusions about Laman and Lemuel by the way they respond to chastisement. Rather than humbly listening and improving their character, they react violently.
Charles Swift (charles_swift@byu.edu) is an associate professor of ancient scripture at BYU.

One of the simplest things we can do to become more spiritual is to feast upon the scriptures every day.¹ I love the word *feast* when it comes to studying the scriptures, because it beautifully conveys what we really should do. When studying the scriptures, we take our time with them, savoring the words and their meaning, and allowing ourselves to be “nourished by the good word of God” (Moroni 6:4). We live in a fast-food world, where the emphasis is not placed on nourishment, enjoyment, or even taste but on the quickness with which we can scarf down the food and move on to something else. But with the study of the scriptures, there is no drive-through window. We are to feast and be filled. Nephi tells us to “feast upon the words of Christ; for behold, the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do” (2 Nephi 32:3). It takes time and commitment to let those words work within our minds and hearts so they can tell us what we should do.

One word that may help us understand what it is to feast upon the word is *search*. Almost immediately after Lehi received the brass plates, “he did search them from the beginning” (1 Nephi 5:10). King Benjamin counseled his sons to search the scriptures diligently so they could profit from them (see

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¹ Regarding this point, see “The Best Kind of Fast: Learning How to Eat”, *Harper’s*, May 1960, pp. 95–97.
Mosiah 1:7). Even the Savior himself taught the importance of searching the scriptures, when he commanded the Nephites to diligently search the words of Isaiah in particular and the prophets in general (see 3 Nephi 23:1, 5). We all know what it means to search because we’ve all searched for some object we needed to find. When we search, we are *diligently looking for something in particular*. We search our cars for our wallets, or our houses for our keys. Perhaps we search our souls for remorse, or our lives for meaning. When people are lost in the mountains, we conduct a search to find them. Searching the scriptures helps us avoid approaching the word of God in ways that bear little fruit. If we search the scriptures, we won’t read them just to be able to check that task off of our to-do lists. As Elder Robert D. Hales teaches, “When we want to speak to God, we pray. And when we want Him to speak to us, we *search* the scriptures; for His words are spoken through His prophets. He will then teach us as we listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.”

Naturally, this counsel to search the scriptures begs a simple question: What are we supposed to be searching for? There is more than just one good answer to that question, of course, but one of the answers lies in one of the most oft-quoted scriptures in the Book of Mormon: we must “liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning” (1 Nephi 19:23). We are to search the scriptures for the meaning they can have in our lives. In other words, we search for ways to apply the scriptures in our lives. However, just applying them is not enough; we need to keep in mind that there is a particular purpose for the application: our *profit* and *learning*. I appreciate the combined use of those two words. We are to learn by the application of the scriptures and benefit from it. People can learn things without profiting from their new knowledge. For example, millions of people who know the extreme dangers of smoking cigarettes continue to do so. At some point they learned the dangers of tobacco, but they are not profiting from that knowledge. Remember, Joseph Smith did not claim that we would get closer to God by reading the Book of Mormon, but by “abiding by its precepts.” We are to live what the book teaches us. Of course, in order to live according to its teachings we need to read it, but reading it is not enough. Application is necessary.

How do we go about applying the scriptures? I have to admit that I am not big on formulas. Life is simply not that cut-and-dried. But I also believe that sometimes it can be useful to identify a pattern that can help us in life, especially if we keep our understanding of the pattern simple and are willing
to be flexible, to allow for others to see different patterns. So, while I think there are many good ways to apply the scriptures, I have often used a threefold approach in my study and my teaching that I have found worthwhile: “Know-Identify-Apply.” (The abbreviation KIA, like the car, may be an easy way to remember this approach, but I prefer avoiding the abbreviation and will refer to it by its complete name throughout this piece to help us remember these key words.) I readily acknowledge that this is not the only way to apply what we learn from the scriptures, but it is one good way that may prove very helpful. This approach involves a process of searching that leads to likening the scriptures to ourselves.

We should remember the most important component of this approach: having the Spirit with us so we can rely on him to help us learn from the scriptures. I don’t include that as a “step,” because it is not one part of the process; it is the central act that runs throughout the entire approach. One of the best ways we can strive to have the Spirit with us when we study the scriptures is the simple but profound act of pondering. As Elder Richard G. Scott teaches, “Pondering a passage of scripture can be a key to unlock revelation and the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Ghost. Scriptures can calm an agitated soul, giving peace, hope, and a restoration of confidence in one’s ability to overcome the challenges of life. They have potent power to heal emotional challenges when there is faith in the Savior. They can accelerate physical healing.”

We need to prayerfully reflect on what we’ve read, seeking both understanding and wisdom. The prophet Abinadi teaches that there is a relationship between wisdom and applying our hearts to our understanding (see Mosiah 12:27); this is good counsel for how we should approach the scriptures, pondering their words in our hearts in ways that influence our understanding and help us gain wisdom.

Now, let’s take a step-by-step look at Know-Identify-Apply.

**Step 1: Know What the Scriptures Are Saying**

This may sound too simple to even bother mentioning, but it is an often-overlooked step in the process. Too often we rely on our far-too-fallible memories. One of the most common experiences I have as a teacher is listening to a student inaccurately paraphrase a verse of scripture and then ask me a question about it. I make it a practice to have the student turn to the actual text so we can read it together. Often, the question or concern the student has about the
verse melts away as we see what the text actually says. Simply put, we need to know what the scriptures are saying before we can begin to use them as part of changing our lives. We need to read the scriptures.

When I say “read the scriptures,” however, I don’t mean simply move our eyes across the page. Too many people are used to reading the scriptures in such a way so that they can feel justified in checking off that box. We don’t want to make reading the scriptures so complicated that no one can actually do it in a reasonable amount of time, but we don’t want reading them to be so simplistic that we really don’t know what they’re saying. I may need to look up a word or two every now and then, but that doesn’t mean I have to become a Greek (or Hebrew or Reformed Egyptian) scholar. It’s simply difficult for me to know what a verse is saying if there are important words I don’t understand.

Elder David A. Bednar teaches about how we must do more than simply read the scriptures, and about how studying them can be a significant means of coming closer to the Savior.

One of the best ways to draw near unto Christ and to both learn about and become more like the Lord Jesus Christ is to consistently study the holy scriptures—to daily “feast upon the words of Christ” (2 Ne. 32:3).

Please notice that I used the word study and not the word read. Studying and feasting suggest a focus and an intensity that reach far beyond casual reading or quick perusing. Studying and feasting, followed by sincere prayer and steadfast application of the truths and principles we learn, yield personal resolve, spiritual commitment, and the bright light of testimony. Studying, learning, praying, and appropriately applying gospel truths are all key elements in the process of coming unto the Savior.

Before we continue with our discussion of Know-Identify-Apply, it will be helpful to select a passage of scripture that we can keep in mind. That will help us move from the abstract discussion of this way of likening the scriptures to the more concrete discussion of actually following the approach. I’ve chosen a very brief passage from 1 Nephi that tells the story of an experience Nephi had shortly after he chastised Laman and Lemuel:

And it came to pass that when I, Nephi, had spoken these words unto my brethren, they were angry with me. And it came to pass that they did lay their hands upon me, for behold, they were exceedingly wroth, and they did bind me with cords, for they sought to take away my life, that they might leave me in the wilderness to be devoured by wild beasts.
But it came to pass that I prayed unto the Lord, saying: O Lord, according to my faith which is in thee, wilt thou deliver me from the hands of my brethren; yea, even give me strength that I may burst these bands with which I am bound.

And it came to pass that when I had said these words, behold, the bands were loosed from off my hands and feet, and I stood before my brethren, and I spake unto them again. (1 Nephi 7:16–18)

Now that we’ve read the passage, do we feel we understand it? There is a basic storyline here that we ought to be sure we follow: Laman and Lemuel are angry at Nephi for chastising them, so they tie him up with the idea of leaving him in the wilderness so wild beasts can kill him; Nephi prays that, according to his faith, the Lord will strengthen him so he can burst the bands he’s been tied up with; then, right after his prayer, the bands are loosed from his hands and feet and he speaks again to his brothers. It’s good for us to review this basic story to make sure we know what the scriptures are actually saying. For example, before I wrote this I had forgotten that Laman and Lemuel had planned on leaving their bound brother in the wilderness to be killed by wild beasts; I’d only remembered that they’d tied him up. Through rereading this passage and making sure I knew the story, I saw an important part of the story that I’d forgotten. There is a significant difference between just tying up their brother and tying him up to leave him in the wilderness to be killed.

Now that we’re fairly confident about the story, are there observations we could make about the passage that would help us be even more thoughtful readers? After all, there is more to reading than just being able to repeat the basics of the story. For example, I think we can draw some conclusions about Laman and Lemuel by the way they respond to chastisement. Rather than humbly listening and deciding to improve their character, they react violently to their younger brother. They even want to kill him! Even the way they decide to kill him is in itself an interesting detail. They aren’t willing to look him in the eye and commit the horrible sin of murder; in a more cowardly manner, they’ll just tie him up and leave him for the wild animals to do the killing for them. Another important part of the story is to realize that, while the Lord immediately answered Nephi’s prayer, he didn’t give him the answer he wanted. Nephi asked for strength to break his bonds; instead, the Lord directly loosens the bonds himself. The text doesn’t make clear why the Lord chose to answer the prayer in that way—perhaps he wanted to reinforce in Nephi’s mind (or, later, in our minds) the reality that it was the Lord who was
delivering him, not his own strength—but it is still an important observation to make about the passage.

Before we discuss the second step of Know-Identify-Apply, it’s worthwhile to mention here that this is the place at which many of us begin to make our mistake in trying to liken the scriptures to ourselves. We’ve studied the scriptures, we know what they are saying, and now we try to apply what they are saying to our lives. But when we read the story of a young man who lived over two thousand years ago, in a culture completely foreign to us, it is often difficult to fathom how what happened to him could possibly have relevance to our lives. After all, we may think, I’m not a young man traveling in the wilderness. I’m not with my two brothers who want to harm me—even kill me. I’ve never been tied up and left to be devoured by wild animals. How can I possibly apply this brief story of Nephi and his brothers to my life when their story has so little to do with my life?

This is why the next step is so important. The concept of studying the scriptures and applying them in our lives is much more difficult to do—and, perhaps, much less effective—if we ignore the second step.

**Step 2: Identify Principles in the Scriptures**

I know there are countless definitions of what a principle might be, but for our purposes let’s keep it simple: a principle is a universal truth. A scriptural passage will likely have many different principles, and we will probably see some principles at one time in our lives and other principles at other times. That is part of the revelatory nature of studying the scriptures. And that is one reason why reading the scriptures once or twice is never enough—such a study is a lifelong pursuit.

It is important to remember that we’re using the word *principle* in a specific way in this approach. It will help us to note a few characteristics of principles as we’re using the term here.

*A principle is true.* In other contexts people talk about *true* principles and *false* principles, but for our purposes, a principle isn’t a principle if it’s false. This Know-Identify-Apply approach only deals with truths we find in scriptures, not falsehoods we might find elsewhere. “As you seek spiritual knowledge,” Elder Scott writes, “search for principles. Carefully separate them from the detail used to explain them. Principles are concentrated truth, packaged for application to a wide variety of circumstances. A true principle makes decisions clear even under the most confusing and compelling circumstances.
It is worth great effort to organize the truth we gather to simple statements of principle. I have tried to do that with gaining spiritual knowledge."6

A principle is universal. As we are defining it, a principle is always true for everyone. For example, a reader of the above 1 Nephi passage might conclude: “When you chastise people, you will make them angry.” However, that is not a universally true statement. It is certainly true that, sometimes, when you chastise someone, that person may get angry. That’s what happened in this passage, in fact. But it is not true that whenever you chastise people they will become angry.

A principle is supported by scriptural text. The somewhat open-ended nature of principles as we are defining them here does not mean that we can interpret the scriptures in any way we want. We cannot just read a passage and claim it contains any principle we want it to. We need to be honest about the first step, carefully and meaningfully reading the scriptures, and we need to hold to the definition of a principle as a universal truth. There may be a certain amount of subjectivity involved in this process, but that doesn’t mean the process is arbitrary. Arbitrariness would mean that no criteria are being applied, but Know-Identify-Apply requires the reader to derive principles from a careful reading of a text.

Say that someone reads the above passage we are discussing and claims this as a principle: “We should pray in the name of Christ.” This is a true principle, without a doubt, and it is a principle that applies to everyone, but the text of this story doesn’t support this principle. It is not a principle that this particular passage of scripture is teaching in that, although Nephi does pray, it is not recorded that he was praying in the name of Christ. There are plenty of other scriptures we can find that very plainly teach this principle of praying in the name of the Lord, but the three verses we are studying here do not. In other words, it is not enough for the principle to be true and universal; it also needs to be supported by the text we’re studying. If it isn’t, then we won’t be applying what we learn from the passage to our lives, but we’ll instead be applying something else.

Keep in mind, we’re not discussing all the possible ways to read the scriptures; we’re only talking about how to use Know-Identify-Apply. So a young woman might read the above story of Nephi’s being bound by his brothers and have an impression come to her mind that she needs to write her older brother because she feels that their relationship is weakening. This woman reading the Nephi account has every right to tell her husband, for example,
that she received inspiration while studying the verses that she should write her brother, but, in my view, she shouldn’t stand in front of the Sunday School class and teach that that is the meaning of the verse. Writing her brother is not the meaning of Nephi’s story; it is the inspiration she received while reading it. This inspiration is a sacred, vital, and awe-inspiring blessing that cannot and should not be ignored. However, it is not what we’re talking about at this point. Right now, we are trying to see what principles are in the text we’re studying; later, we’ll explore what they may lead us to do in our lives.

A principle is more than just a topic. My experience has been that it can sometimes be difficult at first to distinguish between a principle and a topic. For example, upon reading this account of Nephi being set free, some might say that an important principle in the passage is “faith.” Faith is definitely a principle of the gospel, but it is not a principle in the sense that we are using the term in this approach to applying the scriptures. Why not? For one thing, there is not much we can do with just that word. Faith? Faith in what or whom? Should I always have faith, or are there times when I might place my faith in the wrong thing or person? What am I supposed to do to get faith? What am I supposed to do with faith once I have it? Is the eventual goal to replace faith with knowledge? Saying that one word, as important as that word is to us, does not do as much as we would like it to in moving us closer to applying Nephi’s story into our lives.

Also, if a principle is universally true, how can we call “faith” a principle in this context if it is so vague that we’re not sure if it is true for everyone? If by “faith” we mean that if we pray in faith our prayers will be answered, then that’s a principle because it’s universally true. But if by “faith” we mean, “if you pray in faith then you’ll somehow get whatever you asked for,” then that’s not a principle since it’s not universally true.

A principle is concise. Others have the opposite problem when they try to identify principles in the text. Rather than saying one word, they say too many. “One principle we can learn from Nephi’s story is that when the going gets tough, especially when it’s made tough by members of your own family, you need to always turn to the Lord and ask for his help.” This is a very good statement, but it is so long that it’s difficult to make it useful in applying the scriptures. Not only is it difficult to remember, but the statement is complicated enough that it’s not clear how it will help us. Does the principle only apply when family members are making your life hard? Does the statement to “turn to the Lord” mean prayer, or other things as well? There’s no eternal
law that states that a principle should be concise; it’s simply a matter of stating the principle in such a way that it will be most helpful to our lives. If we state a principle that is so long that it is difficult to remember it, or that is so complex that it really contains more than one principle, it will be more of a challenge to understand the principle and change our lives for the better because of it. As mentioned earlier, Elder Scott calls principles “concentrated truth.”

Now that we’ve discussed what principles are, let’s search for principles in this passage. As I have mentioned earlier, there are many principles, and we will find different ones at different times in our lives. But let’s identify some of the key principles we can see now.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 Nephi 7:16–18</th>
<th>Principles</th>
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| And it came to pass that when I, Nephi, had spoken these words unto my brethren, they were angry with me. And it came to pass that they did lay their hands upon me, for behold, they were exceedingly wroth, and they did bind me with cords, for they sought to take away my life, that they might leave me in the wilderness to be devoured by wild beasts. | 1. Unrighteous people sometimes respond to chastisement with anger.  
2. Anger can lead to violence. |
| But it came to pass that I prayed unto the Lord, saying: O Lord, according to my faith which is in thee, wilt thou deliver me from the hands of my brethren; yea, even give me strength that I may burst these bands with which I am bound. | 1. It is good to pray when in trouble.  
2. It can be important to be specific when we pray. |
| And it came to pass that when I had said these words, behold, the bands were loosed from off my hands and feet, and I stood before my brethren, and I spake unto them again. | 1. The Lord may choose to immediately answer prayers.  
2. The Lord may not always answer prayers in the specific way we want them to be answered.  
3. It’s good to accept the Lord’s answer even if it’s not exactly what we asked for.  
4. We shouldn’t let opposition stop us from doing the Lord’s will. |

Notice how several of the principles are clearly connected to what is plainly written in the scriptural text. For example, the principle that “anger can lead to violence” is directly communicated by the story when Laman and Lemuel become angry and tie up Nephi, planning his death in the wilderness. Also, the way in which Nephi prays and is immediately freed from his bonds clearly teaches the principle that the “Lord may choose to immediately
answer prayers.” I purposely included specific words in some of the principles to make sure they are universal. It is not a true principle that the Lord always answers prayers immediately, but it is true that he may choose to do so. Wording the principle in such a way does not dilute it; it is very significant to remember that there are times when he immediately answers prayers. Remembering that truth can help us have faith that if the Lord feels we need an immediate answer, he will give us one. It is also significant because, if we assume he never answers prayers immediately, we may very well be unaware of his answer if it comes quickly because we have mistakenly assumed we have to wait longer.

There are also some principles that are not explicitly communicated by the text but are still supported by it. Such principles require us to exercise some interpretation on our part. We should not be afraid of doing that, so long as we remember, as we discussed above, that the principle needs to be a universal truth that is supported by the text. For example, this story teaches the principle that we should not let opposition stop us from doing what we are supposed to do. Nephi was speaking to his brothers, they got angry and bound him, the Lord freed him from his bonds, and Nephi immediately resumed speaking to his brothers. He did not let their angry actions stop him from doing what the Lord wanted him to do. While the text does not directly state that principle, it does support the principle through the story.

However, what if a reader comes up with a different, but seemingly related, principle? For example, “We shouldn’t stop what we’re doing, even if people get angry.” I do not believe that is a universally true principle. The text does not support the idea that we should never stop what we are doing. There may be times when we speak to people, sense that they are not responding well to what we are saying, and then decide to take a different approach, or perhaps even quit speaking altogether. But is that ignoring the principle that we should not let opposition stop us from doing what we are supposed to do? No, because we are stopping what we are doing not because there is opposition, but because we felt it was no longer what we ought to be doing. We admire Nephi for continuing to teach his brothers once he is freed, but he would have stopped teaching them if that is what the Lord had directed him to do. We need to test each principle we come up with, making sure that it is universal, true, and supported by the text.
Step 3: Apply the Principles Found in the Scriptures

Often, students of the scriptures are frustrated with trying to apply what they have learned because they feel there is no connection between their lives and the lives of the people in the scriptures. This problem arises when the reader attempts to apply the scriptures themselves to their lives. When we liken the scriptures to our lives, we do so by applying the principles they teach. We are not trying to apply the people or events or cultural practices or even the text itself—we are applying the principles.

This third step is meaningless unless we make it very personal. Unlike a principle, which needs to be universally true, the application of a principle is particularly true for us. The application may or may not be true for others. To come up with a universal application can keep the scriptures at arms’ length, safely away from us so that we do not have to actually change our lives as a result of what we have learned. At best, it is likening the scriptures to ourselves for our learning but not for our profit. But if we apply the principles in personal ways to our specific lives, we are changed by what we have learned. Simply restating the principle is not the same as actually applying it. “I’ll apply this principle by remembering that sometimes the Lord doesn’t answer prayers in the specific way I want him to” may be an easy thing to say, but it will not go very far in helping us change our lives unless we learn to accept answers to prayer even when they are not exactly what we were hoping for.

Now, let’s take a couple of the principles we have identified and see how we might apply them. We are not trying to find every possible application, of course, but we can benefit from what we do find.

It is good to pray when in trouble. This principle sounds so obvious that we might wonder if it is even worth bringing up. However, as we try to apply this principle, we may find that we do not follow it as often as we should. Sometimes, when we have a big decision to make that we are confused about (a kind of “trouble”), we may spend all our time researching our options and discussing them with family and friends, neglecting to make it a matter of prayer as well. We also need to remember what the actual principle is, and not reword it in our minds. This principle is not saying, “It is good to pray only when in trouble” or “praying is the only good thing to do when in trouble.” We need to focus on the application of the actual principle, without increasing or decreasing the principle’s scope. Principles need to be universally true, but that does not mean they try to cover the universe in one simple sentence.
Sometimes the Lord does not answer prayers in the specific way we wanted them to be answered. As we apply this principle, we may want to be open to the fact that sometimes we pray for something, receive an answer that is not what we were looking for, then assume that we must have asked for the wrong thing. That may be the case at times, but I believe Nephi’s experience teaches us that sometimes it is not a matter of our being wrong—the Lord simply decides to answer our prayers in his own way. This principle also teaches that we need to keep our eyes open to the answers we are given. If we are expecting a certain answer and are not open to how the Lord is interacting with us at the moment, we may conclude that he did not answer a prayer of ours. In addition, applying this principle may actually help us interact with others differently. For example, a young man who had made it a habit not to pay attention to his mother’s counsel may realize that what she has been saying is the very answer he has been looking for in his prayers. He has been expecting a still, small voice—not his mother’s voice—and now he realizes that the Lord is trying to help him through her.

Other Applications

We can use the Know-Identify-Apply approach in any type of learning, not just in reading the scriptures. When a General Authority gives a talk about tithing, for example, we might be tempted to let our mind wander because we feel there is nothing to learn from such a talk if we already pay a full tithe. However, if we listen closely to know what he is saying, we may be able to identify a number of principles that are relevant to our life that we can apply in a personal way that will make us a better person. This approach can even help in secular learning. If students can know what their physics text is saying, for example, identify the principles in the text, and then apply them in the context of physics, they will have gained much more from the text than if they had merely read the words on the page.

I often use the Know-Identify-Apply approach when I teach my students. It helps them realize how important it is to read the text closely enough that they actually know what it is saying. When I invite them to identify principles, they realize that the text is saying much more than just the words, but also that they have to be able to support the principles by the text. And when we apply in class the principles we have learned from the text (without getting too personal, of course), students realize that the scriptures are completely relevant to their lives and an amazing source of wisdom and truth.
Conclusion

Once again, I realize there are many ways to liken the scriptures to ourselves. This is just one way, and it can be helpful to many of us because of its simplicity. The important thing, however, is not the method but rather the practice of searching the scriptures and likening them to ourselves. Know-Identify-Apply can open up a common ground on which we can explore the scriptures together in our classrooms and in our families, growing in our understanding of those sacred texts.

President Dieter F. Uchtdorf brings together what we have been saying about the importance of scriptures, principles, and application in a powerful summary:

The holy scriptures and the spoken word of the living prophets give emphasis to the fundamental principles and doctrines of the gospel. The reason we return to these foundational principles, to the pure doctrines, is because they are the gateway to truths of profound meaning. They are the door to experiences of sublime importance that would otherwise be beyond our capacity to comprehend. These simple, basic principles are the key to living in harmony with God and man. They are the keys to opening the windows of heaven. They lead us to the peace, joy, and understanding that Heavenly Father has promised to His children who hear and obey Him.7

Notes

1. There are obviously a number of ways to “feast” on the scriptures. Many of them can rely heavily on scholarship, such as depending on research to determine original wording or historical context. However, this article is not focused on how we can best understand what a scriptural text means through the use of various academic tools; rather, it deals with how we as typical readers might apply what the scriptures have to teach us. In this article, I am concerned with application rather than theory—helping teachers guide students as they change their lives by what they learn from the scriptures rather than helping scholars apply critical tools to the text.


When a student is wrong, the teacher needs to be careful not to embarrass the student. Loving correction produces improvement.
Responding to Wrong Answers

RYAN J WESSEL

Ryan J Wessel (wesselrj@ldschurch.org) is a teacher for Seminaries and Institutes in Phoenix, Arizona.

A few years ago, a new missionary at the Missionary Training Center shared a scripture at the beginning of class: “Dig a pit for thy neighbor; there is no harm in this” (2 Nephi 28:8). With the simple faith of an Idaho farm boy, he testified how this scripture had inspired him to help his neighbor dig pits for the posts of a new line of fencing on the neighbor’s cattle ranch.

This situation posed an interesting dilemma for the teacher. Obviously, the student should be congratulated for following the promptings of the Spirit and for serving his neighbor. He had a revelatory experience in the scriptures and acted on that revelation; encouraging this process is one objective of religious education. However, it is clear that the new missionary did not understand the verse. He simply had it wrong.

As teachers and students more fully adopt the student-centered approach encouraged in seminary, institute, and auxiliary curricula, more students are speaking in any given class. If one assumes that no student knows everything, one can expect an increase in the number of wrong statements made in any given class. Therefore, skill in addressing incorrect student answers is becoming increasingly important in religious education.
The purpose of this paper is to help teachers consider the most effective ways to respond to incorrect answers in a classroom. First, a case is made for why teachers should respond to incorrect answers. Next, a few examples of common incorrect answer types are given. Finally, some balancing principles are offered.

**Teachers Should Respond to Incorrect Answers**

Perhaps it is not clear *a priori* that a teacher should correct students’ statements in religious education. One could argue that the fact that the student was willing to respond is enough to allow any response to stand uncorrected. One could also argue that the answers are not necessarily *incorrect*; maybe the student simply interpreted the verse differently than the teacher. However, the scriptures themselves teach that we do not want to become “blind leaders of the blind” (Matthew 15:14). Most would agree that teachers have at least some responsibility to ensure that their students walk away with a doctrinally correct understanding, not merely a crowd-sourced understanding.

Many arguments can be made for why teachers should respond to incorrect answers. Perhaps the biggest concern is that uncorrected wrong answers may inhibit the influence of the Holy Ghost. B. H. Roberts wrote, “To be known, the truth must be stated, and the clearer and more complete the statement is, the better the opportunity will the Holy Spirit have for testifying to the souls of men that the work is true.”¹ Like mismatched sine waves, faithful yet incorrect answers are at best unclear. By helping students more completely understand the scriptures, a teacher provides an environment that is more conducive to the resonance of the Holy Ghost.

Offering correction also helps maintain the Lord’s emphasis in the scriptures. In the example in the introduction, the young missionary learned something good from 2 Nephi 28:8, but clearly he had not learned the lesson the author of the verse intended to teach. Elder Bruce R. McConkie said, “If you want to know what emphasis should be given to gospel principles, you simply teach the whole standard works and, automatically, in the process, you will have given the Lord’s emphasis to every doctrine and every principle.”² If lessons are not grounded in the intended meaning of the author, one could teach good principles while skewing the Lord’s emphasis.

Another problem with letting incorrect answers stand in a classroom is that it sends an unclear message to other students. The teacher’s reaction is in itself teaching everyone in the classroom. If the teacher does not comment,
that may be taken as tacit approval of an incorrect interpretation or answer offered by a student. While the teacher could choose to give private, delayed correction, other students may still come away misinformed. Thus a teacher’s desire not to offend or embarrass one student must be balanced against his or her responsibility toward the group.

Furthermore, wrong answers are often the springboard to effective learning situations. Humble students want to know when they have it wrong. Letting a wrong answer stand may be analogous to letting an effective teaching opportunity slip away.

**Examples**

While incorrect answers come in many forms, three examples of what could be considered common incorrect answer types are given below, each taken from a real classroom experience. These examples are meant to help teachers recognize similar situations in their own classrooms and consider their responses. Each scenario is followed by a hypothetical less-effective response and a few suggestions on how that response could be improved.

**Partially correct answers.** Some teachers may be tempted to accept a partially correct answer as wholly correct. Consider a class studying Matthew 16:19, focusing on the keys of the priesthood. After an extensive discussion about the keys of the priesthood, students are asked in review, “What are the keys of the priesthood?” A student responds, “The keys of the priesthood are the power of man to act in the name of God.” The student is partially correct in defining *priesthood*, but has missed a crucial element of the definition of *keys*.3

In the book *Teach Like a Champion*, author and educator Doug Lemov describes how he has seen public school teachers react in this type of situation. “Many teachers respond to almost-correct answers their students give in class by rounding up,” he wrote. “That is they’ll affirm the student’s answer and repeat it, adding some detail of their own to make it fully correct even though the student didn’t provide (and may not recognize) the differentiating factor.”4

Returning to the religious classroom, the teacher might respond, “Good! The keys of the priesthood are the authority to direct the work of the Church and priesthood,” himself adding the crucial element of authority to direct. But from this response by the teacher, the student is hearing that she was correct when in fact she was not correct. Further, the rest of the students are
learning that *the keys of the priesthood* and *the priesthood* are essentially the same thing, but with some subtle difference that is not worth pointing out.5

In the introduction to a recently published seminary teacher’s manual, it says, “If a student’s statement is doctrinally incorrect, it is your responsibility to gently help the student correct his or her statement while maintaining an atmosphere of love and trust. Doing so may provide an important learning experience for the students in your class.”6 Thus, in the religious education classroom, the principle of “rounding up” can be insufficient.

Lemov suggests an alternative type of response, gleaned from teachers who showed quantitatively outstanding success among middle school students in poor areas of the United States. “The job of the teacher,” he wrote, “is to set a high standard for correctness: 100 percent. The likelihood is strong that students will stop striving when they hear the word right (or yes or some other proxy), so there’s a real risk to naming as right that which is not truly and completely right. When you sign off and tell a student she is right, she must not be betrayed into thinking she can do something that she cannot.”7

A gospel teacher who sets and enforces a standard of clear and complete understanding would recognize this teaching moment; the student clearly does not grasp the distinction between *the priesthood* and *the keys of the priesthood*. Instead of responding in the affirmative, a teacher would do better to acknowledge the correct portions of the answer and ask for a more complete answer. In this situation, the teacher might respond by saying, “Jenna, you have correctly identified what the priesthood is. Good! But I asked for a definition of the *keys* of the priesthood.” Instead of settling for partial understanding, a teacher can help students obtain a full understanding.

**Correct answers at the wrong times.** A correct answer given at the wrong time may be incorrect. This is especially relevant with questions that invite students to search for information or analyze for understanding.8 Consider a class studying the parable of the seeds and soils found in Matthew 13:3–9. After a first reading of the parable, the teacher says, “Describe the four different soils mentioned in this parable.” A student then raises his hand and says, “The soils represent how receptive we are to the gospel when we hear it. We should have good soil, not rocky soil.”

This answer is correct, but it is not given at the right time. Some teachers may be tempted to accept the student’s answer and move on. However, a passage from the Encyclopedia of Mormonism brings up an important idea; it states, “Because of the multicultural base of the Church and its rapid
Responding to Wrong Answers

growth, gospel teachers are asked to teach a wide array of members with radically different backgrounds, needs, and levels of understanding and spiritual preparation. This continues to be a major challenge to the Church.” In this example, the responding student may not represent the level of understanding of the entire class. Further, the student with the correct answer may not have arrived at his answer for the correct reasons, or may not understand the process of understanding parables. Within the context of the question asked, the student’s answer is incorrect; he did not describe the four types of soil.

Research has shown that passing through a period of confusion can lead to increased motivation to learn and a deeper understanding of complex subjects. When one student arrives at a conclusion before the entire class has had a chance to explore, an opportunity for learning is missed. The teacher could bring the class back to the beginning of the learning process by saying, “It is true that we need to have good soil. Now, can you please describe the four soils mentioned in the parable?” This response by the teacher demonstrates an understanding that the process toward the right answer can be as valuable as stating the right answer.

Incorrect answers from correct principles. Third, an answer that is wrong but applies correct principles may necessitate correction. This can come from a misunderstanding of the context or content of the scriptures or from a conscious effort by a student to disguise his or her lack of understanding in front of the class. Consider a class studying the prophecy of the American Civil War found in Doctrine and Covenants 87. After reading the prophecy, the teacher invites students to suggest ways to “stand ye in holy places” (D&C 87:8). A student then responds by saying, “We can stand in holy places by keeping the Sabbath day holy. Look at verse seven; it says that Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath.” The student is correct in that keeping the Sabbath day holy will help us to stand in holy places. Some teacher may accept this true statement and move on. However, verse seven does not say that Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath; it calls him Lord of Sabaoth. Sabbath and Sabaoth sound similar but have drastically different meanings. While many verses of scripture have multiple plausible interpretations, the author of section 87 clearly did not intend verse seven to be a lesson about the Sabbath day.

The Gospel Teaching and Learning handbook states, “When an incorrect response is given, the teacher needs to be careful not to embarrass the student. An effective teacher can build on a part of the student’s comment that is correct or ask a follow-up question that allows a student to rethink his or
her response.” Instead of being content with an answer that merely has a catechetical connection to the question asked, the teacher could invite the student to look again at verse seven, noting explicitly the word Sabaoth. The class could then explore together what that verse actually says, taking care not to wrest the scriptures (see D&C 10:63).

This type of error, accepting a wrong answer that applies correct principles, is common enough that a second, more nuanced example is in order. Consider a class studying John 10:1–11. After reading the text about sheep, sheepfolds, and robbers, a teacher might ask, “In these verses, how is Jesus like a door?” A student may then respond by accessing imagery already in her memory: “Jesus is like a door because he opens heaven to us. He is the way.” While it is true that Jesus is like a door in that he opens heaven to us, these particular verses offer an additional interpretation of the door imagery. At least three times in these verses, Jesus explains how he stands between his sheep and the danger that seeks to harm them. While it is true that Jesus is an open door, these verses are showing Jesus as a door closed to the harm that seeks his sheep.

When students give a wrong answer that applies correct principles, they are often answering based on previous knowledge, but not engaging with the text in front of them. They are responding, but not learning. A wise teacher can help them do both.

All of the previous examples can be understood in the context of a feedback model. Feedback is an important part of decision making and learning. In the book *Nudge*, economists Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein describe the role of feedback in making different levels of decisions. They explain:

> Even practice does not make perfect if people lack good opportunities for learning. *Learning is most likely if people get immediate, clear feedback after each try.* Suppose you are practicing your putting skills on the practice green. If you hit ten balls toward the same hole, it is easy to get a sense of how hard you have to hit the ball. Even the least talented golfers will soon learn to gauge distance under these circumstances. Suppose instead you were putting the golf balls but not getting to see where they were going. In that environment, you could putt all day and never get any better.13

Thaler and Sunstein then suggest that a lack of feedback impedes an individual’s ability to make an optimal choice.14 A teacher can help students gauge how correct their answers are so that they can improve. A teacher provides the feedback.
Balancing Principles

In responding to students, there are a few balancing principles to remember. First, teachers can be careful not to discourage the receipt of personal revelation. Elder Robert D. Hales taught, “When we want to speak to God, we pray. And when we want Him to speak to us, we search the scriptures; for His words are spoken through His prophets. He will then teach us as we listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.” During personal scripture study or in a classroom, the Holy Ghost could teach to an individual something that is completely unrelated to the text the class is studying. A student certainly may read 2 Nephi 28:8 and feel he needs to dig fence post pits for his neighbor. However, this does not mean a class should be taught that this is what 2 Nephi 28:8 means. Teachers and students can carefully distinguish between personal revelation received while studying a verse (application) and the meaning of the verse (interpretation). Quite often, the set of possible applications is much larger than the set of possible interpretations.

Second, teachers can remember that a learning environment of love, respect, and purpose is essential to effective classroom instruction. The Gospel Teaching and Learning handbook states, “When students know they are loved and respected by their teacher and other students, they are more likely to come to class ready to learn.” Research shows that emotions operate continually throughout many cognitive processes, including memory and problem solving. Hence, caring for the emotions of a student can have a significant impact in the classroom.

Offering correction and feedback can contribute to a loving and respectful environment if done with care and righteous motivation. In a letter from Liberty Jail, Joseph Smith couched the idea of “reproving betimes with sharpness,” or correcting immediately with clarity, in a list with persuasion, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, love, kindness, and pure knowledge (see D&C 121:41–43). Thus, correction and kindness are not mutually exclusive.

An environment of love and respect can also help teachers hear what students say better than they say it. One curriculum manual states, “Be careful not to suggest that students’ answers are wrong simply because the words they use to express them differ from those used in the manual or because they identify a truth that is not mentioned in the curriculum.” Love and respect for our students can help us cut through the halting words that many students struggle with and arrive at the intended meaning of a comment.
Third, teachers can be careful not to disallow a basic understanding of scripture because a full understanding has not yet come. Consider Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation.” This verse is often used as a powerful declaration of Paul’s willingness to stand up for the gospel of Christ no matter the social opposition. It has also inspired countless individuals today to do the same. In the context of the verses immediately surrounding verse 16, this interpretation makes sense. A close reading in Greek, however, helps one understand an additional aspect of Paul’s meaning in this verse. The Greek term translated as ashamed has the same root as the term ashamed in Romans 6:21 and 2 Timothy 1:12. In these cases, the term ashamed has the additional connotation of let down by or disappointed in. Applying this connotation to Romans 1:16, we see Paul’s conviction that he will not be let down by or disappointed in the gospel of Christ. With this understanding, Romans 1:16 becomes a fitting thesis statement for the first half of the book of Romans. Even so, there is probably no harm in allowing a novice student to explore the basic or easier meaning without introducing the more difficult concept because these layers of understanding are both true and complementary.

Conclusion

A religious educator may let an incorrect statement made by students stand for a variety of reasons. Perhaps the teacher does not want to crush a student’s burgeoning exploration of the scriptures, or the teacher wants to emphasize the application of a truth more than the understanding of the text. Lack of time is often a concern. For whatever reason, we as religious educators must be careful; we do not serve students by reinforcing error.

When a student looks at a verse of scripture and states what he or she sees, sometimes he or she is simply wrong. As religious educators, it is not wrong for us to kindly correct him or her. In a more serious setting, the Lord is good to correct us. He said, “Whom I love I also chasten that their sins may be forgiven, for with the chastisement I prepare a way for their deliverance in all things out of temptation, and I have loved you” (D&C 95:1). Loving correction produces improvement. Our students deserve that from us.

Notes


3. For a clear definition of the keys of the priesthood, see https://www.lds.org/scriptures/gs/keys-of-the-priesthood.

4. Doug Lemov, Teach Like a Champion: 49 Techniques that Put Students on the Path to College (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 35.

5. For an additional example, see Lemov, Teach Like a Champion, 37.

6. Doctrine and Covenants and Church History Seminary Teacher Manual (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013), x.

7. Lemov, Teach Like a Champion, 35.


11. LDS Bible Dictionary, Sabaoth, 764.

12. Gospel Teaching and Learning, 64.


18. Doctrine and Covenants and Church History Seminary Teacher Manual, x.
New Publications

To purchase any of the following publications, please visit www.byubookstore.com and search by book title or ISBN number, or call the BYU Bookstore toll-free at 1-800-253-2578.

From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith’s Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon
Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat

This book was written to provide a detailed explanation of how Joseph Smith and the scribes who served with him described the process of translating the gold plates and the difficulties encountered as they sought to publish the completed book. Although both members and academics alike often think of this story as well known, recent insights and discoveries associated with the efforts by the Church History Department to publish The Joseph Smith Papers have provided a fuller, richer understanding of the translation and publication of the Book of Mormon.

Conversations with Mormon Historians
Edited by Alexander L. Baugh and Reid L. Neilson

The interviews in this volume tell the stories of remarkable men and women who have made careers out of researching, writing, and teaching about the past. Friends and colleagues conducted these conversations over a decade or so. All were subsequently published in the *Mormon Historical Studies* journal or *Religious Educator* periodical, and now are brought together as a single book of personal essays. As we review and reflect on the personal lives and remarkable careers featured in this volume, we sense that many of these historians feel that they were prepared or given a definite sense of mission and professional calling that stretches well back in time.


An Eye of Faith: Essays in Honor of Richard O. Cowan
Edited by Kenneth L. Alford and Richard E. Bennett

*An Eye of Faith* contains nineteen thought-provoking and new essays about the following topics: ancient and modern temples, revelations to the Latter-day Saints, serving others and sharing the gospel, increasing scriptural understanding, and Church history. Jointly published by Deseret Book and Brigham Young University’s Religious Studies Center, this book was written by established Church scholars including Susan Easton Black, Richard E. Bennett, Kent P. Jackson, S. Kent Brown, Richard D. Draper, Alexander L. Baugh, Craig Ostler, Brent L. Top, and other notable writers.

Psalms of Nauvoo: Early Mormon Poetry
Hal Robert Boyd and Susan Easton Black

The volume opens with the Mormon exodus from Missouri and ends with the Saints’ farewell to Nauvoo as they faced an uncertain future in the American West. These early poets wrote of revelations, restored scriptures, prophecies, temples, and their testimonies of Jesus Christ. To these faithful psalmists, their religion served as inspiration for distinctive poetry. This book is a narrative collection of these poems and provides a glimpse into the culture, life circumstances, religious heritage, and espoused doctrines of those early Latter-day Saints.


The Oakland Temple: Portal to Eternity
Richard O. Cowan and Robert G. Larsen

The Oakland California Temple plays an important role in the culture of the Bay Area. This book tells the story of the temple from early prophecy to the construction and dedication and through its jubilee. When David O. McKay announced that the Oakland Temple would be built, referring to prophecies by Brigham Young and others, he declared, “We feel that the time has come when these prophecies should be fulfilled.”

Called to Teach: The Legacy of Karl G. Maeser
A. LeGrand Richards

Karl G. Maeser has rightfully been called the spiritual architect not only of Brigham Young University, but also of the Church Educational System. As the first superintendent of Church Schools, he helped found and maintain over fifty academies and schools from Canada to Mexico. He helped develop the public education system in Utah and helped establish the Utah Teachers’ Association. The students he taught personally included future US senators and members of the House of Representatives, a US Supreme Court justice, university presidents, and many General Authorities.


Our Savior’s Love: Hope & Healing in Christ
Editors: Alonzo L. Gaskill and Stanley A. Johnson

When we actually, really know, understand, and feel of our Savior’s love—we are transformed; we are changed in our understanding of what divine love is. It is the encounter with Christ’s love that causes us to submit our wills and lives to God's will and way. Our Savior’s love enables us to see ourselves in proper perspective and helps us to see others as God sees them and to love them as deeply as he loves them.

Upcoming Events

**Sidney B. Sperry Symposium**

*Friday and Saturday, October 23–24, 2015*

The 44th Annual BYU Sperry Symposium will start in the Joseph Smith Building (JSB) auditorium on BYU campus. The title of this year’s symposium is “The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder.” Presentations will cover the Book of Mormon’s role in restoring doctrinal truths, the translation process, the witnesses, and the printing of the book.

**2016 Student Symposium**

*Friday, February 19, 2016*

This event is held in the Wilkinson Student Center from 9:00 to noon. The annual student symposium provides a forum for students to research, write, and present papers about religious subjects from a faithful perspective. For more information, visit http://rsc.byu.edu/studentsymposium.

**2016 Church History Symposium**

*Thursday and Friday, March 3–4, 2016*

The 2016 theme is “Beyond Biography: Sources in Context for Mormon Women’s History.” Scholars of Mormon women’s history have long demonstrated a commitment to and an interest in biography. The resulting narratives have helped to recover and preserve voices that would have otherwise been lost to modern awareness.

*These events are free of charge, and registration is not required. Some event details are subject to change. For more details, please visit us online at rsc.byu.edu/conferences or contact Brent Nordgren at 801-422-3293.*
Staff Spotlight

Designer
Carmen Cole graduated from BYU with a BA in communications, print journalism emphasis, and minor in music. She has worked as a designer for the Religious Studies Center since 2002. Some of her design work includes *Nineteenth-Century Saints at War* and, more recently, *Our Savior’s Love* and *Psalms of Nauvoo*. Carmen is mother to four children and loves playing with her kids, ballroom dancing, water aerobics, movies, and food. When she grows up, she wants to travel, speak Spanish fluently, teach preschool and dance, and be a grandmother to as many as will let her.

Editorial Intern
Alison Maeser Brimley is from Salt Lake City, Utah. She served a mission along the scenic Gulf Coast of Florida, Alabama, and Mississippi. She will graduate with a degree in English and a minor in editing in December 2015, after which she hopes to pursue a graduate degree in creative writing. She has worked as a student editor at the RSC since January and has greatly enjoyed picking up many interesting gospel-related tidbits from the material she reads and edits each day. Her hobbies include cooking, eating, writing, party planning, and road tripping. She and her husband, Derek, were married in April of this year.
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Manuscripts will be evaluated by the following questions:

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4. Does the author follow the canons of responsible scholarship (uses sound and fair methodology; documents arguable facts)? If not, why?

5. Is the manuscript faith-promoting? Is the piece in harmony with the established doctrine of the Church?

If a manuscript is accepted, authors will be notified and asked to provide photocopies of all source materials cited, arranged in order, numbered to match the endnotes, and highlighted to show the quotations or paraphrases. Photocopies of source material must include title page and source page with the highlighted quotations.

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