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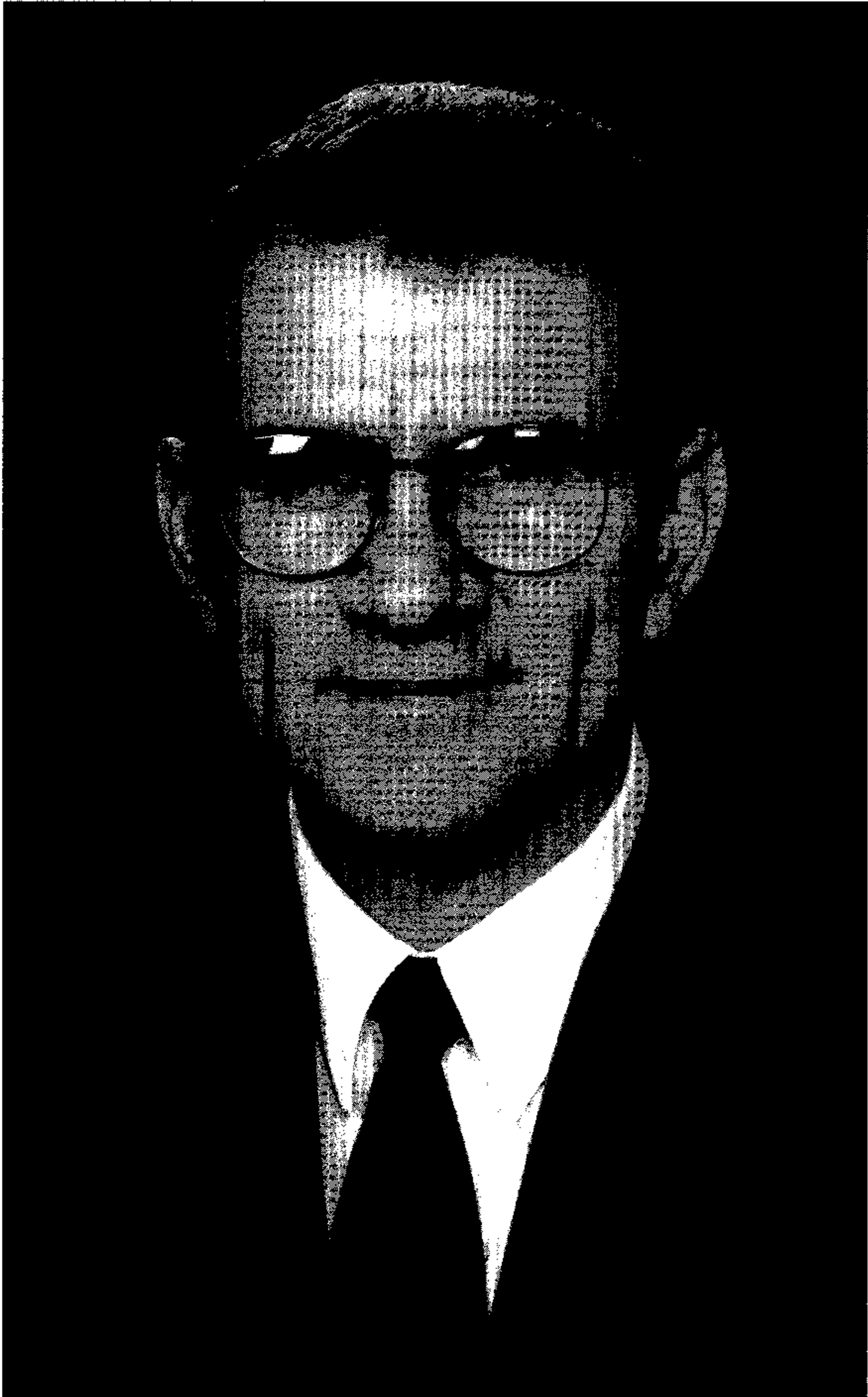
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Elder Jay E. Jensen

The Precise Purposes of the Book of Mormon

Elder Jay E. Jensen

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As a young student in grade school and high school, I developed a love for reading good books. I am certain that much of my motivation came from my mother. Good books were always available at home. We also had the local public library. Saturdays were shopping days, and Mother drove the short distance from Mapleton to Springville, Utah, to do the weekly grocery shopping. The city library was one block from the market, and I often spent my time reading in the library rather than following her through the aisles of the store—a boring task.

Somehow, through all those early years of reading, I failed to learn the significance of reading the prefaces or introductions to books, and I am confident the fault was mine, not the fault of my teachers. Later on in college, I learned that reading the preface is one of the most important things to do, for in them I learned the authors' stated purposes or intents and important background information concerning the text.

Moroni's Purpose Statement on the Title Page

Reading and understanding the introductions to the four standard works and their stated purposes is no exception; this practice is particularly true for the Book of Mormon. Unique to this volume of scripture are two significant introductions: (1) the title page, written by Moroni, and (2) the introduction, written under the direction of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve. The three other introductory

sections to the Book of Mormon—The Testimony of the Three and Eight Witnesses, Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and A Brief Explanation about the Book of Mormon—are also important because of the useful background and contextual information they provide, but not because they are statements of intent.

Moroni states the precise purposes of the Book of Mormon on the title page—“Which is to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel

1. “what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers; and
2. “that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever—And also

3. “to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that JESUS is the CHRIST, the ETERNAL GOD, manifesting himself unto all nations.”

To this list we might add Moroni’s last words on the title page, “That ye may be found spotless at the judgment-seat of Christ,” a vital part of the Book of Mormon’s purpose.

A worthwhile scripture study exercise is to take three separate pieces of paper and write one of the statements at the top of each and then begin a careful study of the Book of Mormon, writing scripture references supporting each purpose. My own efforts showed that the longest list of references is under the third purpose, substantiating the truth that the Book of Mormon is the most Christ-centered book ever written and truly “Another Testament of Jesus Christ.”

In the first two purpose statements, “what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers,” and “that they may know the covenants of the Lord,” Moroni clearly established that people in the Book of Mormon are Israelites and inheritors of the promises made to the fathers. Specifically, the term *fathers* referred to in the first statement may refer to specific ancestral lines and to all the great prophets and patriarchs in the Old Testament, but quite often the fathers are the three great patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, with whom the Lord made covenants. Thus, the first statement leads to the second: “that they may know the covenants of the Lord.”¹

Nephi is the principal writer and author of the small plates, and Mormon and Moroni are the principal compilers and writers of the large plates. These three writers were clear in their purposes for writing, all of which generally tie into the title page of the Book of Mormon; but, as will be shown below, it was probably Nephi who started the basic themes that helped all other writers and compilers with their focus, resulting in the title page as we know it today.

Nephi's Purposes in Writing

So significant are the small plates, and especially the writings of Nephi, that the Lord declared, "Behold, there are many things engraven upon the plates of Nephi *which do throw greater views upon my gospel*" (D&C 10:45; emphasis added). This greater view appears early on in 1 Nephi. In fact, the more I read, study, ponder, and pray over the Book of Mormon, the more I am convinced that Lehi and Nephi set the major doctrinal themes for all other writers. If this is so, then the small plates of Nephi (1 and 2 Nephi, Jacob, Enos, Jarom, and Omni) are a preface to the entire 531 pages (English edition). Perhaps it is even safe to say that those themes are established by the dream and vision of Lehi (see 1 Nephi 8; 10) and Nephi's subsequent vision of the same (see 1 Nephi 11–14). Also, it is important to include Nephi's commentary on Lehi's vision or dream as found in chapter 15. In summary, 1 Nephi chapters 8 through 15 (inclusive) are the most complete preface to the entire Book of Mormon, and all else that follows in this magnificent book grows out of and is in harmony with these eight chapters.²

Lehi and Nephi focus on covenants, the Messiah, the gathering of Israel, the Gentiles, and the Restoration in these early chapters, but it is Nephi's commentary on them that establishes the centrality of the themes Moroni outlined in the title page. For me, 1 Nephi 15 is one of the most important chapters in the entire Book of Mormon. The setting for it is that Laman and Lemuel had not understood Lehi's words "concerning the natural branches of the olive-tree, and also concerning the Gentiles" (1 Nephi 15:7). Nephi answered them by teaching them about Israel and its scattering and subsequent gathering in the latter days, beginning with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, which he said contains the fulness of the gospel and would "come unto the Gentiles, and from the Gentiles unto the remnant of our seed" (1 Nephi 15:13). As a result of the Book of Mormon, the remnant of their seed and all the house of Israel would know

1. "that they are of the house of Israel, and
2. "that they are the covenant people of the Lord; and
3. "then shall they know and come to the knowledge of their forefathers, and also
4. "to the knowledge of the gospel of their Redeemer which was ministered unto their fathers by him; wherefore,
5. "they shall come to the knowledge of their Redeemer and the very points of his doctrine, that they may know how to come unto him and be saved" (1 Nephi 15:14).

Those who come to this knowledge will rejoice and come into the true fold of God and be grafted into the true olive tree (see 1 Nephi 15:15–16). To be grafted in, by scriptural definition, is to “come to the knowledge of the true Messiah, their Lord and their Redeemer” (1 Nephi 10:14). As people come to this knowledge and are grafted in, we see the grand fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham, “pointing to the covenant which should be fulfilled in the latter days; which covenant the Lord made to our father Abraham, saying: In thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed” (1 Nephi 15:18).

The kindreds or families spoken of will be converted through the power of the Spirit as they read, ponder, and pray about the Book of Mormon and will be led to the holy temple, where families are sealed together in fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham.

All other Book of Mormon writers and prophets received revelation from the Holy Ghost, from heavenly messengers, and from the Savior Himself that build upon and expand the simple, profound truths that Lehi and Nephi received by revelation. This revelation shows that “he [Jesus Christ] is the same yesterday, to-day, and forever; and the way is prepared for all men from the foundation of the world, if it so be that they repent and come unto him” (1 Nephi 10:18).

Nephi concluded his portion of the plates by teaching us what he hoped his writings would do—and, for emphasis, I identify them in outline form with this introductory statement by Nephi: “And the words which I have written in weakness will be made strong unto them; for

1. “it persuadeth them to do good;
2. “it maketh known unto them of their fathers;
3. “and it speaketh of Jesus, and persuadeth them to believe in him, and to endure to the end, which is life eternal.
4. “And it speaketh harshly against sin” (2 Nephi 33:4–5).

Other Purposes of the Book of Mormon as Described by Nephi

In addition to the declared purposes discussed thus far, Nephi shared poignant thoughts and feelings about what he had written and what he hoped his writings would do. For example, Nephi included the writings of Isaiah with the hope that we would liken them and that they would “persuade them [us in these latter days] that they would remember the Lord their Redeemer . . . and believe in [Him]” (1 Nephi 19:18, 23). Furthermore, speaking about the plates of brass, Nephi testified that by likening them to ourselves, we will know they

“are true; and they testify that a man must be obedient to the commandments of God” (1 Nephi 22:30).

Nephi’s understanding about these things, the writings on the small plates, is clearly stated with his interpretation of his father’s dream, and we can read between the lines to discern his deep feelings: “I said unto them that it [the iron rod] was the word of God; and whoso would hearken unto the word of God, and would hold fast unto it, they would never perish; neither could the temptations and the fiery darts of the adversary overpower them unto blindness, to lead them away to destruction” (1 Nephi 15:24).

In the so-called Psalm of Nephi, we glimpse his feelings about the plates: “And upon these I write the things of my soul. . . . For my soul delighteth in the scriptures, and my heart pondereth them, and writeth them for the learning and the profit of my children. Behold, my soul delighteth in the things of the Lord; and my heart pondereth continually upon the things which I have seen and heard” (2 Nephi 4:15–16).

After Nephi had included the writings of Isaiah and his commentaries and prophecies of the same, he said he was satisfied except for “a few words which I must speak concerning the doctrine of Christ” (2 Nephi 31:2). Following that statement, he wrote about what the Lord had showed to him, perhaps as part of the vision described in 1 Nephi 11–14, about the Savior, His baptism, and why we must follow Him and stay on the path He marked (see 2 Nephi 31; compare to 1 Nephi 8, Lehi’s dream). Then, Nephi gave first what I call an if-then proposition concerning the words of Christ: “*If* ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold [*then*], thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life” (2 Nephi 31:20; emphasis added). This strong invitation was followed by this command: “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).

Finally, he brought his portion of the small plates to a close by stating that “I, Nephi, have written what I have written, and I esteem it as of great worth” (2 Nephi 33:3). He was commanded to write these things, knowing that they are the words of Christ and that we and Nephi “shall stand face to face” and be judged according to what we have done with the words he wrote, for they will either condemn us or bless us with life eternal (see 2 Nephi 33:11–15).

Jacob’s Purpose Statement

Jacob adhered to the intent established by Nephi and the important focus on the themes of what the Lord had done for their fathers,

that Israel may know the covenants of the Lord, and to the convincing of Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ. These are found in 2 Nephi 6 through 10, especially chapters 9 and 10, and Jacob 1 through 6. In the following meaningful purpose statement, Jacob expressed his hopes for what he had written: “And we labor diligently to engraven these words upon plates, hoping that our beloved brethren and our children will receive them with thankful hearts, and look upon them that they may learn with joy and not with sorrow, neither with contempt, concerning their first parents. For, for this intent have we written these things, that they may know that we knew of Christ, and we had a hope of his glory many hundred years before his coming; and not only we ourselves had a hope of his glory, but also all the holy prophets which were before us” (Jacob 4:3–4).

This precise statement of intent is then illustrated by the magnificent allegory in Jacob chapter 5 and his summary of that allegory in chapter 6, specifically that God will remember the house of Israel and His covenant with them, exhorting them to “repent, and come with full purpose of heart, and cleave unto God” and not “reject all the words which have been spoken concerning Christ” (Jacob 6:5, 8), which he and Nephi had been so careful in writing and preserving.

Fulfillment of the Writers’ Intents in the Book of Alma

In Mormon’s abridgment of Alma’s teachings and experiences, the following summary of what the plates had accomplished thus far illustrates the fulfillment of intent. If we change the verb tense from the past to the present or future, these truths also may be considered as statement of purpose.

“And now, it has hitherto been wisdom in God that these things should be preserved; for behold they [the writings on the plates] have

1. “enlarged the memory of this people, yea, and
2. “convinced many of the error of their ways, and
3. “brought them to the knowledge of their God unto the salvation of their souls.

4. “Yea, I say unto you, were it not for these things that these records do contain, which are on these plates, Ammon and his brother could not have convinced so many thousands of the Lamanites of the incorrect tradition of their fathers; yea, these records and their words brought them unto repentance; that is, they brought them to the knowledge of the Lord their God, and to rejoice in Jesus Christ their Redeemer” (Alma 37:8–9).

This work of supernal significance offers a convincing testimony that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, who manifests Himself to all who repent and come unto Him, especially Lehi's posterity, whom the Lord loves—His covenant people, the children of Israel.

A Purpose Statement from the Doctrine and Covenants

In a revelation to the Prophet Joseph Smith in 1828, the following declaration appears. Note how it parallels the title page and Lehi and Nephi's visions. Again, I emphasize the introductory words *purpose* and *that*, which establish intent:

“And for this very *purpose* are these plates preserved, which contain these records—

1. “*that* the promises of the Lord might be fulfilled, which he made to this people; And
2. “*that* the Lamanites might come to the knowledge of their fathers, and
3. “*that* they might know the promises of the Lord, and
4. “*that* they may believe the gospel and rely upon the merits of Jesus Christ, and be glorified through faith in his name, and
5. “*that* through their repentance they might be saved” (D&C 3:19–20, emphasis added).

A Purpose Statement from the Book of Ether

When Moroni included his abridgment of the plates of Ether, he inserted this short purpose statement:

“Wherefore, I, Moroni, am commanded to write these things

1. “*that* evil may be done away, and
2. “*that* the time may come that Satan may have no power upon the hearts of the children of men, but
3. “*that* they may be persuaded to do good continually,
4. “*that* they may come unto the fountain of all righteousness and be saved” (Ether 8:26; emphasis added).

Notice how the fourth purpose above parallels the words established by Lehi and Nephi in the tree-of-life dream as illustrated by the metaphor of coming unto the fountain of all righteousness and being saved (see I Nephi 8:15–16, 30; 11:25).

Comparison of Mormon's and Moroni's Purpose Statements

Sons learn from their fathers in both word and deed. Moroni surely learned much from his father Mormon, as illustrated by comparing

three purpose statements, two of Mormon's and the title page written by Moroni.

Mormon's Purpose Statement No. 1

Therefore I write unto you, Gentiles and also unto you, house of Israel. . . .

Yea, behold, I write unto all the ends of the earth. . . .

And I write also unto the remnant of this people. . . . Therefore, I write unto you all. And for this cause I write unto you, that ye may know that ye must all stand before the judgment-seat of Christ; . . . and ye must stand to be judged of your works, whether they be good or evil;

And also that ye may believe the gospel of Jesus Christ, which ye shall have among you;

And also that the Jews, the covenant people of the Lord, shall have other witnesses besides him whom they saw and heard, that Jesus, whom they slew, was the very Christ and the very God.

And I would that I could persuade all ye ends of the earth to repent and prepare to stand before the judgment-seat of Christ. (Mormon 3:17–22)

Mormon's Purpose Statement No. 2

Now these things are written unto the remnant of the house of Jacob. . . . And behold, they shall go unto the unbelieving of the Jews;

And for this intent shall they go—that they may be persuaded that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God; that the father may bring about, through his most Beloved, his great and eternal purpose, in restoring the Jews, of all the house of Israel, to the land of their inheritance, which the Lord their God hath given them unto the fulfilling of his covenant; and also that the seed of this people may more fully believe his gospel. (Mormon 5:12, 14–15)

Title Page (Moroni's Purpose Statement)

Written to the Lamanites, who are a remnant of the house of Israel; and also to Jew and Gentile. . . .

Which is to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers; and that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever—

And also to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that JESUS is the CHRIST, the ETERNAL GOD, manifesting himself unto all nations. . . .

Wherefore, condemn not the things of God, that ye may be found spotless at the judgment-seat of Christ. (title page)

Note the emphasis on the judgment-seat in Mormon 3 and in the title page and, as was stated earlier, the role of the Book of Mormon in helping us to prepare for the judgment.

Mormon's Final Purpose Statement

As seen in the parallels above (Mormon 3:17–22; Mormon 5:12, 14–15; and the title page), Mormon clearly understood the intended purpose of the Book of Mormon. If we look at the chronology of Mormon's writings, it appears that Mormon chapter 7 is his final message. (Moroni concluded the plates and inserted two epistles from his father, Moroni 8 and 9, that were probably written earlier in his ministry, making Mormon chapter 7 his final written message on the

plates.) Mormon's final hope and counsel are that the remnant of this people in the Book of Mormon will know the following:

- The things of their fathers (v. 1).
- That they are the house of Israel (v. 2).
- What they must do to be saved (vv. 3–4).
- That they must come to the knowledge of their fathers (v. 5).
- That they must believe in Jesus Christ and in His mission, Atonement, and Resurrection and that there will be a final judgment (vv. 5–6).
- That those who believe in the Book of Mormon will believe the Bible and vice versa (v. 9).
- That they are the seed of Jacob (Israel) and that if they believe in Jesus Christ, repent, are baptized, and receive the Holy Ghost, it will be well with them in the day of judgment (v. 10).

Moroni's Final Purpose Statements

Moroni received the records from his father, Mormon, and then added his words (see Mormon 8–9, Moroni 1–10, and portions of Ether). Moroni said that “my father hath made this record, and he hath written the intent thereof” (Mormon 8:5; see 3:20–22, 5:14–15; and 7). Moroni summarized his father's intent by saying that he hoped the record would help its writers to “rid our garments of the blood of our brethren” (Mormon 9:37) and that these brethren would be restored to the knowledge of Jesus Christ and that God, the Father, would “remember the covenant which he hath made with the house of Israel” (Mormon 9:37).

I continue to marvel at the precise parallels found in all these purpose statements, all of them so beautifully summarized in the title page to the Book of Mormon.

In addition to the title page, the concluding chapter of the Book of Mormon, Moroni 10, contains eight truths relating to all these purpose statements. Each truth begins with an exhortation.

1. “I would exhort you . . . that ye would remember how merciful the Lord hath been . . . and ponder it in your hearts” (v. 3).
2. “I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true” (v. 4).
3. “I would exhort you that ye deny not the power of God” (v. 7).
4. “I exhort you, my brethren, that ye deny not the gifts of God” (v. 8).
5. “I would exhort you . . . that ye remember that every good gift cometh of Christ” (v. 18).

6. “I would exhort you . . . that ye remember that he is the same yesterday, today and forever” (v. 19).

7. “I exhort you to remember these things” (v. 27).

8. “I would exhort you that ye would come unto Christ” (v. 30).

The last two exhortations focus on “these things” and on Jesus Christ. “These things” refers to the written records, and Moroni’s exhortation parallels Nephi’s: there will be a final judgment, and we will see Nephi and Moroni, to ensure an accountability concerning what we have done with the records (see 2 Nephi 33:10–15). Finally, Moroni invites us to come unto Christ and be perfected in Him (see Moroni 10:30, 32). Thus end the large plates, with this stirring Christ-centered invitation.

But what about the end of the small plates? It is no surprise that the small plates, those magnificent writings that Nephi started and that Amaleki concluded, parallel Moroni’s exhortations: “I shall deliver up these plates unto him, *exhorting* all men to come unto God, the Holy One of Israel, and believe in prophesying, and in revelations, and in the ministering of angels, and in the gift of speaking with tongues, and in the gift of interpreting languages, and in all things which are good; for there is nothing which is good save it comes from the Lord: and that which is evil cometh from the devil. And now my beloved brethren, I would that ye should come unto Christ, who is the Holy One of Israel, and partake of his salvation, and the power of his redemption. Yea, come unto him, and offer your whole souls as an offering unto him, and continue in fasting and praying, and endure to the end; and as the Lord liveth ye will be saved” (Omni 1:25–26; emphasis added).

The Prophet Joseph Smith translated the small and large plates by the gift and power of God and declared to the world that “the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book.”³ This bold declaration takes on greater meaning when it is harmonized with the declared purposes of the Book of Mormon. ■

Notes

1. A summary of those covenants that God made with Abraham is that Jesus Christ would be born in Abraham's lineage, that Abraham's posterity would be more numerous than the stars or sand on the seashores, that his posterity would bless all nations, and, finally, that they were promised a land of inheritance (see Genesis 17; 22; Abraham 2:6–11; Bible Dictionary, s.v. "Abraham" and "Abraham, Covenant of," 601–2).

2. See also the excellent article by Andrew C. Skinner, "The Foundational Doctrine of 1 Nephi 11–14," *Religious Educator* 2, no. 2 (2001): 139–55.

3. *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1957), 4:461.