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Heather Hardy

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“Saving Christianity”: The Nephite Fulfillment of Jesus’s Eschatological Prophecies

Heather Hardy

AS PRESENTED IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS, Jesus’s central teaching consisted of a call to prepare for the coming kingdom of God.¹ His message was about the arrival of this kingdom rather than a detailed portrayal of its nature. While he addressed the latter indirectly, through parables and miracles that suggested the radical reversals that the kingdom of God would bring,² Jesus spoke directly of its imminence, repeatedly

1. Each of the synoptic Gospel writers summarized Jesus’s message in terms of the kingdom of God. In Luke’s account, Jesus explains that proclaiming the kingdom was the very purpose for which he had been sent (Luke 4:43). Matthew similarly identifies “the gospel of the kingdom” as Jesus’s essential message, framing his five-chapter narrative of the Sermon on the Mount and earliest miracles with a near-verbatim repetition: “And Jesus went about . . . teaching in their synagogues, and preaching *the gospel of the kingdom*, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people” (Matthew 4:23; 9:35, emphasis added). Mark likewise explains: “Jesus came into Galilee, preaching *the gospel of the kingdom of God*” and adds Jesus’s own injunction, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:14–15, emphasis added).

Norman Perrin emphatically affirmed the scholarly consensus behind this conclusion in *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 54: “The central aspect of the teaching of Jesus was that concerning the Kingdom of God. On this there can be no doubt and today no scholar does, in fact, doubt it. Jesus appeared as the one who proclaimed the Kingdom; all else in his message and ministry serves as a function in relation to that proclamation and derives its meaning from it.”

2. Half of Jesus’s parables explicitly portray some characteristic of the anticipated kingdom of God. These include the growing seed (Mark 4:26–29), the sower (Matthew 13:3–9//Mark 4:3–9//Luke 8:5–8), the tares (Matthew 13:37–43), the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31–32//Mark 4:30–32//Luke 13:18–19), the leaven (Matthew 13:33//

declaring that the kingdom would come within the lifetime of his hearers.³ It was to arrive by an act of divine judgment, following which the Son of man would gloriously descend from heaven, gather the righteous around him, and usher in an entirely new order of reality.

These widely recognized and commonly repeated observations were brought to the fore a century ago in Albert Schweitzer's groundbreaking book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, which featured a review of the work of several German academics seeking to understand Jesus's ministry in the cultural and religious context of first-century Jewish messianic expectations.⁴ Although subsequent scholars have disputed

Luke 13:20–21), the hidden treasure (Matthew 13:44), the pearl of great price (Matthew 13:45–46), the net (Matthew 13:47–50), the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:23–35), the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16), the wicked husbandmen (Matthew 21:33–41//Mark 12:1–9//Luke 20:9–16), the great banquet (Matthew 22:1–14//Luke 14:15–24), the budding fig tree (Matthew 24:32–35//Mark 13:28–31//Luke 21:29–33), the faithful servant (Matthew 24:45–51//Mark 13:34–37//Luke 12:35–48), the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1–13), the talents (Matthew 25:14–30//Luke 19:12–27), and the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31–46).

3. Jesus's most explicit sayings regarding the imminent coming of the kingdom include: Matthew 16:28//Mark 9:1//Luke 9:27, which assert that some of those standing before Jesus will not taste of death until they have seen the arrival of the kingdom, and Matthew 24:34//Mark 13:30//Luke 21:32, which state that "this generation shall not pass" until all of Jesus's eschatological predictions about the coming of the kingdom are fulfilled. Additional passages generally considered to imply an imminent coming of the kingdom include Mark 8:38, which suggests that "this generation" shall witness the Son of man coming in glory; Matthew 10:23, which indicates that the Son of man will come before the apostles complete their mission to the cities of Israel; and Matthew 26:29//Mark 14:25//Luke 22:18, which assert that Jesus will not drink wine again until he does so in the kingdom.

Modern biblical scholarship likewise affirms Jesus's teaching of the kingdom's imminence. Werner Georg Kümmel summarized the position of mid-twentieth-century scholarship in *Promise and Fulfilment*, trans. Dorothea M. Barton (German orig., 1953; London: SCM Press, 1966): "Jesus expected the eschatological consummation in the near future and knew its imminent coming to be announced by premonitory signs in the present" (p. 21); and later, "Jesus does not only proclaim in quite general terms the future coming of the Kingdom of God, but also its *imminence* . . . he emphasized this so concretely that he limited it to the lifetime of his hearers' generation" (p. 149).

4. Albert Schweitzer published *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* ("History of Life-of-Jesus Research") in 1906; it was translated into English by William Montgomery

many of the details of his analysis (as scholars are wont to do), few now contend with his assertion that Jesus's teachings were dominated by a culturally conditioned belief in the imminence of end-times. In establishing the centrality of eschatology to Jesus's gospel message, Schweitzer also made evident a serious problem at the heart of the New Testament account—namely, the imminent events that Jesus proclaimed seem never to have materialized, at least not in the public manner that a plain-sense interpretation of his words predict.

The indisputability of this realization has also been widely acknowledged in scholarly circles. Echoing Schweitzer's observations, for example, Bart Ehrman articulated their brusque and uncomfortable conclusion:

Jesus anticipated that the end was coming within his own generation. God would soon send a cosmic judge from heaven to right all the wrongs of this world, to overthrow the wicked and oppressive powers that opposed God and his people, and to bring in a perfect kingdom in which there would be no hatred, war, disease, calamity, despair, sin or death. People needed to repent in view of the oncoming day of judgment, for it was about here. If

and published in 1910 as *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress From Reimarus to Wrede* (London: Black, 1910). A second German edition, containing significant revisions, was published in 1913, but the revised edition did not appear in English until 2001: John Bowden, ed., *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001).

Historical Jesus scholarship began with the prolific publication of the lives of Jesus in nineteenth-century Germany and spread to the English-speaking world with the publication of a translation of Schweitzer's book in 1910. Broadly speaking, the historical Jesus movement encompasses academic inquiry into the life and death of Jesus, with an emphasis on uncovering his objectives and message within the background of Second Temple Judaism (400 BC–AD 100) as verifiable by historical methods, and to identify continuities and discontinuities between his teachings, Jewish tradition, and the aims of the early church. It recognizes the source priority of the synoptic Gospels and has established criteria for assessing the authenticity of Jesus's purported sayings. For overviews, see Benedict T. Viviano's "Eschatology and the Quest for the Historical Jesus," in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry L. Walls (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 73–90; and N. T. Wright's "Quest for Historical Jesus," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:796–802.

Jesus were to be taken literally—that is, if he really meant that the Son of man was to arrive in the lifetime of his disciples—he was obviously wrong.⁵

Neither was the apparent nonfulfillment of Jesus's eschatological prophecies lost on his contemporaries. F. E. Peters, for example, considers it to be one of the two principal reasons why Jews were not convinced of his messiahship:

There was, in the first instance, the ignominious execution suffered by Jesus, which was not one envisioned by most Jews who were expecting a Messiah. . . . But a more powerfully transparent counterargument was the fact that none of the signs and portents of the End-Time had occurred, the cataclysmic events and the cosmic upheaval that everyone, including Jesus' followers, and Jesus himself, had expected.⁶

Jesus could hardly be considered Israel's Messiah if he could not pass the Deuteronomic test for being a legitimate prophet of Israel's God (see Deuteronomy 18:20–22).

While each of the New Testament writers presupposed the impending fulfillment of Jesus's eschatological prophecies, as time went on, the delay of the Lord's coming became increasingly problematic for early Christians as well.⁷ Paul, writing to the Thessalonians in the earliest New Testament document, expected to personally witness the glorious return of the resurrected Christ:

5. Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 243.

6. F. E. Peters, *The Voice, the Word, the Books* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 27–28.

7. See notes 1 and 3 for Matthew, Mark, and Luke. For examples of other New Testament writers' expectations of the imminent fulfillment of Jesus's eschatological prophecies, see John 21:20–23; Romans 13:11–12; 1 Corinthians 7:29–31; 10:11; 15:51–52; 1 Thessalonians 2:19; 3:13; 4:15–17; 5:2–10, 23; Hebrews 10:25, 37; James 5:7–9; 1 Peter 1:5–7; 4:7; 5:10; 2 Peter 3:1–14; 1 John 2:18, 28; Jude 1:16–19; and Revelation 22:7, 10–12, 20.

The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then *we which are alive and remain* shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air. (1 Thessalonians 4:16–17, emphasis added)

Writing a couple of decades later, Mark likewise depicted a clear belief in the nearness and literalness of the coming of the Son of man. Here, for example, he has Jesus conclude an extended prophecy regarding the calamities preceding his coming in glory within an explicit time frame: “Verily I say unto you, that this generation shall not pass, till all these things be done” (Mark 13:30).

But as Jesus’s generation began dying off, later writers softened the urgency of Jesus’s eschatological message. Paula Fredricksen traces subtle alterations by Matthew and Luke, including the possibility of both a present and future kingdom of God, and highlights the very different nature of John’s Gospel that “gives way to moral and metaphysical eschatology” in place of the temporal eschatology so prominent in the earlier synoptics.⁸ By the second epistle of Peter, one of the last New Testament compositions, we read that scoffers are taunting, “Where is the promise of his coming?” Peter urges the church to withstand the skepticism by assuring them that “the Lord is not slack concerning his coming” and by offering two justifications—first, that time itself might be a relative notion: “One day is with the Lord as a thousand years”; and second, that the Lord might be graciously postponing his return in order to prolong the opportunity for repentance (2 Peter 3:1–9). Fredricksen neatly summarizes this diminishing emphasis on Jesus’s eschatological teachings within the New Testament itself. “The later the writing,” she explains, “the lower its level of commitment to an imminent Apocalypse.”⁹

8. Paula Fredricksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 89.

9. Fredricksen, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 89. For an overview of early Christian responses to the problem of the delayed parousia, see Nicholas H. Taylor, “Early Christian Expectations concerning the Return of Jesus: From Imminent Parousia to the Millennium,” *Journal of Theology for South Africa* 104 (July 1999): 32–43.

Twentieth-century exegetes renewed the efforts to reconcile the dissonance of unmet expectations after Schweitzer gave such prominent and undeniable place to Jesus's unfulfilled eschatological promises. Their basic approaches have included stretching the language of Jesus's prophecies to accommodate metaphorical interpretations; extending the time frame and separating the elements of the eschatological package (with only the destructive judgment coming "soon" in the overthrow of Jerusalem in AD 70 and the rest following in a far distant second coming); shifting expectations from literal, publicly witnessed, historical events to spiritual, individually perceived, or existential ones; and proposing that much of Jesus's eschatology had already been realized—in his mortal ministry, in the bestowal of the Holy Spirit, and in the establishment of the church.¹⁰ Each of these interpretations, though, has

10. Randall Otto provides an overview of twentieth-century theological responses to the problem of the delayed parousia in "Dealing with Delay: A Critique of Christian Coping," *Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 34/4 (2004): 150–60. This article includes a summary of arguments by Schweitzer (quest of the historical Jesus), Rudolph Bultmann and Karl Barth (existential theology), C. H. Dodd (realized eschatology), Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann (theology of hope), N. T. Wright (third quest), and various evangelical approaches.

Latter-day Saint apostle James E. Talmage was clearly aware of the controversy sparked by Schweitzer's work, and he repeated a range of popular (though largely unsatisfying) solutions to the apparent nonfulfillment of several of Jesus's "this generation" prophecies in *Jesus the Christ* (1st ed., 1915; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1956). See his explanations of "the prolongation of the life of John the apostle" (p. 369); the possibility of separate time frames for the fulfillment of the "little apocalypse" of Mark 13 and parallels (p. 572); and the proposed redefinition of "this generation" as referring to "the whole Jewish race" (p. 590). For the latter he cites an apologetic work of his day that solved the problem of the parousia's delay only by appeal to a thoroughly untextual interpretation.

In the last hundred years, the effort to account for inconsistencies and tensions in the Bible, including those regarding the delayed parousia, has largely been a Protestant endeavor, stemming from concern for the foundations of their own religious legitimacy that traditionally has been derived solely from scripture. Latter-day Saints, by contrast, who claim to be guided by continuing revelation in addition to the Bible, need not fear scholarship that reads early Christian writings in critical-historical ways. Adopting only those exegetical methods that have been developed to sustain biblical inerrancy may, in fact, diminish the significance of the Book of Mormon's witness.

been found lacking in one sense or another and does not fully satisfy the concerns that the nonfulfillment of Jesus's prophecies cast on the reliability of God's word, on Jesus as its messenger, and ultimately on the validity of the entire Christian tradition. As Schweitzer famously put it:

Inasmuch as the non-fulfillment of its eschatology is not admitted, our Christianity rests upon a fraud. . . . The sole argument which could save Christianity would be a proof that the parousia [Christ's postresurrection return] had really taken place at the time for which it was announced; and obviously no such proof can be produced.¹¹

Many have no doubt joined Schweitzer in conceding the inescapability of this troubling conclusion, but the Book of Mormon, published seventy-five years before Schweitzer's work, makes a startling assertion to the contrary. The words of 3 Nephi testify precisely that Jesus's Palestinian prophecies about a great day of judgment, the coming of the Lord, and the inauguration of the kingdom of God *were* fulfilled, in full eschatological detail and in strict accordance with the timetable he had assigned. An Israelite remnant, prepared to receive him, recognized the resurrected Jesus as the promised Messiah, and he established God's kingdom among them within the lifetime of the generation that had rejected him a hemisphere away. If its account is true, the Book of Mormon, as another testament of Jesus Christ, provides the very witness Schweitzer demanded to "save Christianity." And whether or not one believes its account is true, the book can be understood as attempting such a saving gesture.

A clarification about the meaning of *eschatology* is perhaps in order before proceeding, since it might seem strange to say that the coming of God's kingdom has already taken place but that the end of times has nonetheless not definitively arrived. Coined from the Greek by Protestant theologians in the nineteenth century, the word *eschatology* means the study of end-times and originally referred to a cluster of Christian doctrines concerning the second coming, the resurrection of the dead,

11. Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 22.

and the last judgment. Over time, its scholarly usage has broadened to include related Old Testament expectations of God's future action in history to judge and save his people in order, as E. P. Sanders has explained, to "create an ideal world . . . [where] peace and justice would prevail."¹² R. E. Clements has similarly clarified that, broadly speaking, "Eschatology is the study of ideas and beliefs concerning the end of the present world order, and the introduction of a new order."¹³ In this wider sense, eschatology is not necessarily synonymous with the ultimate consummation of history. Its key elements, instead, include God's definitive intervention, a context of judgment, and the dramatic transformation of a degenerate world for the purpose of ushering in a new era of blessing.

It is likewise important to recognize that the Book of Mormon text explicitly states that eschatological fulfillment among the Nephites, marked by Jesus's twice-repeated proclamation that "old things are done away and all things have become new" (3 Nephi 12:47; 15:2–7), in no way precludes the reenactment of many of the same prophecies at a later date. The Jesus of the Book of Mormon anticipates such multiple fulfillments when he indicates to the Nephites—his New World audience—that the fruition of many events prophesied by Isaiah and others both "have been and shall be" (3 Nephi 23:3). Indeed, the resurrected Lord reveals to his New World faithful that the time when he would return in glory—when "the elements should melt with fervent heat, and the earth should be wrapt together as a scroll, and the heavens and the earth should pass away" (3 Nephi 26:3; cf. Isaiah 34:4; 2 Peter 3:10)—is still many generations in the future (3 Nephi 28:7–8). Yet the events surrounding the coming of Christ to the Nephites so closely prefigure those of his final appearance

12. E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993), 184.

13. R. E. Clements, *Prophecy and Covenant* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 105. Clements goes on to explain that this broad definition "leaves room for two important features which generally persist in Israel's hope. These are that Yahweh's purpose with the world is bound up inextricably with his unique covenant relationship to Israel, and that his dealings with Israel take place in the arena of history" (p. 105).

that, as Latter-day Saint President Ezra Taft Benson once noted, “In the Book of Mormon we find a pattern for preparing for the Second Coming.”¹⁴

The overwhelming significance of the Nephite eschaton can hardly be overstated. In answer to both Schweitzer’s and Ehrman’s concerns, the Nephite eschaton does, in fact, “save Christianity” by vindicating Jesus as a prophet. Even if misunderstood by his original audience, he was not “wrong”; the grand events that he predicted did indeed occur as he described them, in literal detail and within the generation of his hearers, regardless of the fact that some of them would be fulfilled again, many centuries later, on an even larger scale, and even though they did not occur to or for his original audience.¹⁵ As far as we know, Jesus’s postresurrection ministry to the Nephites is the only reported incident that comprehensively fits the description of “eschaton,” a concept that has otherwise been pieced together from prophetic expectation rather than from actual enactment. Presented in greater clarity than in the prophecies offered by either the mortal Jesus or by others, the narrative of Christ’s coming to the Nephites provides a type for each of the components of his still-future, universal, and glory-filled second coming:

14. Ezra Taft Benson, *A Witness and a Warning: A Modern-Day Prophet Testifies of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 20.

15. There remains at least one problematic, apparently unfulfilled prophecy, and that is at Matthew 16:28//Luke 9:27: “there be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.” It does not seem that anyone in Jesus’s original audience actually saw his descent among the Nephites. Various rationalizations might be advanced—some of Jesus’s followers in Palestine might have seen the events at Bountiful in a vision, or there may have been a transmission problem from the original Aramaic to the Greek of the New Testament (note that Luke softens the impact by changing “see the Son of man coming in his kingdom” to “see the kingdom of God,” a much more ambiguous expression)—but these sorts of explanations are much like those put forward by Christians through the centuries to account for the apparent nonfulfillment of prophecy. Perhaps it is better to simply acknowledge that the hypothesis of this paper does not explain every verse in the Gospels. But it does provide a coherent reading of *almost* everything concerning the imminent coming of the kingdom.

the calamitous judgment of the wicked, the descent of the risen Lord from heaven, and the establishment of the kingdom of God.¹⁶

It may seem a strange claim that Jesus's Old World prophecies were fulfilled on the other side of the world, in a manner that would have been impossible for his original audience to verify; but Jesus speaks in the Book of Mormon of a similar misunderstanding when he tells his Nephite disciples that "ye are they of whom I said, 'Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd'" (3 Nephi 15:21;¹⁷ cf. John 10:16). This identification of the Nephites as Jesus's "other sheep" demonstrates that, so far as the Book of Mormon is concerned, Jesus prophesied on at least one occasion in Jerusalem of events that would transpire in the New World, even though his original hearers could neither understand nor even imagine the prophecy being fulfilled in such a manner. Jesus continues:

"And they understood me not, for they supposed [the other sheep] had been the Gentiles; for they understood not that the Gentiles should be converted through their preaching. And they understood me not that I said they shall hear my voice; and . . . the Gentiles should not at any time hear my voice—. . . But behold, ye have both heard my voice, and seen me; and ye are my sheep."
(3 Nephi 15:22–24)

While acknowledging the difficulty of the prophecy as given, the Jesus of the Book of Mormon here indicates that his words in the New

16. Latter-day Saints sometimes refer to the church as "the kingdom of God" because therein can be found the "power and authority from God to administer in the ordinances of the gospel and officiate in the priesthood of God," as Joseph Smith taught; see *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, selected and arranged by Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 271. But Latter-day Saints also believe that, as will again be the case after the second coming, the Nephites enjoyed the kingdom of God in a fuller form, as "both an ecclesiastical and a political kingdom"; see Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 415.

17. Book of Mormon quotations are punctuated according to Grant Hardy, *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

Testament can only be understood if taken in their plain sense: his sheep include those who have actually, physically, heard his voice. Earlier in the text, he explains that stiffneckedness and unbelief kept his Old World hearers from this truth (3 Nephi 15:18), and in 3 Nephi 16:4 he offers two different methods whereby those at Jerusalem could still receive knowledge about these “other sheep”—and by extension about the timely fulfillment of his eschatological prophecies as well—either by asking the Father in Jesus’s name or by eventually receiving the Nephite record of his postresurrection visit to them.

The day of judgment

Third Nephi 8, the beginning of the account of Jesus’s visit to the New World, opens with a reference to Samuel the Lamanite’s then-forty-year-old prophecy about three days of darkness at the time of Jesus’s death in Jerusalem. The faithful among Book of Mormon peoples are waiting for the sign to be given. In the intervening decades, a combined body of Nephites and Lamanites has engaged in protracted conflict with subversive robber bands, followed by several years of prosperity, the rise of pride, and sudden social disintegration. Both the church and government have collapsed (3 Nephi 6:20–24; 7:14), and many prophets have preached repentance and been persecuted and slain. And then, in the thirty-fourth year following Jesus’s birth, a great storm arises, “such an one as never had been known in all the land” (3 Nephi 8:5).

In the subsequent account of the Nephites’ eschatological day of judgment, Mormon—the narrator at this point in the book that bears his name—narrates events with an eye to the fulfillment of prophecy, both vindicating the truthfulness of God’s word and also justifying the truly horrific extent of the destruction. Mormon integrates the words of several prophets unique to the Book of Mormon—those especially of Nephi, Zenos, and Samuel—in his description of the ruin: thunderings and lightnings (3 Nephi 8:12; 1 Nephi 12:4; 19:11; Helaman 14:21); quaking of the earth (3 Nephi 8:17; 1 Nephi 12:4); vapor of darkness (3 Nephi 8:20; 1 Nephi 12:5; 19:11); tumultuous noises (3 Nephi 10:9;

1 Nephi 12:4); highways broken up (3 Nephi 8:13; Helaman 14:24); many cities sunk and burned (3 Nephi 8:14; 1 Nephi 12:4) or otherwise left desolate (3 Nephi 8:14; Helaman 14:24); and rocks rent and found in broken fragments and in seams and cracks upon all the face of the land (3 Nephi 8:18; Helaman 14:22; cf. 1 Nephi 12:4).

Perhaps even more terrifying than the three hours of “great and terrible destruction” are the three days of complete darkness, so thick that fires cannot be kindled. Mormon tells of great mourning and reports the specific cause of the destruction as perceived by the survivors. He again demonstrates the precise fulfillment of Samuel’s predictions by incorporating the Lamanite prophet’s words:

And there was . . . howling and weeping among all the people continually; . . . and in another place they were heard to cry and mourn, saying, “O that we had repented before this great and terrible day, and had not killed and stoned the prophets, and cast them out.” (3 Nephi 8:23, 25; cf. Helaman 13:32–33)

A voice is then heard from heaven, in the midst of the darkness, proclaiming the extent of the damage—sixteen cities burned with fire, sunk in the sea, or covered with earth—and claiming responsibility for the destruction, in each case “to hide their iniquities and abominations from before my face, that the blood of the prophets and the saints shall not come up any more unto me against them” (3 Nephi 9:5, 7, 8, 9, 11). To the spared, the voice then declares itself to be that of “Jesus Christ the Son of God” (3 Nephi 9:15) and invites the Nephites to repent and return, offering a preview of his forthcoming ministry (3 Nephi 9:13–22; cf. Helaman 13:11).

Mormon, the reader must assume, does not know of the prophecies Jesus gave in Galilee and Judea concerning the events that would precede the arrival of the kingdom of God. Consistent with this, he does not include in his account distinctive phrases from Jesus’s mortal preaching, as he does from the writings of the Nephite prophets. Instead, he tells us that it is up to his latter-day readers to “search the scriptures” and recognize the fulfillment of Jesus’s words (known to them from the

Christian scriptures) in light of their correspondence with the events depicted in 3 Nephi:

And now, whoso readeth, let him understand; he that hath the scriptures, let him search them, and see and behold if . . . all these things are not unto the fulfilling of the prophecies of many of the holy prophets. (3 Nephi 10:14)

When Jesus spoke in the Old World of end-times, he emphasized forthcoming tribulation. His most extended and explicit statement of the woes of the coming judgment is found in Mark 13 and its synoptic parallels in Matthew 24 and Luke 17 and 21. The connections between these accounts and Mormon's narrative are substantial. For example, we read in the Gospels that the coming of the Lord would be preceded by wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines and pestilences, the preaching and persecution of prophets, and signs from heaven, all of which are vividly depicted in Helaman and the early chapters of 3 Nephi.

Jesus's most harrowing and decisive prophecy, echoing Old Testament teachings that "the sun shall be darkened and the moon shall not give her light" (Mark 13:24; cf. Isaiah 13:10; Joel 3:15), is fulfilled in the "thick darkness" that Mormon reports, wherein "there was not any light seen, . . . neither the sun, nor the moon, nor the stars" (3 Nephi 8:20, 22). In Matthew 24 this verse is immediately followed by an additional prophecy: "And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn" (v. 30). This can be read as particular support for a Nephite fulfillment if we consider the "sign" here to be the three days of New World darkness (as noted by both Zenos and Samuel, prophets known to the Nephites) and the "tribes" to refer specifically to remnants of the house of Israel.¹⁸ Finally, to the Jews, Jesus

18. While Mormon clearly indicates the mourning among the people "because of the darkness and the great destruction which had come upon them" (3 Nephi 8:23), he also quotes Jesus explicitly addressing the Nephites as members of the scattered tribes of Israel (3 Nephi 10:4–6; 15:21–16:3) and alludes to the fulfillment of Zenos's and Samuel's prophecies of a *sign* of Jesus's death "concerning the three days of darkness, which should be . . . more especially given to those who are of the house of Israel"

promises that in the midst of the affliction the righteous will be spared (Mark 13:20, 27 and parallels).

Despite the impressive correspondences, it should be noted that Mormon gives no mention of events to fulfill two of Jesus's other predictions reported in Mark 13, namely the arrival of false Christs (vv. 6, 21–22) and the sign of the “abomination of desolation,” following which the righteous are to flee for safety (vv. 14–19; cf. Daniel 11:31). Many New Testament scholars have bracketed off these same two prophecies as being fulfilled at the time of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70 while clustering the remaining predictions for fulfillment at the time of the second coming.¹⁹ But as noted above, Jesus ends the discourse with a time limit that seems to apply to the totality, emphatically declaring, “Verily I say unto you, that this generation shall not pass, till *all these things* be done” (Mark 13:30, emphasis added).

A few other teachings reported in the Gospels bear mentioning in connection with the destruction reported in 3 Nephi. John the Baptist clearly preached of the imminence of the coming of the Lord, the need to prepare, and the fiery destruction awaiting those who failed to repent: “The axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire” (Matthew 3:10//Luke 3:9).²⁰ Jesus likewise indicated a fiery annihilation soon to come upon the wicked, to which he added a prophecy of destruction by drowning. He predicted a massive loss of life and emphasized the righteousness of the ensuing judgment by alluding to both the great flood

(1 Nephi 19:10; cf. Helaman 14:20). It should be noted that the Greek word rendered as “tribes” in Matthew 24:30, φυλαί, is the one used elsewhere in the New Testament to specifically denote the tribes of Israel.

19. According to W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 287–88, “from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards it has been generally agreed that the material [of Mark 13 and its parallels] is [a] composite” of thematically collecting sayings of Jesus given on different occasions. Many have suggested that three distinct matters are addressed in the chapter, including the persecution of the early church, the destruction of Jerusalem, and Christ's second coming.

20. Notably, the Baptist's teachings are echoed by Samuel as the Lamanite prophet assumes the New World role of Elias (see Helaman 14:9, 18).

of Noah's day and the destruction of Sodom: "And the flood came, and destroyed them all. . . . It rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all. Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed" (Luke 17:27, 29–30). Interestingly, the resurrected Jesus in 3 Nephi also alludes to both the flood and Sodom when he claims responsibility for the Nephite destruction: "Waters have I caused to come up in the stead thereof. . . . And because . . . there were none righteous among them, I did send down fire and destroy them" (3 Nephi 9:7, 11; cf. Genesis 7:18–23; 19:23–25).

Another of Jesus's prophecies that finds direct fulfillment in the Nephite eschaton is found in Luke 11:49–51. Recall that the resurrected Jesus declares in the darkness the cause of his judgment against sixteen cities, repeating five times that their inhabitants were destroyed "that the blood of the prophets . . . should not come up unto me any more against them" (3 Nephi 9:5, 7, 8, 9, 11). Compare this with Jesus's pronouncement in Luke 11:49–51:

I will send them prophets, . . . and some of them they shall slay and persecute: That the blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the foundation of the world, may be *required of this generation*; From the blood of Abel unto the blood of Zacharias: . . . verily I say unto you, It shall be *required of this generation*. (emphasis added)

With the great and terrible destruction that Jesus sends on the prophet-slaying Nephites, this prediction is fulfilled precisely and on schedule.

A final piece of evidence for the fulfillment of Jesus's own Old World prophecies among the Nephites is a suggestion to that effect made by the resurrected Lord himself via situational irony. Although readers of the Book of Mormon must assume that the Nephites did not have access to Jesus's mortal teachings, those readers themselves have such access through the New Testament. By quoting or alluding to these earlier words in the Book of Mormon text, Jesus is able to communicate more to his modern readers than he does to the Nephites on two counts. First, the words Jesus speaks have a double context for latter-day readers—that is, a Palestinian context and a Nephite one, which at times

can play off each other. And second, any differences between the two renditions—additions, omissions, or other changes in wording—are potentially fraught with meaning for those who are able to recognize the variations, all the more so if there is an indication that they were intended by Jesus himself.

Consider, for example, the passage in 3 Nephi 10:4–7. Jesus is here lamenting the judgment he has just executed by poignantly directing to the Nephite dead the same rhetorical question he had previously posed to the Pharisees: “How oft would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, . . . and ye would not” (3 Nephi 10:5; cf. Matthew 23:37//Luke 13:34). He explicitly likens the two groups under the identity of their common heritage: “O ye people of the House of Israel, ye that dwell at Jerusalem, as ye that have fallen” (3 Nephi 10:5), thereby connecting the stiffneckedness of both who, in their respective ways, have chosen death over life, contrary to the final exhortation of the Mosaic law (Deuteronomy 30:19; cf. Helaman 14:31). For the Nephite fallen, cursing rather than blessing has inevitably followed.

A conspicuous phrasal variation from Matthew to 3 Nephi is Jesus’s substitution of addressee from “O Jerusalem” to “O ye people of the House of Israel.” By repeating the term five times in four verses, Jesus demonstrates that he is not merely adjusting for particular geography, but is instead emphasizing the unity between the Nephites and the Jews and the continuity of his mission and ministries to both. By verse six, when he shifts his twice-rejected plea of “how oft would I have gathered you” to the one audience that can respond positively, we sense that the spared Nephites are standing in for collective Israel. They are one embodiment of the Israelite remnant, oft foretold by Isaiah, positioned here to accept the Lord’s invitation to repent and return that he might offer to Israel its promised blessing by establishing the kingdom of God among them.²¹

21. Isaiah prophesied that “in that day . . . the remnant of Israel, . . . such as are escaped of the house of Jacob, shall . . . stay upon the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. The remnant shall return, even the remnant of Jacob, unto the mighty God. For though [the] people Israel be as the sand of the sea, yet a remnant of them shall

Mormon closes his account of the Nephite destruction by making an explicit argument for belief on the basis of the fulfillment of several previously given prophecies. In doing so, he offers some inadvertent situational irony of his own as he admonishes:

Whoso readeth, let him understand; he that hath the scriptures, let him search them, and see and behold if all these deaths and destructions . . . are not unto the fulfilling of the prophecies of many of the holy prophets. . . . Yea, many have testified of these things at the coming of Christ, and were slain because they testified of these things. (3 Nephi 10:14–15)

Since readers have access to more scriptures than Mormon is supposed to have had, they can recognize here what he presumably could not—namely, that Jesus Christ himself was one of these holy prophets, slain, in some measure, because he too had “testified of these things.”

The coming of the Lord

As we have already noted, Jesus’s most pronounced eschatological teaching about the coming of the Lord is found in the thirteenth chapter of Mark (and its parallels), following his prophecy of forthcoming judgments:

But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, And the stars of heaven shall fall, and the powers that are in heaven shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of man coming in the clouds with power and great glory. And then shall he send his angels, and shall gather

return . . . [and] shall overflow with righteousness” (Isaiah 10:20–22). Paul alludes to this scripture in describing the saving activity for all Israel of those Jews who believed in Christ in the Old World (Romans 9:27; cf. 11:5), and the resurrected Jesus suggests that the Nephite survivors constitute this righteous remnant when he invites them, in the darkness, to repent and return unto him (3 Nephi 9:13; cf. 15:12; 20:10; 21:2; echoed by Mormon at 3 Nephi 5:23–24 and 10:16–17).

together his elect from the four winds, from the uttermost part of the earth to the uttermost part of heaven. (Mark 13:24–27)

It is in the same discourse that Jesus provides the much-discussed time frame for this advent: “Verily I say unto you, that this generation shall not pass, till all these things be done” (Mark 13:30).

Sometime after the terrifying earthly and heavenly portents subside in the New World, but “soon after the ascension of Christ into heaven” in the Old World (3 Nephi 10:18), a multitude of righteous survivors assemble at the temple in Bountiful and marvel over what has transpired among them when they hear another voice from heaven.²² This one is hushed and they strain to listen, only understanding upon the third iteration the utterance that pierces the souls of all who hear: “Behold my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, in whom I have glorified my name” (3 Nephi 11:7). The multitude cast their eyes upward, and, in Mormon’s understated description, see “a Man descending out of heaven . . . clothed in a white robe; and he came down and stood in the midst of them” (v. 8).

Despite the Father’s explicit introduction, the Nephites are genuinely puzzled when the resurrected Lord descends from the skies: “And the eyes of the whole multitude were turned upon him, and they durst not open their mouths, even one to another, and wist not what it meant, for they thought it was an angel that had appeared unto them” (3 Nephi 11:8).²³ It is only after Jesus identifies himself that they “remembered that it had been prophesied among them that Christ would show himself unto them” (v. 12) and recognize that the voice that addressed them

22. From a careful reading of internal evidence in 3 Nephi, S. Kent Brown concludes that Jesus’s visit to the Nephites occurred several months after his resurrection—still well within Jesus’s “this generation” horizon. See “When Did Jesus Visit the Americas?” in *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla: Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1998), 146–56.

23. This unexpected detail may function as a fulfillment marker in at least two ways. First, in providing an oblique reference to Jesus’s prophecy about angels gathering the elect from “the uttermost part of the earth” as we have just read (Mark 13:27); and second, in providing a typological connection between this account of the Lord’s coming and the episode of the prison-converted Lamanites in Helaman 5 (see below).

in the darkness belongs to the same divine personage now standing in their midst.

It appears that the Nephite survivors were not expecting a divine manifestation beyond Jesus's voice from heaven. Their experience had already transcended that of the Israelites at Sinai who, when terrified that the Lord himself might speak to them directly, pled for Moses's mediation (see Exodus 20:18–21). Their bewilderment is also explained by the expectations they would have derived from a prophecy given long before by Zenos, an Israelite prophet uniquely known among the Nephites:

“The Lord God shall surely visit all the House of Israel at that day, some with his voice, because of their righteousness, unto their great joy and salvation; and others with the thunderings and the lightnings of his power, by tempest, by fire, and by smoke, and vapor of darkness, and by the opening of the earth, and by mountains which shall be carried up.” (1 Nephi 19:11; cf. 3 Nephi 9:13).

Although six hundred years prior to the devastation, Book of Mormon prophet Nephi had clearly taught that the resurrected Lord would visit Lehi's posterity (“and after Christ shall have risen from the dead he shall show himself unto you, my children, and my beloved brethren” [2 Nephi 26:1]), the fact that Samuel the Lamanite, just a generation before, had not mentioned a postresurrection visit may have led the Nephites to forget the earlier prophecy or to interpret it other than literally.²⁴ Prophecy is always clearer in the hindsight of its fulfillment.

24. This may come as a surprise to many Latter-day Saints who have conflated Nephi's explicit prophecies with those of Samuel's, but a review of Helaman 13–15 easily confirms that Samuel did not, in fact, prophesy that the resurrected Jesus would appear among the Nephites. It can be surmised from the text that Samuel had *intended* to bring these good tidings (cf. Helaman 13:6–7) but because the people cast him out, he returned instead with predictions of judgment. Mormon does indicate that he has edited out many of Samuel's prophecies (14:1), but given both the significance of a prediction concerning a visit from Christ and Mormon's repeated use of the argument from fulfillment, it is doubtful that he would have targeted this sort of prophecy for deletion. Additionally, given the people's specific complaint mentioned in Helaman 16:19

The unprecedented event of the resurrected Lord visibly and publicly descending from the sky was without doubt glory filled—how could it have been otherwise?—but on an initial reading, Mormon’s rendition pales in comparison to Jesus’s more poetic prophecies. In composing this narrative, Mormon continues to integrate prior scriptural texts into an eyewitness account, and admittedly, the result is a little flat. He does not use the “Son of man” designation so prevalent in the Gospels (which Jesus borrowed from the seventh chapter of Daniel, a text with which the Nephites are unfamiliar), nor does he mention the evocative “clouds of heaven,” host of angels, or heralding trumpets included in Matthew’s account (see Matthew 24:30–31).

Mormon’s description relies instead on Nephi’s intentionally plain wording of his own apocalyptic vision.²⁵ Nephi, Mormon’s distant ancestor, was shown a sweeping panorama of world history only after the Spirit ascertained his belief in “the Son of the most high God” and promised Nephi that he would be shown “a man descending out of heaven,” whom he then identified as this very Son. Nephi later witnessed vapors of darkness and “great and terrible judgments” that would befall the Lehitites’ land of promise following the mortal death of the Redeemer. He then reported: “I saw the heavens open, and the Lamb of God descending out of heaven; and he came down and showed himself unto them” (1 Nephi 11:6–7; 12:5–6). Mormon incorporates several of these key but rather nondescript terms, including “a man descending out of heaven,” “came down,” and “did show himself unto them” (see 3 Nephi 11 headnote and v. 8). At first glance, the result seems far less distinctive than the grandeur that the long-awaited coming of Israel’s Messiah warrants.

Mormon’s account becomes a bit more interesting, however, when we realize that he is simultaneously interweaving allusions to at least one other scriptural text in his account of the Lord’s arrival at Bountiful.

of “Why will [Jesus] not show himself in this land as well as in the land of Jerusalem?” it is highly unlikely that Samuel had actually foretold Jesus’s Nephite ministry while preaching in Zarahemla.

25. For Nephi’s repeated articulation of his commitment to write and prophesy in “plain” language, see 2 Nephi 25:4, 7, 20, 28; 31:2–3; 33:6.

Several of the distinctive words that do show up in the opening verses of 3 Nephi 11 have their origins in a particular pericope in Nephite scripture. The fact that Jesus refers to the same story while speaking from heaven during the three days of darkness significantly increases the likelihood of Mormon's intentional employment of this cluster of borrowed phrases.

In 3 Nephi 9:20, Jesus enjoins the Nephites to come unto him (an invitation he repeats five times in the darkness discourse) and recommends that they emulate the faith of some Lamanites who were "baptized with fire and with the Holy Ghost" at the time of their conversion. The full account to which he is alluding is related in Helaman 5. In the story recounted in that text, the prophet brothers Nephi and Lehi have been cast into a Lamanite prison where they are mistreated and then protected from harm—first, by a miraculous pillar of fire that encircles them, and second, by repeated tremors of the earth and a cloud of darkness. An "awful solemn fear" comes upon their captors and fellow prisoners, and a voice pierces the darkness calling the Lamanites to repentance and bidding them twice to "seek no more to destroy my servants" (vv. 28, 32). When the Lamanites inquire among themselves how they might have the darkness removed, a Nephite dissenter in the group suggests that they "cry unto the voice, even until ye shall have faith in Christ" (v. 41), as they had been taught previously by Nephite missionaries. When they do so, the cloud is swept away; they too are surrounded by a pillar of fire and filled with the Holy Spirit; they hear the voice of the Father blessing them with peace because of their faith in his "Well Beloved" (v. 47); and angels come and minister to them.

The narrative and verbal connections between this story and Mormon's account of the coming of the resurrected Jesus are substantial. Both begin with menacing darkness and the discomfiting shaking of the earth (Helaman 5:27; 3 Nephi 8:6). While encompassed by the mysterious darkness, a large group of people who have once been taught about Jesus Christ are emphatically invited to repent (Helaman 5:29, 32; 3 Nephi 9:13, 22). They hear a penetrating voice, described as "still" or "small," which "did pierce even to the very soul" (Helaman 5:30; 3 Nephi

11:3). The “darkness” is “dispersed” (Helaman 5:42–43; 3 Nephi 10:9), and both groups “cast their eyes about” (Helaman 5:43; 3 Nephi 11:3) and look “from whence the voice came” (Helaman 5:48; 3 Nephi 11:5). The voice speaks three times, the third time commending the “Beloved” to its audience (Helaman 5:47; 3 Nephi 11:7). There is a pregnant moment of misapprehension (3 Nephi 9:20; 11:4, 8). When they “cast up their eyes again,” heavenly emissaries “come down out of heaven” and minister to them (Helaman 5:48; 3 Nephi 11:8).

It is noteworthy that Mormon here chooses to undergird his composition with a proleptic narrative rather than with his more customary use of prophecy. But his employment of allusions to the Lamanite prison episode demonstrates (albeit subtly) that the Nephite survivors took to heart both Jesus’s invitation and the historical example he proffered. Jesus offers this “more righteous” Nephite remnant a real choice, just as Samuel, the Lamanite prophet, had offered the people of Zarahemla a generation before (see Helaman 14:30–31). Surrounded by divinely dispatched darkness and destruction, they can repent of their sins and “choose life” by spiritually coming unto him as the Lamanites had before them. By doing so, they would be blessed not only with the forgiveness, healing, gathering, salvation, and community in the kingdom of God that the Redeemer’s mission entailed but also with the extraordinary blessings that the converted Lamanites had received: the dispersion of darkness, the change of mourning into joy, hearing the voice of the Father, being baptized with fire and the Holy Spirit, and being ministered to by angels. “But if not,” the Savior tells them, “the places of your dwellings shall become desolate” (3 Nephi 10:7; see Helaman 15:1), and the Lord’s physical coming to the Nephites would be forestalled.

Moroni, Mormon’s son and the last contributor to the Book of Mormon record, later articulates what is perhaps the most significant connection between the two episodes:

For it was by faith that Christ showed himself unto our fathers, after he had risen from the dead; and he showed not himself unto them until after they had faith in him. . . . But *because of the faith of*

men he has shown himself unto the world and glorified the name of the Father. (Ether 12:7–8)

Moroni continues, drawing his evidence from explicit statements of both the Father and the Son: “It was the faith of Nephi and Lehi that wrought the change upon the Lamanites, that they were baptized with fire and with the Holy Ghost” (Ether 12:14). For the argument here, however, the divine voices (more generously than Moroni’s summary) attribute the bestowal of the Holy Ghost to the faith of the converted Lamanites rather than to that of the Nephite prophets. Just as the Father commends the three hundred participants: “Peace, peace be unto you, *because of your faith in my Well Beloved*” (Helaman 5:47), Jesus’s voice in the darkness likewise explains that the Lamanites were blessed “*because of their faith in me* at the time of their conversion” (3 Nephi 9:20).

The coming of the resurrected Lord, then, to the righteous Nephites was the result of an interplay between divine action and human agency. The judgments that came upon the Nephites at the time of Jesus’s death, as well as the Lord’s subsequent offer of salvation, were unconditional, but whether this salvation would be brought to fruition was dependent on the Nephites’ faith in Christ. Mormon’s extended allusion to the Lamanite prison conversion teaches that Christ’s physical coming to the Nephites was necessarily preceded by their first spiritually coming unto him.

Interestingly, Mormon’s account of the coming of the Lord to the Nephites also includes verbal connections to New Testament accounts of two of Jesus’s postresurrection appearances in Jerusalem. The first, in 3 Nephi 11:5, indicates that just prior to Jesus’s descent, the Nephites “did look steadfastly towards heaven,” a clear echo of the ascension account of Acts 1:10–11, which reports that the disciples “looked steadfastly toward heaven” as Jesus was taken up, at which point two angels tell them, “This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.” The use of identical wording to describe Jesus’s subsequent Nephite descent bears witness to the fulfillment of the angels’ words.

Finally, in 3 Nephi 11:8, we learn that Jesus came down and “stood in the midst” of the Nephite multitude, a phrase that appears in a rare parallel between Luke’s and John’s Gospels describing Jesus’s first post-resurrection appearance to his assembled apostles. In both Luke 24:36 and John 20:19 we read that “Jesus . . . *stood in the midst* of them, and saith unto them, ‘Peace be unto you,’”²⁶ following which he showed them his wounds, inviting his closest associates to allay any doubts about his identity. He does the same for the Nephite multitude, first declaring that he is Jesus Christ, the voice who had spoken to them in the darkness (compare 3 Nephi 9:15, 18 and 11:10–11), and then bidding them again, one by one this time, to come unto him and know (in words that again parallel Nephi’s vision account) that he is the God of Israel and “the whole earth” (3 Nephi 11:14; cf. 1 Nephi 11:6 and Isaiah 54:5 quoted at 3 Nephi 22:5). Brant Gardner has aptly commented on the Old and New World connections of these scenes: “In the Old World, Jesus’s death was known and his display of his wounds verified that it was indeed he who was again alive. In a contrasting parallel, in the New World he was obviously alive, while the wounds showed that he had truly died.”²⁷

The Nephites are convinced of the divinity of the resurrected Jesus by the power of his destructive judgment, by the pronouncement of God the Father, by his glorious descent, by beholding the marks of his crucifixion, and by recognizing in him the fulfillment of prophecy. It is the Savior’s own voice in the darkness that first introduces him and his mission and issues an invitation to the people: “I have come into the world to bring redemption unto the world, to save the world from sin” (3 Nephi 9:21).²⁸ After he descends, Jesus repeats his introduction, “I am Jesus Christ; . . . I am the light and life of the world,” and the multitude

26. This is the identical blessing the Father bestowed on the prison-converted Lamanites in Helaman 5:47 (and the only use of this invocation in the Book of Mormon).

27. Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 5:340.

28. I have changed the first “unto” in this passage from the 1981 edition of the Book of Mormon to “into” in accordance with a recommendation from Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon: Part Five, Alma 56–3 Nephi 18* (Provo: FARMS, 2008), 3332–333.

falls to the earth. They cry “Hosanna,” demonstrating their recognition that he alone can bring salvation, and again fall at his feet in worship, thereby acknowledging him as their king (3 Nephi 11:10–11, 17).²⁹

The inauguration of the kingdom of God

According to Mormon’s account, the Lord dramatically intervenes in the Nephites’ affairs to both judge and save his people; and with the arrival of the resurrected Jesus at the temple in Bountiful, God’s kingdom is inaugurated upon the earth. Among the faithful, the resurrected Jesus brings into being the object of Israel’s eschatological hope. Israel’s God has returned as king in the midst of the Nephite remnant; he has defeated their enemies in the destructions of the “great storm”; and he has offered this righteous branch a return from its six-hundred-year exile by reminding his New World hearers repeatedly and emphatically of their covenant lineage and by conferring upon them a promised land for their inheritance.³⁰

29. Matthew L. Bowen identifies the Lord’s postresurrection advent to the Nephites as an enactment of Lehi’s dream. He focuses on the importance of worshipful prostration in each and also recognizes the dependence of Mormon’s account on Nephi’s wording. See “‘They Came Forth and Fell Down and Partook of the Fruit of the Tree’: Proskynesis in 3 Nephi 11:12–19 and 17:9–10 and Its Significance,” in *Third Nephi: An Incomparable Scripture*, ed. Andrew C. Skinner and Gaye Strathearn (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute and Deseret Book, 2012), 107–29.

30. The themes of this paragraph follow the repeated thesis of N. T. Wright’s *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), expressed here in one of its many iterations: “The most important thing to recognize about the first-century Jewish use of kingdom-language is that it was bound up with the hopes and expectations of Israel. ‘Kingdom of god’ was not a vague phrase, or a cipher with a general religious aura; . . . it was simply a Jewish way of talking about Israel’s god becoming king. . . . If, then, someone were to speak to Jesus’s contemporaries of YHWH’s becoming king, we may safely assume that they would have in mind, in some form or other, [a] two-sided story concerning the double reality of exile. Israel would ‘really’ return from exile; YHWH would finally return to Zion. But if these were to happen there would have to be a third element as well: evil, usually in the form of Israel’s enemies, must be defeated. Together these three themes form the meta-narrative implicit in the language of the kingdom” (pp. 202, 206).

New Testament scholar Norman Perrin indicates that in his mortal ministry Jesus employed kingdom terminology in referring to two related eschatological expectations: “He uses it in reference to God’s decisive intervention in history and human experience, and he uses it in reference to the state secured for the redeemed by that intervention.”³¹ The synoptic Gospels report few details about this latter expectation. Again from Perrin, “Jesus gives no systematic account of the state of things in the glorious future,”³² and elsewhere, “Jesus looked for a future consummation of that which was begun in his ministry, but he tells nothing about the form that such a consummation would take.”³³ In Christ’s Nephite ministry, many of the particulars of such a consummation of God’s kingdom are made manifest.

God the Father, in announcing Jesus’s advent to the Nephites, is presented in 3 Nephi as implicitly recognizing his Son’s sovereign relationship with this far-flung remnant of Israel. The words with which he introduces Jesus, “Behold my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (3 Nephi 11:7), draw on two Old Testament texts, Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1; and as John P. Meier has explained in connection with the similar pronouncement made at Christ’s baptism, both passages point to the kingship of Jesus. The enthronement context of the first allusion implies that the Son of God is the promised Davidic Messiah, while the second reference suggests that he is the servant who has been appointed to “reestablish the covenant community of Israel.”³⁴

Likewise, Jesus identifies himself to the Nephites as Israel’s shepherd (3 Nephi 15:17–16:3; 18:31; cf. Mormon 5:17), a royal symbol that N. T. Wright explains as having “deep roots in the ancient Israelite tradition of monarchy.”³⁵ As such, he assumes the role of the Nephites’ sovereign,

31. Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, 60.

32. Norman Perrin, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 21.

33. Perrin, *Kingdom of God*, 188.

34. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1994), 2:106.

35. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 645; see also pp. 533–34 for a review of Old Testament passages that include shepherd/king imagery.

claiming and blessing them as his people. He declares the fulfillment of the law of Moses, instituting new commandments and ordinances in its place. He establishes a church and authorizes its leaders. He bequeaths inheritances of land. In the vacuum created by the recent disintegration of church and government, Jesus inaugurates the kingdom of God, a political and religious realm in which his will is to be done. This new order results in two hundred years of peace, prosperity, and social harmony (4 Nephi 1:1–22).

But Jesus is a divine king, “the God of the whole earth,” and his kingdom is not merely a temporal one. Among the Nephites he also establishes his spiritual dominion, welcoming the righteous into his presence and imparting to them the blessings of salvation. The nature and extent of the Nephite theophany is unprecedented: here, as Lord, Jesus personally visits thousands of the faithful, not just a single prophet as at Sinai or indirectly via the Holy Spirit as at the Pentecost. For the several days he is with the Nephites, he teaches, heals, and ministers. He explicitly and repeatedly invites the multitude to enter into a relationship with him, one that is characterized simultaneously by his tender nearness and his majestic distance.³⁶

“Come unto me” is the catchphrase with which Christ beckons the New World faithful.³⁷ He first issues this invitation in the darkness, compassionately reaching out to the traumatized survivors even as he declares his glory. He repeats the phrase when inviting the multitude to verify the wounds of his crucifixion. Alluding to both of these unforgettable occasions, Jesus adds their common phrase to the Nephite version of the Beatitudes, reiterating the centrality of a relationship with him to the new order he has brought: “Blessed are the poor in spirit *who come unto me*, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (3 Nephi 12:3; cf. Matthew 5:3).

36. In a similar vein, Rudolf Bultmann speaks at some length about the simultaneous remoteness and nearness of God in *Jesus and the Word* (German orig., 1926; New York: Scribner’s, 1958), 133–219.

37. See 3 Nephi 9:14, 22; 11:14; 12:3, 19, 20, 23, 24; 18:25, 32; 21:6, 27; 27:20; 30:2.

Although “come unto me” does not appear in the Matthean Sermon on the Mount (but see Matthew 11:28), Jesus incorporates the phrase five more times in his Nephite rendition, emphasizing his sovereign invitation to the Israelite remnant and providing latter-day readers with another instance of situational irony. These additional words highlight the shift in context between two nearly identical sermons: when first given, Jesus was an itinerant preacher at the beginning of his mortal ministry speaking to an assembly of the curious; among the Nephites he speaks as Lord to an audience humbly prepared to receive him as such. As Jesus explains to the Nephite multitude the requirements of discipleship in consequence of the fulfillment of the law of Moses, he points neither to the commandments nor to the code of ethics he has just given (3 Nephi 11–14) but again to their new relationship with him. Suggesting that salvation was always to be found in his own personhood, Jesus informs them not only that “I am he that gave the law,” but “I *am* the law. . . . Look unto *me*, . . . and ye shall live” (3 Nephi 15:5, 9; cf. Mosiah 13:27–35).

After judging the wicked, Jesus’s entire Nephite ministry is one of blessing the righteous whom he has spared, who, as Mormon reports, had “great favors shown unto them, and great blessings poured out upon their heads” (3 Nephi 10:18). Jesus likewise confirms the beatific purpose of his mission: “The Father . . . sent me to bless you” (3 Nephi 20:26; cf. 4 Nephi 1:17–18). From Mormon’s narrative, the reader gathers that the following blessings are integral to Jesus’s inauguration of the kingdom, emanating from his sovereign presence among them:

- the light of his example (3 Nephi 9:18; 11:11; 15:9; 18:16)
- the intimate sense of God’s nearness (3 Nephi 10:6; 11:15; 17:15–17; 19:14–15, 29)
- baptism by fire and the gift of the Holy Ghost (3 Nephi 9:20; 12:1; 19:13–14; 27:20)
- forgiveness of sin (3 Nephi 9:21; 12:2)
- prophecy and the interpretation of scripture (3 Nephi 16; 20–26)

- healing (3 Nephi 9:13; 17:7–10; 26:15; cf. Isaiah 35:4–6)
- mediation with the Father (3 Nephi 17:17; 19:22–24)
- the blessing of children (3 Nephi 17:21–24)
- the ministering of angels (3 Nephi 17:24; 19:14–15)
- purification (3 Nephi 19:25–29; 27:19; 28:13–15)
- the unveiling of God’s mysteries, especially how his covenant plan for Israel will be accomplished (3 Nephi 16:4–20; 20:10–26:5, 9–10)
- redemption from death, as evidenced in the resurrection of deceased saints (3 Nephi 23:9–11); the raising of the dead (26:15); the transfiguration of the three disciples (3 Nephi 28:12–15, 37–40); and the promise of eternal life (9:14; 15:9)
- and ultimately, salvation itself, as Jesus pronounces that none of those present would be lost (3 Nephi 9:22; 11:33; 27:6, 30–31)

Among the Nephites Jesus brings to fulfillment the promises left unfinished in his Palestinian ministry, revealing to these followers the content and contours of his salvific blessing. Mormon’s narrative, for example, describes the realization of such messages from Jesus’s kingdom parables as readiness, reconciliation, and the procurement of inestimable treasure. It also depicts the enactment of the Beatitudes, considered by many to be Jesus’s clearest teaching about how things will be different in this kingdom, marked most notably—as Meier has explained—by “the reversal of sorrowing with eschatological joy and comfort.”³⁸ In the course of his three-day ministry, Jesus acts as a just and beneficent king, bestowing quite literally upon the Nephites all of the Beatitudes’ assurances: being comforted, inheriting the earth, being filled with the Holy Ghost, obtaining mercy, seeing God, being called his children, and experiencing great joy (3 Nephi 12:3–12).

38. Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 330. He sees in the Beatitudes the manifestation of God as “the truly just king of the covenant community of Israel,” acting in continuity with the monarchical duties enumerated in Psalm 146:5–10—that is, defending widows and orphans, securing relief for the oppressed, and seeing that justice is done.

The resurrected Jesus explicitly reenacts in the New World many of the teachings and performances he first presented in his mortal ministry (3 Nephi 15:1; 17:8), but the Nephite enactment is more than mere repetition. The faith he encounters there stands in sharp contrast to the Jews' prior scorn (3 Nephi 9:16), enabling him to offer the Nephite community his surpassing favor:

So great faith have I never seen among all the Jews; wherefore I could not show unto them so great miracles, because of their unbelief. Verily I say unto you, there are none of them that have seen so great things as ye have seen; neither have they heard so great things as ye have heard. (3 Nephi 19:35–36)

And now, behold, my joy is great, even unto fulness, because of you, and also this generation. (3 Nephi 27:30)

To the Nephites, the kingdom of God is indeed an entirely new state of reality—a complete legal, ecclesiastical, economic, societal, and cultural system established among them by the resurrected Lord. It is the realization of Jesus's Old World prophecies about the imminent inauguration of a new order, and although the Nephites' realm is ultimately an earth-bound kingdom of limited duration, God's eternal kingdom remains the object of prophetic hope, to be universally ushered in when Christ shall again "come in [his] glory with the powers of heaven" (3 Nephi 28:7). It is the good news of Isaiah 52:7, 10: "Thy God reigneth . . . and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of God," a hope that Jesus tells the Nephites both "[has] been and shall be" fulfilled (3 Nephi 23:3; cf. 16:20; 20:35). The kingdom's final denouement will come, as Perrin has noted, "in a manner and at a time of God's choosing," and will include, like its Nephite precedent, "judgment, the vindication of Jesus himself, the establishment of the values of God, and the enjoyment of all the blessings to be associated with a perfect relationship with God."³⁹

The most striking evidence, however, that the eschatological kingdom of God is to be understood as having indeed been inaugurated

39. Perrin, *Kingdom of God*, 198–99.

among the Nephites comes again from situational irony. In altering the version of the Sermon on the Mount taught in Galilee, the Jesus of 3 Nephi is able to communicate more to his latter-day audience than to the assembled Nephites, by way of comparison. After instructing his listeners on the manner of prayer, Jesus offers the following example: “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (3 Nephi 13:9–10). As anyone familiar with Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer will recognize, missing from the middle of this passage is the petition “Thy kingdom come,” presumably because for the Nephites it already has.⁴⁰

Prophecy, fulfillment, and faith

The Book of Mormon presents itself as solving a problem that has long been troublesome to many faithful Christians. As Schweitzer informed the world, the nonfulfillment of Jesus’s prophecies concerning the imminent coming of the Lord and his kingdom seemed to imply that the Bible’s witness had left Christianity on shaky ground. We have seen, in contrast, the firm foundation for prophecy that the Book of Mormon is meant to supply, since many of Jesus’s eschatological predictions were fulfilled point by point among the Nephites: from famines, wars, and earthquakes, to the persecution of prophets, signs in the heavens, fiery judgment, the darkening of the sun and moon, the coming of the Son of man in glory, and the establishment of God’s kingdom upon the earth. On the Book of Mormon’s account, all this happened within Jesus’s own generation, just as he said it would; and it is all clearly recorded,

40. Several Book of Mormon scholars have noted the deletion of “Thy Kingdom come” from the Nephite rendition of the Lord’s Prayer and linked it to the notion that the kingdom was already present among the Nephites, including George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1961), 7:154; Hyrum L. Andrus, *Principles of Perfection* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1970), 260–61; Daniel H. Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 267; Robert J. Matthews, *A Bible! A Bible!* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990), 242; and Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992), 4:82.

despite the fact that the original prophecies are supposed to have been unknown to 3 Nephi's editor, Mormon, and despite the fact that their fulfillment in the Book of Mormon was apparently unrecognized by its translator, Joseph Smith.⁴¹ For those who believe in the Book of

41. In this paper I have dealt with the New Testament on its own terms, on the assumption that the Book of Mormon has something to say to all Christians who accept the New Testament in its current form as scripture. Latter-day Saints can also look for insights to the so-called Joseph Smith Translation (a revision of the Christian Bible undertaken by Joseph Smith between 1830 and 1833), but there are serious questions as to how that revision should be interpreted. As Robert Matthews pointed out in his groundbreaking work, *"A Plainer Translation": Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible—A History and Commentary* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 273, the Joseph Smith Translation seems to be best understood as an eclectic compilation of a variety of proposed revisions: textual restorations, revealed additions, inspired commentary, and doctrinal harmonization.

From that project, however, it becomes clear that Joseph Smith was concerned about many of the same unfulfilled prophecies that have bothered other readers of the New Testament. As he made revisions to the Bible, he adjusted some of the statements concerning the generation that would witness the coming of the Son of man. He shifted the order of verses in Matthew 24, and in verse 34 he changed "this generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled" to "this generation, *in which these things shall be shown forth*, shall not pass away until all I have told you shall be fulfilled." A similar revision, with language obviously borrowed from Matthew, was made at Mark 13:30, and a new phrase with a comparable harmonizing function ("this generation, *the generation when the times of the Gentiles shall be fulfilled*, shall not pass away") was added to Luke 21:32. He also changed 1 Thessalonians 4:15 from "*we* which are alive and remain at the coming of the Lord" to "*they* who are alive at the coming of the Lord," and he revised 1 Corinthians 7:29–31 so that references to the imminent end of the world are reinterpreted as advice for missionaries (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:11). Yet these changes seem somewhat ad hoc and are inconsistent with other passages that Joseph left unchanged, such as Romans 9:28; 16:20; 1 Corinthians 1:7; 4:5; 11:26; and 1 Thessalonians 2:19; 5:23.

Because the revisions just noted respond to the same theological conundrum in divergent ways, with no corroboration from Greek manuscripts, and in the end do not eliminate the difficulties (whatever Jesus may have actually said on those particular occasions, there is ample evidence that the first generation of Christians fully expected his return within their own lifetimes), I suspect that Joseph Smith was drawing in his revision upon a combination of creativity and his own prophetic sensibilities to make sense of these eschatological passages. To my mind, though, this suggests that Joseph Smith was *not* the author of the Book of Mormon since his proposed revisions make it evident that he himself did not realize that 3 Nephi had already provided a solution to the problem.

Mormon's truth, this fulfillment does indeed, in Schweitzer's memorable expression, "save Christianity" by confirming the validity of Jesus's prophetic words. Jesus was not wrong, his coming was not delayed, and Christianity does not, in fact, "rest upon a fraud."

Both Mormon and Jesus urge readers of the Book of Mormon to search the scriptures diligently in order to be assured in their faith as they recognize prophecies already fulfilled and those that will yet come to pass (3 Nephi 10:14; 23:1–5). We are shown in the narrative the fulfillment of many prophecies, both those familiar to the Nephite audience (Zenos's, Nephi's, and Samuel's) and also others of which they were unaware—particularly the eschatological predictions of Jesus himself given during his mortal ministry. We are shown that prophecies are fulfilled in their literal detail (rocks "found in seams and broken fragments," or the weeping and howling: "O that we had repented and not killed and stoned the prophets"). Some prophecies may seem contradictory (Zenos's and Nephi's predictions concerning precisely how the Lord would visit the Israelite remnant following his resurrection), and others appear to be genuinely unverifiable to those to whom they were given (Jesus's "other sheep"). The 3 Nephi account of the New World eschaton repeatedly demonstrates the ultimate reliability of divine disclosure, something Wright has described as particularly characteristic of end-times, when it will be acknowledged that "God has done what he said he would do, even though it doesn't look like what anyone had thought it would."⁴²

Jesus tells the Nephites that answers to all kinds of questions could be forthcoming had his followers only inquired. "They understood me not," he repeats four times when recalling the reaction of the Jews to his reference to "other sheep." They were content with their erroneous

For useful overviews of the nature of the Joseph Smith Translation, see Royal Skousen, "The Earliest Textual Sources for Joseph Smith's 'New Translation' of the King James Bible," *FARMS Review* 17/2 (2005): 451–70; Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 46–61; and Kevin L. Barney, "The Joseph Smith Translation and Ancient Texts of the Bible," *Dialogue* 19/3 (1986): 85–102.

42. N. T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 53.

assumptions, even though Jesus had a clear explanation ready. The Lord subsequently urges the Nephites not to make the same mistake: “Ponder upon the things which I have said, and ask of the Father in my name, that ye may understand” (3 Nephi 17:3). The implicit message to modern readers is to not be satisfied with superficial interpretations based on unexamined assumptions; there is much more that God is inviting people to see.

Remarkably, Mormon anticipates in his readers the very skepticism that Schweitzer voiced, foreseeing the modern age as one in which many “shall say the Lord no longer worketh by revelation or by prophecy” (3 Nephi 29:6). But he also recognizes the force of the Nephite witness in countering such latter-day skepticism, with its proclamation that the resurrected Jesus had indeed established his Messianic kingdom among Israel’s lost sheep. Latter-day readers need no longer imagine that Jesus prophesied in vain; he did not delay his coming to his generation, nor will he delay his second coming in their own times. Mormon in fact closes his account of Christ’s visit to the Nephites by prophesying of the role his own writings will play in reasserting the Lord’s faithfulness in fulfilling his promises:

When . . . these sayings shall come unto [you], . . . then ye may know that the words of the Lord, which have been spoken by his holy prophets, shall all be fulfilled; and ye need not say that the Lord delays his coming unto the children of Israel. And ye need not imagine in your hearts that the words which have been spoken are vain, for behold, the Lord will remember his covenant which he hath made. . . . And when ye shall see these sayings coming forth among you, then ye need not any longer spurn at the doings of the Lord. (3 Nephi 29:1–4)

Heather Hardy earned an MBA from Brigham Young University and worked for several years in university administration at Yale and BYU before leaving the workforce to raise a family and pursue a life of learning.