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Three-Nephite Lore and Observing the Sacred: Some Observations

Brad Kramer

LATE IN THE BOOK OF MORMON'S ACCOUNT of the resurrected Christ's visit to the ancient Americas, the record describes three disciples whose deaths were postponed until the end of human history (see 3 Nephi 27–28). This dispensation, the text reports, was granted them so that they would be free to do the work of Christian preaching—among Jews, Gentiles, and the scattered remnants of Israel—until God's purposes are entirely accomplished. Unsurprisingly, stories of encounters with these “Three Nephites” have circulated among Latter-day Saints with varying levels of frequency from quite early in Mormon history. But it is widely recognized among Mormons that, whatever their credibility or incredibility, such stories, fables, beliefs, folktales, rumors, histories, and myths about modern appearances of and interactions with the Three Nephites are not in any sense “central” to the Mormon gospel. They are minutiae, folklore, the inessential, “culture” rather than doctrine, theologically and salvifically inconsequential. Whether any or all of these accounts are historically factual or accurate doesn't matter. So far as Latter-day Saints are consciously concerned, no one's salvation or exaltation is at stake. A closer look at Mormon discourse, however, through the lens of anthropological description rather than normative theology, suggests that this conscious claim about the inessential nature of Three Nephites stories is in certain ways misleading.

Let's imagine two Venn circles overlapping (as Venn circles tend to do). In one circle, we have “stuff that is sacred.” In the other, we have

“stuff that is unique to Mormonism.” The categories, like the circles, partially overlap. Belief in Christ, guidance by the Holy Ghost, the ritual of the sacrament of the Lord’s supper, and so on, are not unique to Mormonism, yet are sacred. Jell-O and funeral potatoes are unique parts of Mormonism, well-known features in the Mormon culture region, yet they are not sacred. The Mormon temple and its complicated rituals, however, are both sacred and unique to Mormonism, positioned within the overlap of the two circles. Now, consider the role that humor plays in defining the parameters of the three spaces: the two nonoverlapping Venn spaces, and the overlapping center. I rely here on anthropological observations of Mormon social life, features that, I’m quite confident, would be recognized by most Mormons. Latter-day Saints make jokes about uniquely Mormon but nonsacred things with regularity. They also use humor in connection with uniquely Mormon sacred things, but in a different way. Unlike humor about nonsacred but distinctly Mormon things, humor with regard to sacred things unique to Latter-day Saints demonstrates, enacts, and even reinforces a reverence for the sacred by gently—but in socially acceptable and even socially regulated ways—skewering Mormons’ own perhaps overearnest preoccupation with their veneration of it.

Latter-day Saints make jokes about the Three Nephites, but not in a way that mocks or demeans them. Instead, they chide themselves over the possibility that they too seriously or earnestly expect to see them. By contrast, Mormons do not make (or at least they consider inappropriate) jokes about sacred things that are not also distinctively Mormon. This subtle distinction applies even to the temple (which is both sacred and quintessentially Mormon), where playful humor is saturated with a kind of hyperawareness and vigilante observance of the holiness and sacred status of temple rituals and temple language. The point is that humor helps to code stories and quips about Three Nephite sightings as more similar to temple rites than to *Napolean Dynamite*, which exploits many peculiarities of the Mormon culture region. The Three Nephites comprise a part of the discursive territory Latter-day Saints observe and experience as holy. This is significant, given the widespread

acknowledgment among Mormons that stories about encountering the Three Nephites are allegedly irrelevant to weightier, eternal matters.

The significance of Three Nephite stories for Mormon enactment and experience of the sacred can be further excavated by comparing them to the accounts of the resurrection narratives of the Savior in the New Testament. Anonymity figures centrally in both. There are three separate stories in the Gospels of disciples who, although they were intimately acquainted with Jesus during his ministry, encounter the risen Messiah without recognizing him. These stories might seem quaint now, as if Jesus were testing his disciples. But reflect on this detail from the perspective of the disciples themselves: men and women who not only encountered the risen Christ as an ordinary, anonymous person who walked and spoke and ate, but who encountered him in this way after having heard him relate the parable of the goats and sheep, with its potent image of those at Christ's right hand who served "one of the least of these" and thereby served him (see Matthew 25:31–46).

It is one thing to understand the moral imperatives of the parable in metaphorical terms, such as Jesus telling you that feeding the hungry or giving drink to the thirsty or visiting the sick or imprisoned is *like* doing those things to him. It is quite another thing to realize that it is not a metaphor at all or that the metaphor is also real. The stranger you just spoke with in the garden, that you just walked with to Emmaus, is actually the Christ. He could be anyone, anywhere. This association of the very person of Jesus with the actual bodies of those most in need acquires a new, and perhaps even intimidating or frightening, significance in light of the postresurrection encounters because the parable becomes so shockingly literal. The homeless veteran on the freeway onramp, or the pathetic rehabbing junkie going through agonizing withdrawals, or the hardened prisoner—Christians are to encounter these people and minister to them as if to the Messiah because they *are* the Messiah, not just figuratively but in the sense that any or all of them *could literally be* the anonymous Christ memorialized in "A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief," the hymn famously sung to the Prophet Joseph in his prison cell.

The Three Nephites are similarly anonymous. They “will be among the Gentiles” and “the Jews,” but all these “shall know them not” (3 Nephi 28:27–28). Moreover, their mission is scripturally associated with the resurrection of Christ. Their transfiguration occurs as the result of an encounter with the (at-first-misrecognized) resurrected Jesus (see 3 Nephi 11:1–8) who, as in the Gospel accounts, assures complete recognition by having all witnesses physically handle the scars of his crucifixion (see 3 Nephi 11:13–17 and John 20:26–29). The Three Nephites’ immortality—though qualitatively different from Christ’s—is a kind of extension of his resurrection, especially in light of the role anonymity plays: they live forever, they are unrecognized, and they could be anyone and anywhere (indeed are in some sense both), and stories of encounters with them in their immortal state crucially involve acts of Christian service.

Moreover, both Christ’s resurrection and the transformation of the Three Nephites figure centrally in apocalyptic expectation and narratives of the eschaton. In fact, the Three Nephites’ transfigured condition prefigures the transformation of the earth and humanity (both in terms of immortality and freedom from Satan’s influence) more closely and explicitly than does Christ’s immortal condition, and the text of the Book of Mormon posits a role for the Three Nephites to play in the unfolding of history’s end (see 3 Nephi 28:27–32 for suggestive passages regarding their participation in the gathering of the lost tribes, their preaching to the Jews, and their performing a “great and marvelous” work before “the great and coming day” of judgment).

Interestingly, however, it is this last point—the close relationship between the Three Nephites and Mormon apocalyptic expectation—that may help to explain an important anthropological observation. Latter-day Saints are still familiar with folklore surrounding the Three Nephites: such folklore, however, plays a smaller role in Mormon culture today than in the past. It seems likely that this decline in preoccupation with the Three Nephites is connected to Latter-day Saints’ diminished anticipation of an any-moment-now second coming. Imminent apocalyptic expectation has waned in both official and popular Mormon discourse.

My conclusion to this brief note, however, is not about the Three Nephites *per se*—who or where they are supposed to be, whether their stories are true, or what direct role they might play in Mormonism’s rendering of God’s plan for humanity. My more narrowly anthropological conclusion deals rather with who Latter-day Saints are as a people, with how the stuff of everyday life often mixes with the strange or the surreal to organize Latter-day Saints’ experience of the sacred and the holy, their movement in and out of sacred time and space, back and forth across sacred thresholds, and in and out of contact with sacred materials. That which on the surface does not seem to matter can actually matter a great deal. Looking closely at the things that Latter-day Saints insist are not really central or essential to Mormonism—the folkloric bits of idiosyncratic tradition or speculation more commonly associated with a Sunday School lesson run amok—might in fact tell us some rather interesting, useful, and important things about who they are.

Brad Kramer received his PhD in sociocultural anthropology from the University of Michigan, where his research focused on religious language, verbal taboo, and semiotics. Dr. Kramer currently works as an instructor in history and anthropology at Utah Valley University and as the director of marketing and publicity for Greg Kofford Books.