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“Come unto Me” as a Technical Gospel Term

Noel B. Reynolds

April 3, 2018

While the oft-repeated scriptural invitation “to come unto Christ” is widely recognized and appreciated in LDS discourse, no one has as yet undertaken the task of clarifying precisely how this broad phrase relates to the six-part definition of the gospel that is laid out in the Book of Mormon and is used in Church curricular materials, including *Preach My Gospel* and *Handbook of Instructions*. The phrase “come unto” occurs many times in the Book of Mormon referring to situations where men or even the Lord come to each other in one context or another. By my count, 48 of these occurrences in 29 separate passages do not refer to a physical coming, but to a spiritual one. The Lord has invited all men “to come unto him and be saved.” This indicates a more extensive use of this phraseology in the Book of Mormon than we see in either the Old or the New Testament, though it does occur in each.

Scholars have recognized some limited use of this terminology in the New Testament that seems consonant with this Book of Mormon usage. While the Greek verbs *érchomai* and *eisérchomai* are employed in a wide variety of contexts where they can mean “to come” or “to go,” the gospels do feature a small subset of

those passages that reflect a spiritual meaning similar to Book of Mormon usage. Geoffrey W. Bromiley has summarized all of these usages succinctly. In one part of this entry, he reviews the occurrences in the Gospel of John where *érchomai* is used to imply a “coming to Jesus.”

Here again we find a general coming (3:6; 6:5; 10:41). Jesus invites people to come (7:37). Those who respond come in a special sense (6:35) by becoming disciples (cf. 1:47). Disciples can also issue the invitation (1:46). Jesus will not reject those who come (6:37) but give them life (6:35). Yet only those whom the Father draws (6:65) and who are taught by him (6:45) can come. Coming means believing in Jesus as the coming one (11:27), and believing means deliverance from judgment (5:24) and new birth by the Spirit (3:8). The opposite is a refusal to come to Jesus (5:40) or to come to the light (3:20).¹

More generally, *eisérchomai* is often used in the New Testament for going into the temple, a synagogue, or even Jerusalem. But, as Bromiley points out, it is also used for the most significant theological statements:

The Synoptists speak about entering the kingdom, for which the following

¹ Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (editors), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Abridged in One Volume by Geoffrey W. Bromiley*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985, p. 258.

requirements are found: becoming as little children (Mk. 10:15), keeping the commandments (Mt. 19:17), doing God's will (Mt. 7:21), a new beginning (Mt. 5:20), a clean break (Mt. 18:8-9), vigilance (Mt. 25:10), and fidelity (Mt. 25:21ff.). Jesus and the disciples summon people into the kingdom; they are to enter by the strait gate (Mt 7:13), but may be hindered by wealth (Mk. 10:23) or by the self-righteous (Lk. 11:52). John adds the need for regeneration by water and the Spirit (3:5) and stresses that access is only through Christ (10:2, 9). Tribulation precedes entry (Acts 14:22).²

The gospel of Jesus Christ in the Book of Mormon

While several of the Nephite references are as general in their language as these biblical examples, a large number get right into specifics—telling hearers and readers how they can come to Christ. Even more impressively, these passages refer collectively to the various elements of the gospel of Jesus Christ, as repeatedly spelled out in the Book of Mormon, and do so with a specificity that would seem to point to some of those as preparatory steps for coming to Christ, and to others as constitutive of that coming. In previous publications, I have demonstrated how the Book of Mormon consistently presents a six-element gospel

² Bromiley, 260.

or doctrine of Jesus Christ. All who will (1) be saved in the kingdom of God, or receive eternal life must (2) trust in Jesus Christ, (3) repent of their sins, (4) be baptized, (5) receive the gift of the Holy Ghost, and (6) endure to the end.³

Further, there are no shortcuts. Anyone who wishes to receive eternal life in the kingdom of God must meet all these requirements.

The first of these passages is found in 2 Nephi 31:4–21 and seems to be the primary source that informs the teaching of all the later Nephite prophets. Nephi presents the passage as the climax of his prophecies and teachings in the rhetorical form of an *inclusio* that begins and ends with an indication that the passage will explain the doctrine or gospel of Christ. The explanation presents these six basic elements in a series of combinations which show how they relate to one another and how they cumulatively constitute the means the Father and the Son have mandated for all mankind to follow as they seek eternal life. Nephi ensures that the authority of this gospel will stand beyond question. His unprecedented explanation incorporates three quotations from the Father and three from the Son.⁴

³ See Noel B. Reynolds, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets," *BYU Studies*, 31 (No. 3, Summer 1991): 31–50., "Gospel of Jesus Christ," *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* 2:556–560 (1992). and "The Gospel according to Mormon," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68 (2015, 2): 218–234.

⁴ See also Noel B. Reynolds, "The Gospel According to Nephi: An Essay on 2 Nephi 31," *Religious Educator* 16, no. 2 (2015), 51–75.

The other two basic passages defining the gospel (3 Nephi 11:32–40, and 3 Nephi 27:13–22) share some of these same characteristics. Both are constructed rhetorically as inclusios that point directly to their function as explanations of the doctrine or gospel of Jesus Christ. And both are presented as quotations from Jesus Christ. Further, each presents the gospel as a series of statements containing two or more of the six gospel elements and showing how the elements relate to one another in one comprehensive account of how men and women might qualify for eternal life.

Enduring to the end and come unto me.

In a recent paper I demonstrated that six brief Book of Mormon passages—that quote Jesus Christ and exhibit the same unique rhetorical structure—use “come unto me” specifically as an equivalent of the gospel principle of enduring to the end.⁵ The following example illustrates the shared rhetorical structure of these six distinctive passages:

And he [Christ] hath said:

A (1) *Repent*, all ye ends of the earth, and (2) *come unto me*,

⁵ Noel B. Reynolds, “How ‘Come unto Me’ Fits into the Nephite Gospel,” *Religious Educator* 18, no. 2 (2017), 28. The six passages include 3 Nephi 21:6, 27:20, 30:2, Mormon 3:2, Ether 4:18–19, and Moroni 7:34.

B and (3) *be baptized in my name* and (4) *have faith in me*,

Ballast: (5) that ye may *be saved*. (Moroni 7:34)

As explained in the previous paper, the six-fold recurrence of this rhetorical form invites further investigation. Elements 1, 2, and 3 of the parallel lines A and B are nearly identical in all six passages. The ballast lines in all six contain the fifth element, which in each case articulates some version of a promised salvation. In a standard Hebrew couplet with two parallel lines, items 1 and 3 would be related as would items 2 and 4. Repentance and baptism are closely related throughout the teachings of the Nephite prophets in which baptism is characterized as the public witnessing of the covenant to obey God one makes when repenting. Should the fourth elements, which are worded differently in each of the six passages, be similarly related to element 2, *come unto me*, these passages would be recognizable as variations on the standard Hebrew parallel couplet—with the addition of a ballast line—which is also a common feature of Hebrew rhetoric. As it turns out on closer analysis, all of the phrasings in the 4 position can readily be read as versions or specifications of the Book of Mormon gospel requirement of enduring to the end. And so the six passages all quote Jesus directly, share an identical rhetorical structure, repeat the same four principle elements of the gospel formula—with the variant versions of *enduring to the end* each being parallel to

come unto me.

Abbreviated formulations of Book of Mormon gospel references.

Like the Bible, the Book of Mormon has many authoritative statements of the gospel that only explicitly list one or some subset of these elements as necessary for salvation. For example, Nephi quotes the Father teaching him in his first great vision that “he that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved.”⁶ But as I have also shown, this should not be read as evidence that repentance and baptism are not necessary for those who can “endure to the end.” Nor are these passages to be read as relaxations of the full set of gospel requirements. Rather, they should be seen as abbreviations of the full gospel description. They exemplify a common biblical form of abbreviation labeled *merismus* by rhetoricians. The most common form of *merismus* is the abbreviated list wherein mention of some of the elements of a known list is intended to invoke the full list as context in the reader’s mind—without a tedious listing of all its elements. *Merismus* is just another rhetorical technique in which the part stands for the

⁶ 2 Nephi 31:15.

whole.⁷

As my study of gospel merisms in the Book of Mormon has shown, the most common versions of gospel merisms only include two or three of the six gospel elements. In most of these cases, one or two of the first five elements will be teamed with the sixth (salvation or eternal life) to constitute a two- or three-element merism that stands in for a complete articulation of the gospel message. Examples of this rhetorical device are plentiful. In prophesying the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Nephi promises that “all they that shall believe on his name shall be saved” (2 Ne 25:13). A few chapters later, the same Nephi quotes the Father telling him, “He that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved” (2 Ne 31:15). Alma taught the people of Zarahemla that “except ye repent, ye can in no wise inherit the kingdom of heaven” (Al 5:51). Because of the clarity and authority of the full versions of the gospel message as explained above, we would never read these brief statements as alternative or competing gospels. While these shorter merisms almost never focus on the baptism of water or of the spirit, the stand-alone references to faith in Christ, repentance, or enduring to the end provide repeated examples of these single elements of the gospel being used as a

⁷ For a detailed explanation see Noel B. Reynolds, “Biblical Merismus in Book of Mormon Gospel References,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 26 (2017), 106–134.

shorthand reference to all the rest. The same thing happens with the invitation to come unto Christ and be saved—which actually occurs as a two-part gospel merism even more often than its alternate form that promises salvation to those who endure to the end. In these meristic occurrences, the invitation to come unto Christ can refer specifically to the process of enduring to the end, while meristically representing all the other elements of the gospel formula.

Examples of this are also easy to find. In the very first chapter of the Book of Mormon, Lehi extols the “goodness and mercy” of God who will “not suffer those *who come unto thee* that they shall perish” (1 Ne 1:14). After reporting Lehi’s great vision, Nephi goes on to point out in a three-element merism that “the way [to salvation] is prepared for all men from the foundation of the world, if it so be that they repent and *come unto him*” (1 Ne 10:18). A few chapters later, Nephi reports his own version of that same great vision and the words of the angel who taught him that “the Lamb of God is . . . the Savior of the world, and that all men must *come unto him* or they cannot be saved” (1 Ne 13:40). Clarifying the same teaching to his questioning brothers, Nephi explains that men must gain a knowledge of “the very points” (the elements) of the Redeemer’s doctrine, “that they may know how to *come unto him* and be saved” (1 Ne 15:14). In his own teaching about Christ, Nephi borrows and modifies phrasing from Isaiah to quote

Christ saying “*come unto me*, all ye ends of the earth; buy milk and honey without money and without price” (2 Nephi 26:25, *cf.* Isaiah 55:3). In a continuation of the same passage, Nephi clarifies that the Lord “*inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness*” (2 Ne 26:33). And again, he quotes the Lord God’s promise to the Gentiles in another three-element merism that “*if they will repent and come unto me,*” he will be merciful to them (2 Nephi 28:32). In the closing sentence of his record Enos describes his anticipated judgment scene, in which the Redeemer will say to him, “*Come unto me*, ye blessed, there is a place prepared for you in the mansions of my Father” (Enos 1:27). Understood as a gospel merism, this instance of “*come unto me*” calls to mind all five elements of the gospel that have been part of Enos’s life. Amaleki brings the small plates to a conclusion with a pair of merisms making this same connection, specifying in the process what he sees as the essential elements of enduring to the end: “*Come unto Christ . . . and partake of his salvation. . . . 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 1:26). In his visit to the Nephites, Jesus includes one more three-element merism: “*Yea, blessed are the poor in spirit which cometh unto me, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*” (3 Nephi 12:3). From what we have learned in this study, we might paraphrase this saying that repentant

persons with broken hearts and contrite spirits, who endure to the end, will be saved—a statement that is repeated in one form or another throughout the Book of Mormon.

But these abbreviated statements of the gospel also introduce another linguistic complication. Rather than list all the gospel elements they may have in mind in a particular statement, always using the same name or words for that element, they may use synonyms or even combine two or more elements under another label. For example, in the very sentence in which Nephi introduces the requirement of faith in Christ, he refers to it again as “relying wholly” upon Christ: “For ye have not come thus far save it were by the word of Christ with unshaken *faith* in him, *relying* wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save” (2 Nephi 31:19).⁸ Similarly, faith is referred to elsewhere as “trust.”⁹

In this same chapter where the gospel elements are most authoritatively and fully articulated, Nephi also introduces another term for repentance and baptism as a pair when he says “*the gate* by which ye should enter is repentance and baptism by water” (2 Nephi 31:17). Having introduced this new terminology in support of

⁸ Readers will notice that all Book of Mormon quotations, including punctuation, are taken from the new critical text prepared by Royal Skousen. See Royal Skousen, *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, Yale University Press, 2009. Throughout the paper I have introduced italics in these quotations to help readers focus on key words and phrases.

⁹ See, e.g., 2 Ne 4:19, 34; 22:2; Jac 7:25; Mosiah 4:6.

his metaphor of the gospel as a path to eternal life, Nephi can then go on to simply refer to “the gate” (2 Nephi 31:18), without specifying repentance or baptism again, knowing his readers will understand the compound reference. The subject of this essay is just such a reference—*come unto me*, which obviously occurs in a number of gospel merisms, but which is nowhere so simply and straightforwardly defined as are the preceding examples.

The gospel invitation.

The text seems to invite such an analysis directly when Nephi quotes the angel in that same vision telling him “that all men must *come unto him* or they cannot *be saved*,” and then goes on immediately to stipulate that “*they must come* according to the words which shall be established by the mouth of the Lamb,” which in turn would “be made known in the records” of the Nephites (1 Nephi 13:40–41). As demonstrated in the papers cited in the footnotes 1 and 3 above, all three passages that spell out the six-element gospel in the Book of Mormon are quoting directly from Jesus Christ, “the Lamb.” A starting assumption for this paper is that these passages constitute “the words which shall be established by the mouth of the Lamb, and . . . made known in the records of [Nephi’s] seed” (1 Ne 13:41). Nephi seems to confirm this same point later in explaining the vision to

his resistant brothers when he says “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 Ne 15:14).

From beginning to end, the Book of Mormon announces this invitation in the most universal terms possible—including all the earth’s inhabitants. Lehi’s entire perspective on the prophesied destruction of Jerusalem was radically changed by the visions he received, leading him to exclaim: “Thy throne is high in the heavens and thy power and goodness and mercy is over all the inhabitants of the earth. And because thou art merciful, thou wilt not suffer those *who come unto thee* that they shall perish” (1 Ne 1:14)! And in the concluding chapters, Mormon quotes Jesus addressing all the ends of the earth: “Repent, all ye ends of the earth, and *come unto me* and be baptized in my name and have faith in me, that ye may be saved” (Moro 7:34). It is clearly Nephi who articulates the universality of the invitation most vigorously in his own final sermon. Borrowing from Isaiah, he frames the Lord’s invitation: “*Come unto me*, all ye ends of the earth” (2 Ne 26:25, cf. Isa 55:1). Rhetorically, he asks if the Lord has “commanded any that they should depart out of the . . . houses of worship,” or “that they should not partake of his salvation” or “of his goodness” and then goes on to answer, “Nay;. But all men are privileged the one like unto the other, and none are forbidden” (2 Ne

26:26–28). Nephi then goes on to emphasize and elaborate the same inclusiveness: “And he inviteth them all *to come unto him* and partake of his goodness. And he denieth none that *come unto him*, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen. And all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile”(2 Ne 26:33). In welcoming home the successful missionary sons of Mosiah, Alma rejoiced to “see that God is mindful of every people in whatsoever land they may be in; yea, he numbereth his people. And his bowels of mercy is over all the earth” (Alma 26:37).

As I have explained elsewhere, one helpful way to understand the dynamic between the six elements of the gospel message is dialogically.¹⁰ The dialogue begins with an invitation to each of the Father’s children that they trust in Christ and repent of their sins. In response, the individual can ignore or reject that invitation, or accept it by repenting or humbling him/herself before the Father and returning to the true path. It is also required that those who repent privately witness publicly to God and to all men that they have so repented and taken the name of Christ upon them—by going down into the waters of baptism. For those who do respond to his invitation in this way, the Father then responds in turn by

¹⁰ “Understanding Christian Baptism through the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 51, No. 2, 2012, pp. 11–13.

sending them the remission of sins “by fire and by the Holy Ghost”—the blessing promised to the repentant from the beginning. Having received the Holy Ghost, the convert has the spiritual testimony, inspiration, and guidance necessary to be able to endure to the end. This enduring is a life-long process—also in dialogue with God—by which he or she strives daily to follow the guidance of the Spirit, obey the commandments and laws of God, serve the Lord and his fellow man and through which the Father is able to bless and strengthen, mold and correct—helping the convert each day to become more like the Father and the Son and to be prepared to enter into their rest—receiving eternal life—and appears to be the means by which they can “come unto him.”

***Come unto me* in other Book of Mormon passages.**

In passages where the invitation to “come unto me” is listed with one or more of the other gospel elements, it is most easily seen as one alternative phrasing for this fifth principle of the gospel—the requirement that men endure to the end.¹¹ 3 Nephi 27 contains one of the three key definitional passages for the gospel and provides the most complete example of this in verses 16–19:

¹¹ . See Noel B. Reynolds, “The Fifth Principle of the Gospel,” *The Religious Educator*, BYU Religious Studies Center, Vol 15 No. 3, 2014, pp. 117–127.

16 And it shall come to pass

A that whoso repenteth and is baptized in my name shall be filled.

B And if he *endureth to the end*, behold,

him will I hold guiltless before my Father at that

day when I shall stand to judge the world.

17 B* And he that *endureth not unto the end*,

the same is he that is also hewn down and cast into

the fire from whence they can no more return

because of the justice of the Father.

19 A* And no unclean thing can enter into his kingdom.

Therefore

nothing entereth into his rest save it be

those who have washed their garments in my blood

because of their faith

and the repentance of all their sins

and their *faithfulness unto the end*.

20 Now this is the commandment:

A (1) repent, all ye ends of the earth, and (2) *come unto me*

B and (3) be baptized in my name, that (4) ye may be sanctified
by the reception of the Holy Ghost,

Ballast: that ye may stand spotless before me at the last day.

As with many other Book of Mormon statements of the gospel, the invitation begins with repentance and baptism, which lead to the remission of sins “by the reception of the Holy Ghost.” The eventual result will be that the person can “stand spotless” at the judgment. But there is no specific reference to the requirement of enduring to the end in this concluding restatement of the gospel. However, verse 20 is one of those six unique rhetorical structures discussed earlier, and it contains that extra phrase requiring the convert to “come unto me,” as another way of describing enduring to the end. The very next sentence affirms that “this is my gospel,” and goes on to remind the Nephites of the works they “must do in my church” if they will “be lifted up at the last day,” emphasizing again the expectation that all is not done and that the convert needs to work and endure to the end of this life (3 Nephi 27:21–22).

Mormon rephrases the same invitation once again in his closing words to the future descendants of Lehi who will receive his record and learn of the gospel and of their genealogical connection to ancient Israel:

3 Know ye that ye must *come unto repentance*, or ye cannot be saved. . . .

5 Know ye that ye must *come to the knowledge of your fathers* and repent of all your sins and iniquities and believe in Jesus Christ, that he is the Son of God . . .

8 Therefore repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus and *lay hold upon the gospel of Christ, . . .*

10 And ye will also know that ye are a remnant of the seed of Jacob.

Therefore ye are *numbered among the people* of the first covenant. And if it so be that ye believe in Christ and are baptized—first with water, then with fire and with the Holy Ghost, following the example of our Savior, according to that which he hath commanded us—it shall be well with you in the day of judgment. (Mormon 7:3, 5, 8, 10)

In this version, Mormon explicitly includes each of the elements of the gospel message except enduring to the end, which may be indicated in the unique commandment to “lay hold upon the gospel of Christ,” and once again by the reference to being “numbered among the people.” The phrase is used again by Moroni in an obvious reference to the process of enduring to the end for new members of the church:

And after that they had been received unto baptism and were wrought upon and cleansed by the power of the Holy Ghost, they were *numbered among*

the people of the church of Christ and their names were taken, that they might be remembered and nourished by the good word of God, to keep them in the right way, . . . (Moroni 6:4)

Moroni's drastically condensed account of the Jaredite record contains various insertions of his own teachings, including one important quotation from the Lord's words responding to his own expressed feelings of inadequacy in his assigned task:

27 And if men *come unto me*, I will shew unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble. And my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me. For if they humble themselves before me and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.

28 Behold, I will shew unto the Gentiles their weakness. And I will show unto them that faith, hope, and charity *bringeth unto me*, the fountain of all righteousness. (Ether 12:27–28)

This passage is less obviously a gospel invitation as displayed in the previous examples. But when we remember that the three-fold reference to men humbling themselves before God is an exact replication of Nephi's original characterization

of repentance in 2 Nephi 31:7–11,¹² we can see that it includes repentance and faith, along with “come/bring unto me” interpreted as a synonymous phrasing for enduring to the end.

This passage also gives us another unique support for this interpretation. In his foundational presentation of the doctrine of Christ, Nephi introduces faith, hope, and charity as a description of the mode of life of those who have entered into the path, received a remission of sins, and who are now enduring to the end:

Wherefore ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope and a love of God and of all men; wherefore if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father, Ye shall have eternal life. (2 Nephi 31:20)

This process of living as directed in all things as directed by the Holy Ghost¹³ is here explicitly identified with enduring to the end, a process which, in the Lord’s words to Moroni, “*bringeth unto me—the fountain of all righteousness*” (Ether 12:28). This passage from Moroni begins referring to men who “come unto me” and then describes explicitly how the Lord works with the repentant, showing them their weaknesses that they may be humble, and then, through their faith,

¹² See “The gospel according to Mormon,” p. 223.

¹³ Cf. 2 Nephi 32: 3, 5 for Nephi’s explanation of this terminology..

making “weak things strong unto them.” This is a unique and powerful description, in the Lord’s own words, of how he works with converts, bringing them unto him in the process of enduring to the end.

Earlier, he had taught them not to cast sinners out of their meetings: “For ye know not but what they will return and repent and *come unto me* with full purpose of heart and I shall heal them, and ye shall be the means of bringing salvation unto them” (3 Nephi 18:32). As part of his expanded version of the Sermon on the Mount delivered to the Nephites, the Lord includes “come unto me” with faith and repentance as the formula for those who will be saved:

19 And behold, I have given you the law and the commandments of my Father, that ye shall believe in me and that ye shall repent of your sins and *come unto me* with a broken heart and a contrite spirit. . . .

20 Therefore *come unto me* and be ye saved, for verily I say unto you that except ye shall *keep my commandments*, which I have commanded you at this time, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven. (3 Nephi 12:19–20)

It was Alma who first framed this gospel message as an invitation:

33 Behold, *he sendeth an invitation* unto all men; for the arms of mercy is extended towards them, and he saith: Repent and *I will receive you*.

34 Yea, he saith: *Come unto me* and ye shall partake of the fruit of the tree of life; yea, ye shall eat and drink of the bread and the waters of life freely.

35 Yea, *come unto me* and bring forth works of righteousness, and ye shall not be cut down and cast into the fire. (Alma 5:33–35)

Here “coming unto” the Lord is characterized as an invitation and as *being received* by him. It is further described as a way of life or process in which his followers “partake of the fruit of the tree of life,”¹⁴ as they “eat and drink of the bread and the waters of life freely,” bringing “forth works of righteousness.” All of this fits most easily with the various descriptions of enduring to the end.

In all the examples cited so far, the divine invitation to “come unto me” occurs in combinations with two or more of the other six gospel elements, constituting in those occurrences gospel merisms that should bring all six elements of the gospel to the mind of the reader. And in each of these, this invitation seems to most easily describe enduring to the end—the gospel element that is not usually mentioned explicitly in those particular gospel merisms. This insight spares us the awkwardness that might otherwise arise if we had to explain the divine command to come unto Christ as one more recurring principle of the gospel without a

¹⁴ Compare 1 Nephi 8:15–18 where Lehi links the invitation to come to partaking of the fruit four times.

specified meaning.

Variations on *come unto me*.

“Come unto me” is not the only form this invitation can take. Most prominent among the alternative formulations is the often-repeated call “to keep the commandments of God.” Over 80 Book of Mormon passages contain some version of this phrase in direct reference to either the Lord’s covenant to Lehi that if his descendants would keep the Lord’s commandments, they would prosper in the land, or to the covenant required of those who would be baptized, that they would always keep the commandments, or, in many cases, to both simultaneously.¹⁵ This is not surprising once we recognize that the Lord’s promises given to Abraham and Lehi, articulated primarily in terms of blessings in this world, are in reality surrogates for the universal promise made by the Father to all his children that if they would follow Christ in accepting and living his gospel, they would receive eternal life in the world to come. A clear equivalence between the invitation to “come unto me” and “keep my commandments” is indicated in the parallel construction of the Savior’s elaboration of the invitation in 3 Nephi 12:20:

¹⁵ By my rough count, there are well over 40 passages that fall in each category.

A Therefore *come unto me*

B and *be ye saved*, for verily I say unto you

A* that *except ye shall keep my commandments*, . .

B* ye shall in no case *enter into the kingdom of heaven*.

Even more obvious is the equation between keeping the commandments and enduring to the end. While this connection may be self-evident, it is emphasized by the Savior himself in that critical verse in his sermon at the temple where he finally draws his presentation of the gospel to a completed stage by a double statement of the theretofore missing requirement of enduring to the end.¹⁶ He links it doubly to eternal life and follows with a double reference to the commandments which are to be kept:

Look unto me and *endure to the end*, and ye shall *live*; for unto him that *endureth to the end* will I give *eternal life*. Behold, *I have given unto you the commandments*. Therefore *keep my commandments*. (3 Nephi 15:9–10)

Less prominent, but also important to notice are invitations to look to the Lord, to listen to or heed his voice and the words of his prophets, and to follow him or his righteousness, etc., that can also be substituted into gospel statements in

¹⁶ How this passage is to be seen as included in the definition of the gospel provided in 3 Nephi 11:31–39 is explained in “The gospel according to Mormon,” p. 231.

the place of “enduring to the end.” Jacob appealed to his brethren to “*listen unto the word* of his commands and let not this pride of your hearts destroy you souls” (Jacob 2:16). The corrupting pride of those who “follow after their own will” thereby miss salvation is also a recurring theme (Alma 42:7) and leads to emphasis on the requisite humility of those who would follow God (1 Nephi 15:3, 2 Nephi 28:14, Alma 4:15, Helaman 6:5 and 39). The importance of *following* instead after Christ or his words or voice or after righteousness again recalls the metaphor of the gospel as a path or way and is invoked in a variety of phrasings.¹⁷ Nephi stressed the example of Christ who “humbled himself before the father” and showed men the way to salvation that they should *follow* (2 Nephi 31:7, 10–13). Alma encouraged his people to *hearken* to the voice of the good shepherd and *follow* him (Alma 5:41). He also taught his son Helaman to *follow* the words of Christ which would carry him into a far better land of promise (Alma 37:45). Mormon echoed these teachings in a more complete statement of the gospel which also appears to use “following the example of our Savior” in the place of enduring to the end:

¹⁷ For a thorough explanation of the metaphor of the gospel as a path or way, see Noel B. Reynolds, “This is the Way,” *Religious Educator*, vol.14 No. 3 (2013), 79–91. Book of Mormon discourse repeatedly adapts this metaphor to the ancient doctrine of the two ways as documented in Noel B. Reynolds, “The Ancient Doctrine of the Two Ways and the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2017), 49–78.

And if it so be that ye believe in Christ and are baptized—first with water, then with fire and with the Holy Ghost, *following the example* of our Savior, according to that which he hath commanded us—it shall be well with you in the day of judgment. (Mormon 7:10)

Mormon emphasizes the *following* metaphor again in a statement describing the process of developing oneself to be like Jesus Christ:

Pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart that ye may be filled with this love which he hath bestowed upon all who are true *followers* of his Son Jesus Christ, that ye may become the sons of God, that when he shall appear, we shall be like him—for we shall see him as he is—that we may have this hope, that we may be purified even as he is pure. (Moroni 7:48)

Similarly, Book of Mormon prophets frequently encouraged the people to *look unto God* or to *hearken to his words or commandments* (1 Nephi 18:16, 2 Nephi 2:28–29, Jacob 3:1, Mosiah 15:11, Alma 37:46–47). Alma’s blessing to his son Helaman makes clear how this looking to God amounts to enduring to the end:

And now, my son, I trust that I shall have great joy in you, because of your steadiness and your faithfulness unto God; for as you have commenced in your youth to *look to the Lord your God*, even so I hope that you will continue in *keeping his commandments*; for blessed is he that *endureth to*

the end. (Alma 38:2)

In another version of this injunction, the prophets repeatedly encouraged the Nephites to *look forward* to the atonement of Christ which would provide the means by which their sins could be remitted (Mosiah 18:21, Alma 4:14, 5:15, 7:6, 13:2, 6, and 25:15). Alma explains this “looking forward to the fruit” in terms of the process of preparing men for everlasting life as they “nourish the word,” another synonymous phrase for enduring to the end:

40 If ye will not *nourish the word*, looking forward with an eye of faith to the fruit thereof, ye can never pluck of the fruit of the tree of life.

41 But if ye will *nourish the word*, yea, nourish the tree as it beginneth to grow by your faith with great diligence and with patience, *looking forward to the fruit* thereof, and it shall take root. And behold, it shall be a tree springing up unto everlasting life. (Alma 32:40–41)

3 Nephi 9:13–22 and 10:3–7: Another unique announcement of the gospel.

Mormon’s abridgement of the Nephite record contains one other important meristic presentation of the gospel in the words of Christ himself in which *come unto me* is used prominently as a featured phrase. At the time of his crucifixion

and approximately one full year prior to his actual appearance to the Nephites,¹⁸ Jesus Christ spoke to them from heaven, listing and explaining the destructions they had witnessed and announcing that his gospel, which the Nephites had known and accepted since the great visions given to Lehi and Nephi, would now constitute a full replacement for the now-fulfilled law of Moses. While 3 Nephi 9:13–22 resembles the three other passages in which the gospel is taught by Jesus Christ in a series of gospel merisms, there is no attempt here to include and repeat all six elements of the gospel. It can occur to the reader that his stating the gospel meristically ten times, may have been an implicit allusion to the ten commandments given to Moses and to the law of Moses that it officially replaced.

In this series of gospel merisms, there are five explicit and five implicit appearances of the phrase “come unto me.” Explicitly, the Nephites are promised that “if ye will *come unto me*, ye shall have eternal life,” that “blessed are they which *cometh unto me*” (v. 14), that “whoso *cometh unto me* with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, . . . will I baptize with fire and with the Holy Ghost” (v.20), that “whoso repenteth and cometh *unto me* as a little child, . . . will I receive,” and

¹⁸ Because of the arrangement of the text, readers often assume Christ showed himself to the surviving Nephites immediately after the three days of destruction associated with the crucifixion. But the chronicler clearly states that the destructions began with a great storm on the fourth day of the 34th year. The visitation occurred “in the ending” of the 34th year. Compare 3 Nephi 8:5 and 10:18.

commanded to “repent and *come unto me . . . and be saved*” (v. 22). This same phrase may also lie behind five other phrasings in this passage: (1) “Will ye not now *return unto me* and repent of your sins and be converted, that I may heal you” (v. 13)? (2) “*And whosoever will come*, him will I receive” (v. 14). (3) “My own *received me not*” (v. 16). (4 and 5) “And as many as have *received me*, to them have I given to become the sons of God. And even so will I to as many as shall *believe on my name*” (v. 17).

As in the most obvious presentation of his gospel in 3 Nephi 27:13–21, Jesus, begins here with a context-setting reference to the plan of salvation. Book of Mormon references to the “great” or “merciful” plan of God repeatedly provide the context that gives meaning to the gospel message. While it may be true that much contemporary LDS discourse merges these two as if they were the same thing, the Nephite prophets understood the plan of salvation as background context that gave the doctrine or gospel of Christ its meaning. The plan of salvation describes the great things that the Father and the Son have done to make the salvation of man possible, including the creation, fall, Abrahamic covenant, atonement, proclamation of the gospel, judgment, and eternal life. The gospel tells men what they must do individually to qualify for eternal life.¹⁹ This relationship between the

¹⁹ See “This is the Way,” 86–87.

two is illustrated clearly in this passage as ten references to elements of the plan of salvation (labeled as PS #s 1–10 below) are interspersed with the ten meristic presentations of the gospel.

The long litany of destructions that introduces this presentation is itself prefaced by an explanation of these calamities in terms of the gospel as part of the plan of salvation and the failure of a wicked people to accept and follow it. There is a devil, and he seeks the fall and destruction of the righteous (PS #1):

2 A Woe woe woe unto this people!

 B Woe unto the inhabitants of the whole earth except they shall
 repent,

 A* for the devil laugheth and his angels rejoice

 B* because of the slain of the fair sons and daughters of my people

 Ballast: And it is because of their iniquity and abominations that they
 are fallen.

The negatively stated gospel merism in B is the universal message to “the inhabitants of the whole earth” that great woes await them “except they repent.” The Savior’s heavenly announcement continues with a sequence of ten small rhetorical structures that contain between them ten gospel merisms (labeled below as GM #s 1–10)—seven of which incorporate *come unto me* explicitly. Addressed

to a people who have known and lived the gospel, Jesus focuses on his promise to come to his people and his repeated invitation to them to come or return to him and his promise to receive them if they will receive him first. The entire passage is permeated with the language of coming. Different ways of combining and presenting these concepts carry much of the weight in this series of couplets, triplets, and chiasms—all of which are delimited by their rhetorical forms from one another, and which exhibit structures that are characteristic of ancient Hebrew rhetoric.²⁰

13 O all ye that are spared because ye were more righteous than they,

A will ye not now return unto me and repent of your sins

B and be converted, that I may heal you (GM #1)?

14 Yea, verily I say unto you:

A if ye will come unto me, ye shall have eternal life (GM #2).

B Behold, mine arm of mercy is extended towards you.

B* And whosoever will come, him will I receive (GM #3).

²⁰ For an explanation of Hebrew rhetoric as it has come to be understood by Bible scholars over the past seven decades and how it can be applied to readings of the Book of Mormon, see Noel B. Reynolds, “The Return of Rhetorical Analysis to Bible Studies,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 17 (2016): 91–98, and “Hebrew Rhetoric in the Book of Mormon: Second Nephi as a Case Study,” forthcoming.

A* And blessed are they which cometh unto me (GM #4).

15 Behold, I am Jesus Christ the Son of God.

A *I created the heavens and the earth* and all things that in them is.

B *I was with the Father* from the beginning (PS #2).

B* *I am in the Father* and the Father in me;

A* and *in me hath the Father glorified his name* (PS #3).

16 A *I came*

B unto *my own*,

B* and *my own*

A* *received me not* (PS #4);

A and *the scriptures* concerning my coming *are fulfilled*.

17 B And *as many as* have received me,

C to them *have I given to become the sons of God* (GM #5).

C* And even so *will I [give to become the sons of God]*

B* to *as many as* shall believe on my name (GM #6).

A* For behold, by me redemption cometh,

and in me is *the law of Moses fulfilled* (PS #5).

- 18 A *I am* the light *and* the life of the world.
 B *I am* Alpha *and* Omega,
 C [*I am*] the beginning *and* the end (PS #6).
- 19 A And *ye shall offer up unto me* no more the shedding of blood;
 B *yea, your sacrifices and your burnt offerings* shall be done
 away,
 B* for I will accept none of *your sacrifices and your burnt offerings*.
- 20 A* And *ye shall offer for a sacrifice unto me* a broken heart and a
 contrite spirit.
- A And *whoso cometh unto me with a broken heart and a contrite spirit,*
 B him will I *baptize with fire and with the Holy Ghost* (GM #7),
 A* even as *the Lamanites because of their faith in me at the time of their conversion*
 B* were *baptized with fire and with the Holy Ghost—*

Ballast line: and they knew it not (GM #8).

- 21 A Behold, I have *come unto the world*
 B *to bring redemption* unto the world,
 C *to save the world* from sin (PS #7).
- 22 A Therefore whoso repenteth and *cometh unto me* as a little child,
 him *will I receive* (GM #9),
 for of such is *the kingdom of God*.
- B Behold, for such I have *laid down my life*
 B* and have *taken it up* again (PS #8).
- A* Therefore *repent and come unto me*, ye ends of the earth,
 and *be saved* (GM #10).

The chronicler reports that this voice and message from heaven quieted the people in their distress, and after many hours of silence, the voice came again.

3 Nephi 10:3–7

- 3 A And it came to pass that *there came a voice*
 B again *unto the people*—
 B* and *all the people*
 A* *did hear [the voice], and did witness* of it—saying:
- 4 A *O ye people* of these great cities which have fallen,
 B which are *a descendant of Jacob*—
 B* yea, which are *of the house of Israel*—
 A* *O ye people* of the house of Israel,
 A how oft have I gathered you
 B as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings
 C and have nourished you!
- 5 A And again, how oft would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her
 chickens under her wings!
 B Yea, *O ye people* of the house of Israel which have fallen
 B* —yea, *O ye people* of the house of Israel, ye that dwell at
 Jerusalem as ye that have fallen—

A* yea, how oft would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her
 chickens

Ballast: and ye would not (PS #9)!

6 A O ye house of Israel whom I have spared,

B how oft will I gather you as a hen gathereth her chickens under
 her wings

C if ye will repent and return unto me with full purpose of
 heart!

7 A* But if not, O house of Israel,

B* the places of your dwellings shall become desolate

C* until the time of the fulfilling of the covenant to your
 fathers (PS #10).

In these 15 verses, Mormon reports two speeches of the crucified Christ as he spoke to the Nephites from heaven—possibly at about the same time as his resurrection. Both speeches are composed of a series of simple rhetorical structures that are typical of ancient Hebrew rhetoric. The first contains the most concentrated collection of *come unto me* phrasings in the entire Book of Mormon.

Taken as a whole, these verses contain Christ's personal appeal to the surviving Nephites to accept the gospel, which has been taught in preceding centuries by their own prophets, and to abandon the previously binding law of Moses with its program of sacrifices and offerings. The "true points" of the gospel are not spelled out in this passage as they will be in the first speech he makes to them when he descends to meet with them at the end of the year (3 Nephi 11:30–39). But it is referred to meristically ten times in a way that has been established for centuries in Nephite discourse. The passage is distinguished from the other three basic passages where Christ teaches his gospel directly to Nephites in that ten references to elements of the plan of salvation are interspersed with the ten gospel merisms to provide the larger context of the gospel message and to make clear its central importance as the divinely provided means by which all peoples may receive the full benefits of the plan of salvation.

Conclusions.

In this paper I have reconciled the well established six-element gospel of salvation taught by Christ and his prophets throughout the Book of Mormon with the recurring invitation to come unto Christ and be saved. Once we can understand that most statements of the gospel in the Book of Mormon are

formulated meristically—that where only a few or even just two of the gospel elements are mentioned explicitly, the full set of six is implied—the door is opened for a more precise account for the invitation to come unto him. In this detailed survey, I have shown that in almost all cases, “come unto me” in its various formulations, can readily be understood as a parallel phrasing for the Book of Mormon requirement that converts must “endure to the end” to receive eternal life. As it turns out, there are a variety of alternative phrasings for “endure to the end” that are used in these passages, including “partake of the fruit of the gospel/tree,” “be “numbered among his people,” and “lay hold on the gospel,” “keep the commandments,” etc., though “come unto me” is used with far greater frequency than the others. In longer passages explicitly mentioning most of the gospel elements, “come unto me” usually takes the place of “enduring to the end” specifically. But in very brief gospel merisms, it can invoke all the other missing elements as well in the minds of readers and convey the general conception of the gospel as the way back to the presence of God, linking such passages to the most common metaphor for the gospel or doctrine of Christ as a path or way.