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The Ascension of Jesus Christ: Its Role in Redemption from a Latter-day Saint
Theological Perspective

William Perez

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The Ascension of Jesus Christ: Its Role in Redemption from a Latter-day Saint Theological Perspective

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Mosiah 18:2 lists the ascension of Jesus Christ as one of the atoning acts that brings about redemption. Although many faith traditions have developed a theology about the significance of the ascension, the topic has not been covered at length within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This thesis explores the ascension of Jesus Christ and its implications for humanity from the perspective of Latter-day Saint beliefs.

The ascension of Jesus Christ can be considered the culmination, even the capstone of His atonement. There are sufficient sources within Latter-day Saint canon and the teachings of general authorities to support a theology of redemption through ascension and to expound on the implications of this final salvific act for humanity. This thesis serves as a prolegomenon for further insightful study and discussion.

Keywords: ascension, atonement, theology, redemption, Latter-day Saint

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My intrigue with this topic began as I took up President Russel M. Nelson's January 2017 challenge to study the life of Jesus Christ by using the topical guide as a main reference. I never got past *Jesus Christ, Ascension of*. I am grateful for his invitation and example.

I am indebted to my wife for cheering me on and providing invaluable support throughout the coursework and thesis work for this program. She has reviewed (and corrected) countless pages and has been a trusted sounding board and partner. She and our three daughters have been a great captive audience along the way.

I especially thank my committee members: Brian Hauglid, Mauro Properzi, and Charles Swift. Their expertise, feedback, and patience have helped craft my thinking and writing into a worthwhile compilation.

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Chapter 1: The Essential Ascension?

“The Lord’s ascension...is essential to the work of the atonement...In Christ’s ascension, God eradicates every vestige of our alienation from Him,”¹ wrote Patrick Henry Reardon, an archpriest of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese. Reardon declared that it is the lifting up of Jesus Christ into heaven following his passion and resurrection that enables our “entrance” into God’s kingdom. He is not alone among Christians in declaring the necessity of the ascension of the Savior. In his book, *Ascension Theology*, Douglas Farrow points out the efficacy of the ascension as described in the gospel of Luke. “That [Christ’s ascension] has implications both for the people of God and for the whole human race is the burden of Luke’s second volume, which is hinged to the first by the twice-told story of the ascension... Jesus’ destiny is our destiny...in reaching our destiny, he has reached it not only for himself but also for us.”² This demarcation of the ascension as pivotal in salvation is not a modern construct. In a homily attributed to Saint Augustine of Hippo, one of the early church fathers and a prominent influencer in shaping Western Christianity, we read that “unless the Savior had ascended unto heaven, his nativity would have come to nothing, his passion would have born no fruit for us, and his most holy resurrection would have been useless.”³

As a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints⁴ undertaking a study of the ascension of Jesus Christ, I was fascinated to discover that such intimations about the

¹ Patrick Henry Reardon, “The Essential Ascension” in *Touchstone* (May/June 2014), 48.

² Douglas Farrow, *Ascension Theology* (Bloomsbury Academic, May 5, 2011), 7,10.

³ Davies, *He Ascended into Heaven*, 170. (Sermo 53.4 Coll. Selec. SS. Ecclesiae Patrum, ed. D.A.B. Caillau, 131 B, 1842, P.278).

⁴ For the sake of conciseness, the phrases “the Church” or “The Church of Jesus Christ” or Latter-day Saint will be also be used in reference to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

importance of the ascension can be deduced from Latter-day Saint teachings. However, as a lifelong member of the Church, the concept had never entered my ears or even crossed my mind. As I explored further, I realized that ascension undertones can be found throughout the teachings and writings of both ancient and modern prophets. A foundational key for understanding the significance of Christ's ascension is found in the Book of Mormon's summary of Abinadi's sermons. Abinadi bore testimony "concerning that which was to come and also concerning the resurrection of the dead, and the redemption of the people, which was to be brought to pass through the power, and sufferings, and death of Christ, and his resurrection and ascension into heaven" (Mosiah 18:2). A potent assertion in this verse is that Christ's "ascension into heaven" is one of the salvific acts that brings about "the redemption of the people..." An oft-published quotation among Latter-day Saint circles is a description of the gospel approved by Joseph Smith himself: "The fundamental principles of our religion is the testimony of the apostles and prophets concerning Jesus Christ, 'that he died, was buried, and rose again the third day, *and ascended up into heaven;*' and all other things are only appendages to these, which pertain to our religion."⁵ Again, Christ's ascension is deemed as being on the short-list of "the fundamental principles of our religion."

Surprisingly, despite such assertions, the ascension's role in redemption is not among the highlights of atonement discussed by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For example, a quick search into the Church's general conference messages throughout the last 47 years as archived on Gospel Library (up until 2019) yields 44 uses of the term *Ascension*; however, they are only in reference to the actual event as it occurred chronologically. Not one of

⁵ "Elders' Journal, July 1838," p. 44, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 24, 2019 <<https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/elders-journal-july-1838/12>> (emphasis added).

them comes close to explicitly connecting Christ's ascension into heaven with the redemption of humanity.

Another example of what might be termed an oversight involves the use of the quotation cited in the paragraph above in an institute of religion lesson found in the *Jesus Christ and the Everlasting Gospel Teacher Manual*, Lesson 19, *He is Risen*. After displaying the statement by the prophet Joseph Smith regarding the “fundamental principles of our religion” (which include Christ's death, burial, resurrection, and ascension), the lesson plan invites a discussion using the following question: “Why do you think all other gospel principles are ‘appendages’ to the death, burial, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ?”⁶ The omission is obvious when compared to the actual quotation. Joseph's fundamentals and overview of Christ's atonement include four steps. The question at hand summarizes it in only three. The Church of Jesus Christ's *Guide to the Scriptures* defines the atonement as including “His suffering for the sins of mankind, the shedding of His blood, and His death and subsequent resurrection from the grave.” Have Latter-day Saints come to equate ascension as synonymous with resurrection? Or, have they simply excluded it from the theological dialogue? Does the heavy emphasis placed on the believer's own journey of faith and works in accessing Christ's atoning power limit a deeper look at His ascension's role in the process?

This thesis will delve into the ascension of Jesus Christ and its place as a soteriological doctrine in LDS theology by exploring the question: *How does the ascension of Jesus Christ play a role in humanity's redemption in the atonement theology of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?* As such, it will establish that despite its glaring omission in Latter-day Saint

⁶ *Jesus Christ and the Everlasting Gospel Teacher Manual* (2016), accessed April 4, 2019, <https://www.lds.org/manual/jesus-christ-and-the-everlasting-gospel-teacher-manual/lesson-19-he-is-risen?lang=eng>

theology and practice in comparison to other Christian traditions, the ascension of Jesus Christ plays a critical role in the redemption of humanity. Its importance can be attested to from within Latter-day Saint doctrinal and theological sources and may even be shown to be the capstone of the Divine Economy (relating to God's administration of His plan of salvation). A theology of ascension can set the ultimate vision and pattern which disciples of Jesus Christ are to strive for on the Latter-day Saint salvific path.

Furthermore, elaborating on specific blessings enabled by Christ's atonement through His ascension will help believers better appreciate the intricacies of the Plan of Salvation and enrich their own study of mankind's redemption. Such a study will help bring added meaning to aspects of Latter-day Saint worship that can be viewed through an ascension lens, such as temple attendance with its emphasis on ascending to the presence of God. Indeed, as Jacob questioned, "...why not speak of the atonement of Christ, and attain to a perfect knowledge of him...?" (Jacob 4:12). Jesus taught his disciples that "no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6, KJV). These disciples came to believe that Jesus had been raised up to take his throne "by the right hand of God exalted," having –unlike others– actually "ascended into the heavens" (Acts 2:33-34, KJV). This ascension unto exaltation can be viewed as part of the "grace to grace" process which the Savior went through "until he received a fulness" (D&C 93:13). Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe that they too can progress grace for grace and receive of God's fulness through following the pattern established by the Son of God (See D&C 93:18-20). Therefore, Jesus Christ's ascension and subsequent reception by the Father can be viewed as a possibility for all who fully follow in His paths. In addition, given that the ascension has been discussed so heavily among other faith traditions, such internal theological clarification will help Church members to better engage in a productive and informed dialogue

about the topic with other Christians. In a day where great strides are being made by the Church to clarify and explicate basic doctrines for the benefit of those within and without the faith, surely the ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven, one of the “the fundamental principles of our religion,” is worthy of increased attention.

The scope of this study will expound upon the aforementioned claim made in Mosiah 18:2 linking Christ’s ascension to mankind’s redemption. Taking this verse at face value, this paper will substantiate and build upon this claim from a Latter-day Saint theological perspective using The Old and New Testaments, The Book of Mormon, The Doctrine and Covenants, The Pearl of Great Price, remarks made by Church general authorities, and any other sources produced and distributed by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Given that there is no formal doctrinal statement on the issue at hand thus far, I will not discriminate between past and present Church sources but will present a homogenous theological model on the Ascension’s role in redemption as taken from those things on which there is general consensus. Unofficial Latter-day Saint scholarship or speculation pertaining to the topic will also be considered. Because the Old Testament’s ascension theme offers a rather indirect symbolic connection to the issue of Christ’s ascension, this study will focus primarily on the more explicit references to the ascension found in the New Testament and Latter-day Saint restored scripture.

Approaching the topic from a hermeneutic of faith, I will not be attempting to engage exegetical critics in proving that the ascension actually happened. Although there may technically be two ascensions implied in the gospels (both post-resurrection), one after Christ’s appearance to Mary at the garden tomb and another after his forty-day tenure with His apostles as resurrected Lord, I will not differentiate between the two and their implications but will describe ascension as Christ returning to the presence of the Father sometime after his

resurrection. Key to the question at hand is the issue of redemption. Before thoroughly exploring its link to ascension, I will define this term at least from a Latter-day Saint standpoint. This study will propose a theological model for how Latter-day Saints can view the ascension of Jesus Christ as part of humanity's redemptive process.

Because Latter-day Saints accept as doctrine primarily those tenets endorsed consistently by Church general authorities and laid out explicitly in the accepted canon, the topic at hand is to be approached using said doctrine and canon. However, the language and conversation enveloping the research and delivery of this thesis will be in the realm of theology, which has been "characterized by thoughtful, usually doctrinally driven reflection on matters of faith that are not inherently authoritative or challenging to dogmatic authorities."⁷ As such, the aim is to begin a constructive theological conversation about the implications of the ascension of Jesus Christ that fits within the framework provided by the teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The resulting theological construct will be designed to invoke deeper thought on the concept and to engage with other faith traditions that have already fleshed out their opinions more fully. This study is qualitative in nature in that it is primarily exploratory.

As a "descriptive-interpretive enterprise,"⁸ this project will review the relevant sources, organize them into a coherent framework and offer an interpretation in the hopes that "in some measure the teachings of the gospel will be made more meaningful and correspondingly more relevant."⁹ The process I will undertake of analyzing, reflecting, organizing, and presenting a

⁷ Mauro Properzi, *Mormonism and the Emotions: An Analysis of LDS Scriptural Texts* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015), 7.

⁸ M. Gerald Bradford, "On Doing Theology" (BYU Studies Copyright 1974), 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

discourse for consideration can be considered a theological exercise in which I will be comprehensive with the Latter-day Saint contributions relative to the topic of Christ's ascension and show how they fit into the system of redemption as a whole. The resulting conversation is intended to serve as a thought-provoking prolegomenon that can be expounded upon later.

As a final anecdote to further convey the present gap, I was recently privileged to visit Israel and spend some days in and around the old city of Jerusalem. I was part of a small tour group that is owned and operated by members of the Church who are expert in their craft and in catering these types of trips to a Latter-day Saint audience, down to the very doctrines, principles, and other theological material covered at each location. We explored the well-known sites associated with the life of the Savior and His atoning sacrifice including Gethsemane, Golgotha, and the Garden Tomb. I happened to be there during what the Christian community recognizes as the Day of Ascension. However, there was no mention of ascension made on my tour, no visit to the Mount of Olives as a scene of salvific importance. Ascension was clearly not on the radar. I begged our guide to take me to the ascension site outside the city walls and was able to negotiate a brief detour. On this detour, I learned that there are at least three sites dedicated to the scene and commemoration of Christ's ascension. The Chapel of the Ascension is a small shrine which houses a stone slab believed to have been imprinted by the Savior's final footprint on earth. There is also the Russian Orthodox Convent of the Ascension of our Lord, and the Evangelical Church of the Ascension. The latter boasts a magnificent tower with an even more magnificent view, standing on the highest point of Jerusalem. I was surprised to find that even on Ascension Day these sites were relatively empty, and I wondered why the countless pilgrims on the journey of their lives that week – including those of my own faith tradition – would seek to walk in all of the Savior's earthly footsteps except for his final ones.

Even though other Christian faiths seem to be more saturated with an ascension theology than The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is, some scholars and even clergy have criticized their own modern-day faith institutions for ‘dumbing-down’ the significance of Christ’s ascension and its commemoration. One minister asserted “most Christians today do not commemorate Jesus’ ascension as part of our worship experience.”¹⁰ He offers at least one reason for this diminishment: “Why do we downplay this event? Perhaps Jesus’ ascension is more difficult for us to relate to experientially.”¹¹ A common lectionary’s prescription of worship passages based on the liturgical calendar, or calendar of the Christian year, suggests an account of the ascension (Acts 1) be read on the seventh Sunday after Easter (Ascension Day is typically commemorated on the sixth Sunday). J. Neil Alexander observes that

The downside is that the repetition of the ascension narrative on the Sunday following the feast has become an excuse not to keep the feast day in its fullness, on the day, thus effectively making the Seventh Sunday “Ascension Sunday.”¹²

Such assessments are nothing new. In the forward to his 1911 book, *The Ascended Christ*, H.B. Swete optimistically remarks

I shall be thankful if these pages are permitted to set forward in any measure the revival of the great Ascension festival in parishes where the Church bell is silent or awakens a feeble response on the day when our Lord entered into His glory.¹³

¹⁰ Ray Vander Laan, *The Mission of Jesus Discovery Guide: Triumph of God’s Kingdom in a World in Chaos* (HarperCollins Christian Publishing, June 28, 2016), Session Four.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² J. Neil Alexander, *Celebrating Liturgical Time: Days, Weeks, and Seasons* (Church Publishing, Inc., 2014), 19

¹³ H.B. Swete, *The Ascended Christ* (Macmillan and Co., Limited, St. Martin’s Street, London, 1911), viii.

Exactly a century later, Douglas Farrow gave a dreary assessment in the preface to his work, *Ascension Theology*

The doctrine of the ascension has become an enigma, if not an embarrassment. The corresponding liturgical feast, once one of the church's great feasts, is poorly celebrated. The Rogation Days that preceded it have disappeared and, whether marked on Thursday or Sunday, Ascension pales beside Pentecost. The latter's dependence on the former is seldom noticed, which helps to explain why it too is fading in many places, along with the ecclesial confidence and communal bonds that all these feasts formerly nourished.¹⁴

In the minds of some, something has gone amiss. However, one can always find records of faithful adherents to ascension's commemoration. One touching account comes from the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who "wrote from a Nazi prison that he was celebrating Ascension Day as a great festival because he knew what it was about."¹⁵ Holy Thursday, or Ascension Day, is a beautiful and long-standing tradition that ties together the commemoration of Christ's saving acts in behalf of humanity.

Is Jesus Christ's ascension essential? What can The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints contribute to the dialogue even though an internal dialogue on the subject is lacking? What does said contribution unlock for members of the Church? The following chapters will use these lenses to examine the ascension, which *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, a Protestant publication, describes as "...the crowning of the purpose of Jesus' life and death in the restoration of fellowship between heaven and earth."¹⁶

¹⁴ Douglas Farrow, *Ascension Theology* (Bloomsbury Academic, May 5, 2011), xi-xii.

¹⁵ Mark Pearson, *Fifty Days of Glory, From Easter Morning to the Eve of Pentecost* (Charisma Media, February 18, 2014), 168.

¹⁶ *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, eds. Alan Richardson and John Bowden (Westminster John Knox Press, January 1, 1983), 45.

Chapter 2: The Rise of Ascension Theology

In presenting a review of ascension theology, I borrow a sentiment expressed by Douglas Farrow in his book, *Ascension and Ecclesia*. I humbly acknowledge that in tackling such a cosmic event, given the plethora of scholarship that could be examined, connections that might be drawn, or avenues which might be traveled down in a comprehensive study on the ascension of our Lord, “I cannot pretend to have done equal justice to all, or indeed full justice to any...Others, perhaps, will supply what is wanting and make corrections in doing so.”¹⁷ I hope that the final product serves as an initiation for great strides yet to be made along this thrilling journey of discovery.

We commence our current study of one of the most beloved yet befuddling stories in the New Testament – that of Christ’s ascension. Although mentioned in the epistles, Christ’s actual ascension event is related only three times – once in Mark, once in Luke, and once in Acts, respectively. Several references to ascension made by Christ himself are found in John; however there is no record in this gospel of an ascension actually happening. Even Mark seems to give the event just passing mention in what some scholars consider an unauthentic, extended ending.¹⁸ “So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God” (Mark 16:19, KJV).

To the ancient saints the disappearance of Jesus Christ after his resurrection must have been a trial of their faith, an enigma at the very least. To skeptics of the Christian movement it was evidence of the fallibility of the gospel message and of the foolishness of its adherents. How

¹⁷ Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia* (A&C Black, July 1, 2004), ix-x.

¹⁸ A.W. Zwiep, *The Ascension of the Messiah in Lukan Christology* (Koninklijke Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1997), 131. (Some scholars question the authenticity of Mark 16:9-20 given that these verses are not contained in some of the oldest extant manuscripts.)

could they claim to worship a Lord whose body was now missing and unaccounted for? Where did the Messiah go? Was he truly the Lord's anointed Savior? In the New Testament, Luke sought to put minds at ease by twice relaying a sequence of events that answered these questions.

The account of Christ's ascension recorded in Luke's gospel reads:

And he led them out as far as to Bethany, and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them.

And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven.

And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy:

And were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God. Amen (Luke 24:50-53, KJV).

With slight variations, Acts describes the event as follows:

And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight.

And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel;

Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? 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 (Acts 1:9-11, KJV).

In his comprehensive work, *The Ascension of the Messiah in Lukan Christology*, A.W.

Zwiep pinpoints 'salvation history' as being among one of Luke's major theological concerns.

He explains that Luke draws upon Jewish rapture accounts, especially that of Elijah, to resolve the issue of a delay in the Parousia, or Christ's return.¹⁹ By structuring his ascension narratives in this way, Luke is able to subconsciously draw upon an established pattern in which the main character's ascent is compensated for by an outpouring of the spirit (which is presented as the Day of Pentecost in Luke's narrative). In this way, ascension is kept separate from resurrection

¹⁹ A.W. Zwiep, *The Ascension of the Messiah in Lukan Christology* (Koninklijke Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1997).

and exaltation and implies an imminent eschatological return. Luke theologically used the ascension as a link in salvation history to assuage the burden of Christ's disappearance and point towards the Savior's second coming, which some early Christians expected would occur in their own lifetimes. This overview lays the framework for Jesus Christ's ascension being part of his redemptive act and also being a foreshadowing of what lies ahead.

Although scholars throughout antiquity and into modern academia have received the ascension accounts in a variety of ways, one well-known supposition is that Christ's ascension is only a Lukan literary construct and not a literal event (some question whether the construct is even originally Luke's).²⁰ Others have posited that the ascension is to be taken as synonymous with resurrection and exaltation.²¹ Furthermore, believing scholars maintain a hermeneutic of faith and trust in Christ's literal ascension, along with its place in the Divine Economy.²² In his survey of ascension scholarship, A.W. Zwiep describes a study that concluded that the ascension narratives were never meant to be taken *ad litteram*, or exactly as is. Zwiep then reviews a refutation to this conclusion which explained that labeling the ascension passages as legendary was nonsensical because a legend would have taken much longer than three decades to emerge, whereas other New Testament writers (including apparent eyewitnesses) were testifying of an

²⁰ See A.W. Zwiep "Ascension Scholarship: Past, Present, and Future" in *Ascent into Heaven in Luke-Acts: New Explorations of Luke's Narrative Hinge*, eds. David K. Bryan and David W. Pao (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2016).

²¹ Stanly E. Porter "The Unity of Luke-Acts and the Ascension Narratives" in *Ascent into Heaven in Luke-Acts: New Explorations of Luke's Narrative Hinge*, eds. David K. Bryan and David W. Pao (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2016), 120. It has been posited that because Luke so sharply seeks to contrast the suffering and death of Christ with His exaltation, that resurrection, ascension, and exaltation all serve the purpose of communicating Christ's enthronement as opposed to having distinct consequences and meanings. See also Lidija Novakovic, *Raised from the Dead According to Scripture*, A&C Black, May 29, 2014.

²² See Douglas Farrow, *Ascension Theology* (Bloomsbury Academic, May 5, 2011).

ascension event much earlier than that.²³ What did the earliest Christians believe about the ascension? Although it is difficult to trace and corroborate original extra-biblical sources from the first century, one can begin to put the pieces together from the writings of early Christian apologists. Among the most relevant to be highlighted in this chapter are Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyon, two prominent apologists in the second century A.D. Much of their theology and testimony are still extant today.

Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyon

Justin Martyr (Approximately 100 A.D. – 165 A.D.) has been described as a “philosopher turned Christian.”²⁴ After a motivating conversion experience, he became a defender of the faith. He considered himself “still a philosopher, but of the only true philosophy, and professing himself a teacher, not of human wisdom but of the divine word.”²⁵ Irenaeus of Lyons (Approximately 130 A.D. – 202 A.D.) is seen as the father of Christian orthodoxy. A leader in the early church, his writings and theology are “a weaving together of patterns of thought which he, a Christian from birth, held to be authentic elements in the tradition handed on from Christ’s apostles.”²⁶ Both Justin and Irenaeus were outspoken in their defense against heretical movements of the day, such as Marcionism, Gnosticism, and Docetism – a tradition that professed a belief in Jesus Christ, but not in his bodily existence, presuming that Jesus was never

²³ A.W. Zwiep, *The Ascension of the Messiah in Lukan Christology* (Koninklijke Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1997), *Forschungsbericht*.

²⁴ Richard A. Norris, *God and World in Early Christian Theology: A Study in Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen* (Adam and Charles Black, London, 1965), 57.

²⁵ Robert Wilson Evans, *Biography of the Early Church, Volume 1* (J.G. & F. Rivington, London, 1837) 140.

²⁶ Norris, *God and World in Early Christian Theology*, 57.

really human at all, but only appeared to be so for the benefit of those with weaker faith. By exploring what Irenaeus and Justin were saying in regard to Christ's ascension, one can conclude Christians of the second century took the biblical ascension accounts at face value. For Justin and Irenaeus, Christ's ascension was a literal event entirely separate from his resurrection. It was also seen as having major implications for humanity.

In writing against heretics and false prophets, Justin asserts "He (Christ) foreknew all that would happen to us after His resurrection from the dead *and* ascension to heaven" (Dial. LXXXII, emphasis added).²⁷ In an accusation against the Jews, Justin writes "when [they] knew that He had risen from the dead *and* ascended to heaven, as the prophets foretold He would," they quickly commissioned "chosen men" to spread false stories about what really happened (Dial. XVII, emphasis added). Justin believed that everyone, not only Christians, knew about Christ's resurrection and ascension. In addition, the resurrection and ascension were two separate, literal occurrences. This distinction can be seen consistently across the board of apology. In defending the divinity of Jesus, Justin Martyr testifies of him,

Whom we also know to have been Christ the Son of God, who was crucified, and rose again, and ascended to heaven, and will come again to judge all men, even up to Adam himself (Dial. CXXXII).

In a similar defense of Christ's divinity, Irenaeus adds,

That He Himself, because He was Jesus Christ, suffered for us; He, who lay in the tomb, and rose again, who descended and ascended, —the Son of God having been made the Son of man, as the very name itself doth declare (Haer.III, XVIII, 3).²⁸

²⁷ *Dial.* is used in this chapter as an abbreviation for Justin Martyr's work titled *Dialogue with Trypho* (as translated by Philip Schaff).

²⁸ *Haer.* is used in this chapter as an abbreviation for Irenaeus's works titled *Against Heresies* (as translated by Philip Schaff).

In yet another reflection, Irenaeus delves into the theological ramifications of the ascension. Using two New Testament passages for support, he explains,

For the Lord, through means of suffering, “ascending into the lofty place, led captivity captive, gave gifts to men,” and conferred on those that believe in Him the power “to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and on all the power of the enemy,” that is, of the leader of apostasy (Haer.II, XX, 3).

Jesus receives power through ascension that He can then confer. Irenaeus relegates Christ’s suffering to a “means” by which he achieves the end goal of leading captivity captive by “ascending into the lofty place.” Irenaeus is not denigrating the pivotal role and compelling nature of the passion; however, he identifies it as being one step in a larger journey. The subjugation of all Christ’s enemies, and by extension the enemies of his followers, was an anticipated and much talked about result of his ascension into heaven. Christ is looked to as victor and deliverer. As Irenaeus states, “in order that, as our species went down to death through a vanquished man, so we may ascend to life again through a victorious one” (Haer.V, XXI, 1).

Christ’s ascending foreshadowed other ascensions. Why? Irenaeus offers a reason that would continue to be embraced in the work of other Christian writers centuries later. After descending to Hades in search of lost sheep, “which was indeed His own peculiar handiwork,” Jesus would “ascend to the height above, offering and commending to His Father that human nature (hominem) which had been found” (Haer.III, XIX, 3). In taking upon himself flesh and thus ascending, Jesus vicariously reintroduces humanity into the presence of the Father. Apparently, not all mankind would be worthy of the same degree of ascension – seeing as how “In my Father's house there are many dwelling places” (John 14:2, NRSV). Yet the worthy disciples might “ascend through the Spirit to the Son, and through the Son to the Father” (Haer.V, XXXVI 2).

This impact of ascension on humanity is illustrated by a fascinating metaphor drawn by Irenaeus from a narrative in 2 Kings Chapter 6. In this account, a man in Elijah's group loses a borrowed axe head in water while chopping down timber. In response to his distress, Elijah, the man of God, "cut off a stick, and threw it in there [the water], and made the iron float" (2 Kings 6:6 NRSV). Irenaeus comments as follows

This was a sign that souls should be borne aloft through the instrumentality of wood, upon which He suffered who can lead those souls aloft that follow His ascension (Fragments XXVIII).²⁹

In other words, the wooden stick that Elijah threw into the water represented Christ's descent by way of the cross and just as the axe head floated to the top, representing an ascension of sorts, the souls of mankind can also be elevated. What souls? The souls that "follow His ascension." Whether this following refers to faithfully worshipping the ascended Christ or whether it indicates a literal path set by Christ that each soul is bound to follow is uncertain. Yet, the general thrust here is that because of Christ's ascension, he can lead other souls "aloft."

The *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception* explains that

By thus separating resurrection clearly from ascension Luke helped bring out the point that there were two distinct claims regarding Jesus to be made in all this. That Jesus had been raised from the dead, as the beginning of the end-time resurrection of the dead (Rom 1:4; 1Cor 15:20, 23), with all the eschatological corollaries entailed, was crucial enough for earliest Christian self-understanding. But from earliest days of Christianity it was also seen as of crucial importance to recognize that Jesus was not simply the first man to be raised from the dead. In addition, and as a distinct claim, the risen Jesus had also been exalted to God's right hand.³⁰

²⁹ *Fragments from the Lost Writings of Irenaeus*, edited by Philip Schaff.

³⁰ *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception Volume 2* (Walter de Gruyter, Berlin/New York 2009), 912.

The Encyclopedia is also quick to point out that “Because of its close linkage with the resurrection and exaltation traditions, the ascension as such was not able to develop an appreciable kerygmatic or liturgical momentum of its own in the first three centuries.”³¹

Modern-Day Scholarship

In her book, *Between Heaven and Earth: Liminality and the Ascension of Christ in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, Johanna Kramer traces the theological development of ascension theology among the Anglo-Saxons from the fifth century onward. In outlining how biblical sources and patristic authorities on the ascension were read, received, and relayed, Kramer characterizes the ascension as a liminal doctrine given that the event technically encompasses two spheres, heaven and earth, which allows for various narratives, images, and motifs to be used in conveying what is in reality a very abstract theology. Relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process, Kramer adopts a definition of liminality “as a ‘betwixt-and-between condition often involving seclusion from the everyday scene,’ or, more broadly, as ‘any condition outside or on the peripheries of everyday life.’”³² She describes how

Most immediately the Ascension is liminal because it takes place across boundaries as Christ ascends from the earth and crosses into heaven. Each central Ascension doctrine also describes a liminal condition: Christ in his nature as God and man is a dual entity – and so is the *totus Christus* (the Pauline concept of Christ as the Head and Christians as the Body); Christ opens heaven to humanity by crossing the boundary into heaven; after his ascension, Christ is both present and absent on earth, inhabiting two spaces at once.³³

³¹ *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception Volume 2* (Walter de Gruyter, Berlin/New York 2009), 914.

³² Johanna Kramer, *Between Heaven and Earth: Liminality and the Ascension of Christ in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Manchester University Press, 2017), 3.

³³ Johanna Kramer, *Between Heaven and Earth: Liminality and the Ascension of Christ in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Manchester University Press, 2017), 3.

Thus, in her detailed treatise, Kramer asserts “that such ‘in-betweenness’ marks the core doctrines of the ascension, especially Christ’s dual nature and the *totus Christus*.”³⁴

Ascension scholarship continued to propagate beyond the 5th century (as studied by Kramer) and on into the 20th and 21st centuries. In 1911, Henry Barclay Swete, an English biblical scholar and Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge published *The Ascended Christ: A Study in the Earliest Christian Teaching*. Swete chooses to focus on the ascension of Jesus Christ and its theological significance for mankind, beginning with the assertion that “the resurrection of our Lord would have been an event of comparatively small significance from the standpoint of the religious life if it had been no more than a return to life on earth for a shorter or longer space of time,”³⁵ He investigates in scripture why the ascension was necessary and what it is that Jesus Christ is able to do because of it, citing that the two great creeds of the Western Church confess the ascension and the exaltation of Christ at the Father’s right hand as almost synonymous occurrences. The book focuses on Christ’s role as “the great high priest” and how the ascension “makes his atoning sacrifice operative, and is the unfailing spring of the life of justification and grace in all his true members upon the earth.”³⁶

In another attempt to pore over the scriptural record and show that “resurrection is certainly not ascension,”³⁷ J.G. Davies published *He Ascended into Heaven: A Study in the*

³⁴ Johanna Kramer, *Between Heaven and Earth: Liminality and the Ascension of Christ in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Manchester University Press, 2017), 3.

³⁵ Henry Barclay Swete, *The Ascended Christ: A Study in the Earliest Christian Teaching*, (Macmillan and Co., Limited, London, 1911), vii.

³⁶ Henry Barclay Swete, *The Ascended Christ: A Study in the Earliest Christian Teaching*, (Macmillan and Co., Limited, London, 1911), 51.

³⁷ J.G. Davies, *He Ascended into Heaven: A Study in the History of Doctrine*, (Association Press, New York, 1958), 33.

History of Doctrine, in 1958. Davies identifies what the ascension meant in New Testament times and how it was viewed by gospel authors. Additionally, he describes how ascension doctrine made its way through the original Christian church to the ante-Nicene church, into the conciliar creeds, and then into the early church sermons and texts of Greek and Latin writers. Davies pinpoints that there was a phase in the history of an ascension doctrine being fully solidified that “since it in no sense occupied the forefront of debate (early Christian apologetics) no attempt was made to expound it in detail,”³⁸ so it may have become muddled. His overall research concludes “hence, from the standpoint of the contingency of the incarnation, it is through the resurrection and the ascension, and not through the former alone, that man can now say: ‘Felix Culpa!’”³⁹

First published in 1999, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* by Douglas Farrow remains a keynote compilation of ascension theory and its development from the ancient and into the modern church. Farrow reiterates that Christ’s “ascent into heaven, like his ascent on the cross is a journey undertaken on behalf of God’s people and with a view to the realization of their kingdom hopes.”⁴⁰ He seeks to expose how some ascension theology has attempted to separate itself from the concept of a bodily ascension dealing with a human Jesus in order to shy away from the

³⁸ J.G. Davies, *He Ascended into Heaven: A Study in the History of Doctrine*, (Association Press, New York, 1958), 113.

³⁹ *Felix* meaning “happy” or “blessed” and *Culpa* meaning “fall” or “fault.” *Felix Culpa* is a nuanced expression which characterizes the fall of Adam as fortunate because it leads to humanity’s ultimate redemption. It is especially appropriate in our discussion of ascension because it is the ascension which brings the fall of Adam full circle and restores mankind into literal communion with God. J.G. Davies, *He Ascended into Heaven: A Study in the History of Doctrine*, (Association Press, New York, 1958), 182.

⁴⁰ Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia* (A&C Black, July 1, 2004), 23.

dilemma of an absent Lord. Ultimately, he argues, such a “truce with gnosticism” only serves to “[corrupt] history with myth”⁴¹ and land the church leagues away from its divinely appointed destiny.

We also happen to think that the church, or that portion of it which represents the remnants of Christendom, is coming to a crossroads which defies all indecision on the matter. A choice about the centrality of Jesus will have to be made, and made with the doctrine of the ascension in mind.⁴²

For Farrow, understanding the ascension is critical in unlocking the power of church sacraments and in preparing for the Savior’s imminent return.

The ascension of Jesus Christ is a treasure trove for scholars, faithful or otherwise, and remains a topic of conversation in both research and theology. In 2016, Fortress Press published *Ascent into Heaven in Luke-Acts: New explorations of Luke’s Narrative Hinge*. This anthology is one of the latest compilations of essays on Ascension study. Ranging from topics such as “The Unity of Luke-Acts and the Ascension Narratives” to “The Ascension as a Cultic Experience in Acts,” this text is a great assemblage of what exegetical scholars are saying about the latest ascension-related issues and theories. Notwithstanding all that is being said and can be said regarding Christ’s ascension, one common assessment among scholars of faith is echoed by Johanna Kramer. In reference to her area of expertise, but categorically stated as a reflection of the whole, she writes,

Despite its centrality to Christian doctrine, the Ascension has been neglected in scholarship, both in literary criticism of the early English Middle Ages and in religious history and theology. While Douglas Farrow has argued for

⁴¹ Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia* (A&C Black, July 1, 2004), 106.

⁴² Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia* (A&C Black, July 1, 2004), 267.

the importance of the Ascension to the contemporary Church, its importance to Anglo-Saxon England remains unrecognized and largely unexamined.⁴³

In like manner, the ascension of Jesus Christ as a soteriological doctrine also “remains unrecognized and largely unexamined” within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The ascension of Jesus Christ has not been discussed in-depth or at all in some of the major publications produced by the Church or penned by Church leaders regarding the atonement of Jesus Christ. Among the most notable publications in which the significance of the ascension is absent are Tad R. Callister’s *The Infinite Atonement*, Bruce R. McConkie’s *Mormon Doctrine*, John Taylor’s *An Examination into and an Elucidation of the Great Principle of the Mediation and Atonement of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*, and Jeffrey R. Holland’s “Atonement of Jesus Christ” entry in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*. Ascension is nonexistent in the Church’s *True to the Faith: A Gospel Reference*, and in *This is My Doctrine: The Development of Mormon Theology*, Charles Harrell does not mention it in his comprehensive review of how Latter-day Saints have developed a theology about the atonement of Jesus Christ over time.

The absence of explicit statements does not mean that the material for such theologizing is nonexistent. There are many references that are rich in ascension substance when scrutinized and Church leaders have at times made subtle references that carry tremendous implications for the study at hand. At a worldwide Face to Face event for youth on March 4th, 2017, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve apostles talked about the gift of the Holy Ghost being an extension of the Savior’s atonement. He said:

You remember in the New Testament when he said, ‘unless I go away, the Holy Ghost can’t come.’ I wondered about that for thirty years. Well I think what he means is ‘unless I fulfill my Atonement – that requires my death and resurrection, and absence, my ascension – the Holy Ghost can’t come and that’s

⁴³ Johanna Kramer, *Between Heaven and Earth: Liminality and the Ascension of Christ in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Manchester University Press, 2017), 14.

what you're really going to need to get through, once I've provided my Atonement.'⁴⁴

Elder Holland included the ascension in the list of atoning acts that unlock eternal blessings. He separated it from its all too common counterpart, the resurrection. In an article penned for the February 1982 Ensign magazine, Church President Gordon B. Hinckley praised the path to salvation made possible by Him who is “the resurrection, and the life (John 11:25, KJV). He then stressed, almost as if to caution against a celebration that would cause one to settle prematurely “But there is a goal beyond the Resurrection. That is exaltation in our Father’s kingdom.” Jesus Christ Himself attained exaltation “on the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Hebrews 1:3, KJV) by His post-resurrection ascent. We now turn to a Latter-day Saint examination of atonement “beyond the Resurrection,” as secured by Christ’s ascension.

⁴⁴ Jeffrey R. Holland, Face to Face with President Eyring and Elder Holland,” March 4, 2017, time stamp 3:38-3:59, accessed April 22, 2019, <<https://www.lds.org/broadcasts/face-to-face/eyring-holland?lang=eng>>

Chapter 3: The Pattern of Descent and Ascent

Vestiges of a powerful ascension motif can be found throughout the Old Testament. The ascent is always coupled with a descent.

To begin to understand the story of Jesus we can and should go back as far as the legend of Enoch, and even further. Indeed we must go all the way back to Eden, to that cosmic mountain on which was planted the garden where the very first humans are said to have walked and talked with God. For in Eden begins the pattern of descent and ascent that provides the main story-line of the holy scriptures, a story-line that reaches its climax in Jesus and his ascension into heaven.⁴⁵

For members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, this pattern can be traced beyond Eden's paradise and into the realms of a concrete premortal existence. It was here, in "our first primeval childhood,"⁴⁶ that one like unto God declared: "We will go down, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell; And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them" (Abraham 3:24-25). Then the children of God decided to descend and leave their "more exalted sphere."⁴⁷ In a continuation of this idea Adam and Eve live in the presence of God before they fall from grace and are cast out of his presence. Noah, "a just man and perfect (Genesis 6:9, KJV)" is carried up "above the earth (Genesis 7:17, KJV)" in an ark while all of creation perishes in the flood. Descending from Mount Ararat, Noah's posterity eventually embraces the wickedness of the past and seeks a counterfeit ascent up the

⁴⁵ Douglas Farrow, *Ascension Theology* (Bloomsbury Academic, May 5, 2011), 2.

⁴⁶ Eliza R. Snow "Oh My Father," *LDS Hymnal* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 292.

⁴⁷ Eliza R. Snow "Oh My Father," *LDS Hymnal* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 292.

tower of Babel, which leads to a going “down” (Genesis 11:7, KJV) in which they are confounded and scattered.

Other notable examples include the descent of Joseph into a pit from whence he ascends by gaining command over all of Egypt, the descent of Jacob’s posterity into slavery and their ascent into Sinai and the presence of God via their prophet-leader, the rise and fall of many kings and judges in Israel including Saul, David, and Solomon the wise, and the descent of Jonah into “the belly of hell” (Jonah 2:2, KJV) only to be brought up again through the Lord’s mercy. “It is against this backdrop” notes Douglas Farrow, in which “the story of Jesus was consciously told.”⁴⁸ Jesus Christ himself condescends as Word made flesh (see John 1:14, KJV). Born in the lowliest of circumstances, He eventually rises to the point of receiving a king’s welcome during His triumphant entry into Jerusalem. He is shortly thereafter stripped of honor, acclaim, and even clothing, and condemned to death as a common criminal where – in another ironic imitation of ascent – He is “lifted up upon the cross” (3 Nephi 27:14). Christ then descended and “preached unto the spirits in prison” (1 Peter 3:19, KJV) until eventually he “[arose] with healing in his wings” (Malachi 4:2, KJV) through the resurrection. He ultimately ascended into heaven “being by the right hand of God exalted” (Acts 2:33, KJV).

It is this climax of ascension which validates all of the Savior’s prior experiences. Christ’s birth, death, burial, and resurrection all pointed to the moment in which He would once again return to the presence of the Father. Saint Augustine of Hippo expressed as much when he wrote “For unless the Savior had ascended to heaven, His nativity would have come to nothing...His passion would have borne no fruit for us and His most holy resurrection would

⁴⁸ Douglas Farrow, *Ascension Theology* (Bloomsbury Academic, May 5, 2011), 6.

have been useless.”⁴⁹ The apostle Paul testified that “as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22, KJV). Under a thorough lens, we can observe that one of the ways in which Christ truly is “the last Adam” (1 Corinthians 15:45, KJV), is that He not only corrects the death that came into the world through Adamic transgression, but He puts an end to the perpetual failings experienced by God’s children in their efforts to permanently ascend and return to that holy presence. In this redemptive role, “Christ is the new Adam, the new *man*, freeing those who previously descended to death so that they may now ascend.”⁵⁰ Paul’s prophetic verse could be restated: ‘For as in Adam all fall, in Christ shall all be made to ascend.’⁵¹

The Fall of Lucifer

Latter-day Saints acknowledge a doctrine of the fall. Through a transgression of “holy laws, man became sensual, and devilish, and became fallen man” (D&C 20:20). The fall encompasses a spiritual death, or separation from God, and a physical death. In reviewing the holy writ that sheds light on Lucifer, formerly a “son of the morning” (D&C 76:27), it appears that he has also experienced a fall.

In reference to the pre-existent celestial rebellion in which Satan left the Father’s presence, Jesus Christ commented, “I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven” (Luke 10:18, KJV). In the Book of Isaiah, reiterated by Nephi in the Book of Mormon, we glean more information as to the nature of Lucifer’s insurgence through a dual prophecy. Lucifer presumes

⁴⁹ Erwin W. Lutzer, *Christ Among other Gods: A Defense of Christ in an Age of Tolerance* (Moody Publishers, December 15, 2015), Ch. 9.

⁵⁰ Johanna Kramer, *Between Heaven and Earth: Liminality and the Ascension of Christ in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Manchester University Press, 2017), 41.

⁵¹ See footnote 39, *Felix Culpa*.

“I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High” (Isaiah 14:13-14, KJV). The response to Lucifer’s arrogant assertion reads, “Yet thou shalt be brought *down to hell*, to the sides of the pit” (Isaiah 14:15, KJV, italics added). Almost every time we read about Satan’s expulsion, the word *down* is used to describe his fall (See Revelation 12:10, KJV; Moses 4:3; D&C 76:25). Because Satan sought to ascend on his own, circumventing the appointed path, he was forcibly made to descend. Indeed, he “became the devil, to *rise* no more” (2 Nephi 9:8, emphasis added). This is in stark contrast to the Savior, who willingly descended and was then elevated above the clouds to sit on God’s right hand.

Adam and Eve’s Fall

The description of Satan’s fate is enlightening when compared to the description of humanity’s fall through Adam and Eve. Although both parties at hand were cast away from the presence of the Father as a consequence, Adam and Eve are never described as being cast *down* (see Genesis 3:24, KJV; 2 Nephi 2:19; D&C 29:41). In addition to *down* being a locational reference (clearly the word-choice *down* refers to Satan being expelled from his home above) this wording has metaphorical significance as well. Cast *down* in scripture is often used in reference to a condition – that of being in hell, torment, and suffering (see Ezekiel 31:16-17, KJV; D&C 76:106, Alma 31:17). Satan was cast *down* into this condition because of his desire to ascend prematurely. His descent without a body is a condition of bondage (see D&C 138:50). Although Satan’s fall is strictly and permanently downwards, Latter-day Saints view the fall of Adam and Eve as having “a twofold direction – downward yet forward.”⁵²

⁵² “Fall of Adam and Eve” in *Gospel Topics*. Accessed December 4th, 2019. <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/fall-of-adam-and-eve?lang=eng>

This concept is illuminated in the Doctrine and Covenants. Section 29 is a revelation that was given as several members united in prayer with the prophet Joseph Smith. They were petitioning for divine resolution to a difference of opinion about the nature of Adam's transgression.⁵³ After summarizing the casting out of Adam and Eve, the Lord states

But, behold, I say unto you that I, the Lord God, gave unto Adam and unto his seed, that they should not die as to the temporal death, until I, the Lord God, should send forth angels to declare unto them repentance and redemption, through faith on the name of mine Only Begotten Son. And thus did I, the Lord God, appoint unto man the days of his probation—that by his natural death he might be raised in immortality unto eternal life, even as many as would believe; And they that believe not unto eternal damnation; for they cannot be redeemed from their spiritual fall, because they repent not (D&C 29:42-44).

Adam and Eve are not immediately condemned. The Lord God gave them a time of probation, an opportunity for gospel learning and living, wherein they themselves could “choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil” (2 Nephi 2:27). Should they choose repentance and redemption through the Only Begotten, they would be “raised in immortality unto eternal life.” “Raised in immortality” is indicative of resurrection, a free gift for all mankind made possible through the Savior's atonement. However, being raised “unto eternal life” implies a symbolic and literal status of elevation, even ascension. Unlike Satan, who was cast *down* “and became the devil, to rise no more” (2 Nephi 9:8), Adam and Eve's agency in the matter was preserved.

Mankind's actions will ultimately determine whether they, like the Savior, ascend, or whether they, like Satan, are forced to descend. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, in speaking of the Savior's power to end Adam and Eve's “spiritual banishment” recognized that “Fortunately,

⁵³ Largey, D. L., Dahl, L. E., Black, S. E., Esplin, S. C., Ostler, C. J., Tate, C. D., & Woodford, R. J. (2012). *Doctrine and Covenants reference companion*. Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 737.

there was going to be way out and a way *up*.”⁵⁴ Because of Jesus Christ, this ascension, indeed, a redemption, became possible.

Redemption through Ascension

This brings us back to one of the most explicit references to this principle within Latter-day Saint canon: Mormon’s summary of Abinadi’s sermons as communicated to the people by Alma the elder

And now, it came to pass that Alma, who had fled from the servants of king Noah, repented of his sins and iniquities, and went about privately among the people, and began to teach the words of Abinadi—
Yea, concerning that which was to come, and also concerning the resurrection of the dead, and the redemption of the people, which was to be brought to pass through the power, and sufferings, and death of Christ, and his resurrection and ascension into heaven (Mosiah 18:1-2).

As was mentioned earlier, ascension is listed as the final act in a series of atoning events that unlocks redemption. Elder D. Todd Christofferson taught that

The word *redeem* means to pay off an obligation or a debt. *Redeem* can also mean to rescue or set free as by paying a ransom. If someone commits a mistake and then corrects it or makes amends, we say he has redeemed himself. Each of these meanings suggests different facets of the great Redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ through His Atonement, which includes, in the words of the dictionary, “to deliver from sin and its penalties, as by a sacrifice made for the sinner.”⁵⁵

The Church’s *Guide to the Scriptures* explains that

Redemption refers to the Atonement of Jesus Christ and to deliverance from sin. Jesus’ Atonement redeems all mankind from physical death. Through His Atonement, those who have faith in Him and who repent are also redeemed from spiritual death.

⁵⁴ Jeffrey R. Holland, “Behold the Lamb of God,” *Ensign*, April 2019, 44.

⁵⁵ D. Todd Christofferson, “Redemption,” *Ensign*, May 2013, 109.

Within the context of a literal separation from the Father, being forgiven and being resurrected seem incomplete without also a literal return to His presence and the ability to remain there. If redemption in Christ undoes the effects of the fall, then one of its major contributions is its ability to return us permanently into the presence of that God from whom we are now separated. It seems that most often in Latter-day Saint speak, redemption is broken up into two parts. The first is a redemption from spiritual death, or sin. This is connected to Christ's suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross. The second is redemption from the death of the physical body, which is connected to Christ's resurrection from the grave. For example, in a recent general conference of the Church, Tad Callister defined the Atonement as "a series of divine events that commenced in the Garden of Gethsemane, continued on the cross, and culminated with the Savior's Resurrection from the tomb."⁵⁶ Although forgiveness and resurrection might be easily condensed into derivatives of Christ's actions in the garden, on the cross, and in exiting the tomb, there is also something to be said for what was accomplished by Christ's literal ascent. In the spirit of helping us take redemption one step further, Michael Williams reminds readers of the fact that Jehovah did not only lead Israel *out* of bondage, but *into* a promised land.

Through Jesus Christ, God accomplishes our deliverance *from* sin, and also our deliverance *into* a rich life of meaning, purpose, and significance in his presence. By his almighty and unfailing power, God delivers us from the penalty of sin as well as from the power of sin that seeks to reclaim us after we have escaped its menacing clutches.⁵⁷

Through His ascension, Jesus Christ not only delivers us from sin and suffering, but also delivers us into a rich life of meaning, purpose, and significance in the presence of the Father.

⁵⁶ Tad Callister, "The Atonement of Jesus Christ," *Ensign*, May 2019, 85.

⁵⁷ Michael Williams, *How to Read the Bible through the Jesus Lens: A Guide to Christ-Focused Reading of Scripture* (Zondervan Academic, January 24, 2012), 19.

The Day of Atonement: A Model for Redemption through Ascension

The Epistle to the Hebrews found in the New Testament is a potent theological treatise expounding on such themes as faith, perfection, endurance, and atonement. The author of Hebrews explains Christ's atoning sacrifice in terms of temple sacrifice performed under Mosaic Law, which was common knowledge at that time. The writer explains how Jesus Christ, the "infinite and eternal sacrifice" (Alma 34:10) cleanses our sins and makes it possible for us to ascend to God's presence. An understanding of an ancient temple ritual is critical for grasping the author's claims and their theological significance. The ceremony is called Yom Kippur (in Hebrew), or the Day of Atonement. As the title of the ceremony implies, Yom Kippur takes place "once every year" (Hebrews 9:7, KJV). The Day of Atonement was to be an "everlasting statute" required "to make an atonement for the children of Israel for all their sins once a year" (Leviticus 16:34, KJV), the only day of national fasting ordered by the law (see LDS Bible Dictionary, "Fasts"). On this day, in addition to other sin and burnt offerings, the high priest was to take two goats. Upon casting lots, one of the goats was to be determined a sin offering for the Lord. The other was to become a scapegoat, a representative of the people which was to be set free in the wilderness. The Lord's goat was offered up as a sacrifice while the scapegoat was only brought before the altar. Upon the scapegoat, "the high priest confessed all the sins of the people of Israel, after which it was sent by the hand of a man into the wilderness to bear away their iniquities into a solitary land" (LDS Bible Dictionary, Fasts").

Before the scapegoat was released, the high priest took the blood of the sacrificed Lord's goat into the temple room known as the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies and its corresponding mercy seat were symbolic of the presence and throne of God and could be accessed only by the high priest, and only on the Day of Atonement. After having "cast the

incense on the coals there so that the cloud of smoke might cover the mercy seat and, as it were, hide him from God” (LDS Bible Dictionary, “Fasts”), the high priest would take the sacrifice’s blood “... and sprinkle it upon the mercy seat, and before the mercy seat: And he shall make an atonement for the holy place, because of the uncleanness of the children of Israel, and because of their transgressions in all their sins...” (Leviticus 16:15-16). This sacred day and ritual through which an atonement was made for the children of Israel sets the stage for the following conclusion regarding Yom Kippur as found in the Book of Hebrews:

Which was a figure for the time then present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience;

Which stood only in meats and drinks, and divers washings, and carnal ordinances, imposed on them until the time of reformation.

But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us.

For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh:

How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.

For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us (KJV, Hebrews 9:9-24).

The author had already explained that “into the [Holy of Holies] went the high priest alone once every year, not without blood, which he offered for himself, and for the errors of the people” (Hebrews 9:7, KJV). However, that entry into what was truly the “the holiest of all” – the actual presence of God – was not actually effectuated on Yom Kippur. In fact, the “washings, and carnal ordinances” (Hebrews 9:10, KJV) performed on the Day of Atonement were clearly “a figure for the time then present” (Hebrews 9:9, KJV) and could not actually clear the parties

involved of their sin and guilt. What then was this “figure” intended to represent? How then were Israel’s sins to be truly purged? An answer to this question follows in verse 11: “Christ, [the]...high priest of good things to come.”

At first glance at the symbolism of this ordinance, one might quickly connect Christ to the scapegoat upon whom Israel’s sins are laid, or to the sacrificed animal whose blood lies upon the altar of the temple. The message is clear: Jesus Christ’s blood was shed that man might go free. However, Christ can also be represented by the priest, whose role in making atonement continues after the slaying of the goat. Although the focus is definitely on the importance of blood in the rituals required for Atonement, and although our author is seeking to point their readers to Christ as opposed to “dead works” (Hebrews 9:14, KJV), there is an additional event of great significance. David M. Moffitt points out that “Jesus’ death in Hebrews is explicitly collocated with sacrificial language only twice in the entire homily: Hebrews 9:15 and 13:12.”⁵⁸ Having recognized a Greek preposition in the verses, Moffitt expounds on the concept of Christ’s death being “for” redemption (as mentioned in verse 15) which the author of Hebrews leaves open ended.

I suggest, though, that it is not necessary to assume that the death itself – presumably of Jesus – is identified here as the agent that effects the redemption. The preposition might mean “for” as in “for the purpose of.” The preposition, however, can also indicate a result. If it bears a resultative sense here, the translation “for” would be clarified as something like “resulting in.” In either case the death itself is not unambiguously identified with the *means* of redemption...The writer is not denying the importance of Jesus’ death in effecting salvation, but clarifying where that event fits in a larger process.”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ David M. Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2011), 289.

⁵⁹ David M. Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2011), 290-293.

The text walks us through the blood sacrifice but does not stop there. The death of Christ inaugurates the covenant, the same way that an animal sacrifice initiated the ordinance performed on Yom Kippur. Regarding the “larger process” as given in the context of the Day of Atonement, the author of Hebrews reminds us that the blood was then presented at the mercy seat. In Hebrews, atonement does not end with “the death of the testator” (Hebrews 9:12, KJV). It moves beyond the death and into the presentation of the sacrificial blood in the heavenly Holy of Holies, where Christ is “now to appear in the presence of God for us” (Hebrews 9:24, KJV). Given the context of Mosaic ordinances, this concept would not have been new to the audience of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Some early rabbinic literature has been found to indicate a belief that “a slaughter is the performance of a sacrifice only when the blood is properly presented to God.”⁶⁰ The author of Hebrews is seeking to point his readers to not only the slaughtered Christ, but the resurrected, eternal Christ, who “when he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men” (Ephesians 4:8, KJV).

Ultimately, that redemption does not take place on the altar, but in the Holy of Holies; in the very presence of God. It is to Him that the sacrificial blood must be presented and by Him that it is accepted. Although the Book of Mormon highlights redemption through resurrection, there is also heavy emphasis placed on Christ’s blood in the redemptive process. As discussed above, this blood becomes fully efficacious in the heavenly tabernacle. King Benjamin sermonized that “the law of Moses availeth nothing except it were through the atonement of his blood” (Mosiah 3:15). Indeed, “the blood of Christ atoneth for [our] sins” (Mosiah 3:16), and “salvation was, and is, and is to come, in and through the atoning blood of Christ, the Lord

⁶⁰ David M. Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2011), 292.

Omnipotent” (Mosiah 3:18). It should also be noted that the high priest would *ascend* up the numerous temple steps and pass through a veil that hid him from view in the process of performing atonement. “From there, if all went well, he would carry the divine blessing to the people waiting outside.”⁶¹ With this evidence in mind, when we consider Mosiah’s list of redemptive events, the event that most directly accounts for the return of Christ into the Father’s presence is the ascension. This return finalizes and secures the atoning promise. The Book of Mormon solidifies our ability to view the priestly roles delineated in the Mosaic ordinances as types and shadows of the Son of God.

And again, my brethren, I would cite your minds forward to the time when the Lord God gave these commandments unto his children; and I would that ye should remember that the Lord God ordained priests, after his holy order, which was after the order of his Son, to teach these things unto the people. And those priests were ordained after the order of his Son, in a manner that thereby the people might know in what manner to look forward to his Son for redemption (Alma 13:1-2).

One can imagine the joy in the heavenly tabernacle, when the infinite atonement, the blood of the Lamb of God, was presented by the ascended Lord and accepted of the Father. This deepens the meaning of Aaron’s testimony that “there could be no redemption for mankind save it were through the death and sufferings of Christ, *and* the atonement of his blood” (Alma 21:9, emphasis added). In this sense the ascension of Jesus Christ could be considered the capstone of His atonement. As on Yom Kippur, He, the great High Priest, ascends into the Holy Holies and finalizes the redemptive act. This is fitting for Luke’s description of the Savior being “carried up” (Luke 24:51) because the Greek manuscript uses the word ἀναφέρω (*anapherō*), which in

⁶¹ Douglas Farrow, *Ascension Theology* (Bloomsbury Academic, May 5, 2011), 6.

addition to meaning carried or led up to a higher place, also connotes and is translated as meaning to offer up, to bring to the altar, or to put something on the altar.⁶²

Central to the priestly role assumed by the Savior in his ascent to the heavenly Holy of Holies is the bestowal of this role by the Father who proclaimed, “Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec” (Hebrews 7:17). This declaration is a New Testament reference to the Messianic prophecy found in Psalm 110, in which the same eternal decree is made unto the Lord of David (see Psalm 110:4, KJV). In this Psalm, it is made clear that He who was being declared “a priest forever” was also to “sit at [God’s] right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool” (Psalm 110:1). After the resurrection and ascension of the Savior, Peter, the chief apostle himself, connects these verses to Jesus Christ and also explicitly to ascension. Referring to David and his prophecy, Peter testifies

Therefore being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne;

He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption.

This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses.

Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear.

For David is not ascended into the heavens: but he saith himself, The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand,

Until I make thy foes thy footstool (Acts 2:30-35).

Peter reasons that the prophecy could not have been about David because David had not ascended. Therefore, since the promised blessings could only be gained through an ascension on high, the prophecy was in reference to Jesus Christ. He the risen and ascended Lord, the great

⁶² See Liddell, Henry George, and Robert Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon: Founded upon the Seventh Edition of Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 64.

high priest, who was ordained to carry out Israel’s Day of Atonement in a literal sense, and on an infinite scale. With regards to the Epistle to the Hebrews, Patrick Gray posits

For all the similarities he shares with the broader culture, the author cannot deny that something novel and different has taken place with Jesus and the “new covenant” he has inaugurated. He strives mightily to show that Jesus, while representing God’s new way of dealing with humanity, nonetheless fits perfectly with the divine plan disclosed under the old covenant.⁶³

Ascending on Our Behalf

Not only does Christ ascend into the Holy of Holies as the final high priest, but also as representing each of God’s sons and daughters. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints readily accept that the atonement of Jesus Christ was “a redeeming service, vicariously rendered in behalf of mankind.”⁶⁴ Because He stood in our place, *his* “sufferings and death...atone for [*our*] sins” (Alma 22:14; emphasis added). Just as His passion –and subsequent resurrection– were efficacious for humanity in general, His ascension likewise has a universal implication. As the son of both the Supreme Being and of Mary, a mortal woman, “In His nature would be combined the powers of Godhood with the capacity and possibilities of mortality.”⁶⁵ A Latter-day Saint New Testament seminary manual stresses that, “This divine nature uniquely qualified Him to be able to suffer for our sins, die on the cross, and be resurrected.”⁶⁶ This dual

⁶³ Patrick Gray, “Hebrews among Greeks and Romans,” in *Reading the Epistle to the Hebrews: A Resource for Students*, eds. Eric F. Mason and Kevin B. McCrudden (Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 29.

⁶⁴ James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, 2006), chapter 3. Accessed May 6th, 2019. <https://www.lds.org/manual/jesus-the-christ/chapter-3?lang=eng>

⁶⁵ James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, (3rd ed.1916), 81.

⁶⁶ *New Testament Seminary Teacher Manual* (2016), lesson 6. Accessed May 6th, 2019. <https://www.lds.org/manual/new-testament-seminary-teacher-manual/matthew/lesson-6-matthew-1-2?lang=eng>

nature as both God and man qualified Jesus Christ to ascend as a vicarious act that symbolizes and foreshadows the ascension of all men and women and their literal reconciliation with the Father.

This concept was commonplace among ancient Christian commentators. After coming down and taking on flesh as a part of his condescension, Cyril of Alexandria (378-444 AD) writes that Jesus “was carried up into heaven so that he might share the Father’s throne even with the flesh that was united to him.”⁶⁷ Leo the Great (c. 400-461 AD) marveled at the miracle of Christ’s ascension.

It was certainly a great and indescribable source of joy when, in the sight of the heavenly multitudes, the nature of our human race ascended over the dignity of all heavenly creatures. It passed the angelic orders and was raised above the heights of archangels. In its ascension, our human race did not stop at any other height until this same nature was received at the seat of the eternal Father. Our human nature, united with the divinity of the Son, was on the throne of his glory. The ascension of Christ is our elevation. Hope for the body is also invited where the glory of the Head preceded us. Let us exult, dearly beloved, with worthy joy and be glad with a holy thanksgiving.⁶⁸

On another occasion, he wrote

And so while at Easter it was the Lord’s resurrection which was the cause of our joy, our present rejoicing is due to his ascension into heaven. With all due solemnity we are commemorating that day on which our poor human nature was carried up in Christ above all the hosts of heaven, above all the ranks of angels, beyond those heavenly powers to the very throne of God the Father.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament III (Luke)*, edited by Arthur A. Just Jr, general editor, Thomas C. Oden (InterVarsity Press, February 19, 2003), 392.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 393.

⁶⁹ *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament II (Mark)*, edited by Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, general editor, Thomas C. Oden (Taylor & Francis, 1998), 392.

Also referencing the miracle beyond Easter, Origen (184-253 AD) declared that “perfection of the resurrection was when he came to the Father.”⁷⁰ According to Johanna Kramer, some of Sainte Bede’s gospel homilies were aimed at teaching “the core doctrine of Christ’s opening of heaven to humanity”⁷¹ through ascension. Reflecting on what the original apostles may have been feeling after witnessing Christ’s ascent and having “returned to Jerusalem with great joy” (Luke 25:52, KJV), Bede the Venerable poetically mused

He was now returning to the throne of his Father’s glory with the conquered mortal nature that he had taken. How sweet were the tears that they poured out when they were burning with lively hope and gladness over the prospect of their own entry into the heavenly fatherland! They knew that their God and Lord was now bringing their part of their own nature! Such a sight rightly restored them!⁷²

By ascending in the same human flesh He descended to save, Jesus Christ broke the seemingly impenetrable barrier brought about by the fall.

A beautiful rendition of this event is found in the messianic Psalm 24. The second verse contains a question familiar to Latter-day Saints: “Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully” (Psalm 24:3-4, KJV). In light of Satan’s vain desires to lift up his soul and ascend to the throne, and his blasphemous declarations that he would be like the most high (see 2 Nephi 24 and Isaiah 14, KJV), this Psalm can be interpreted

⁷⁰ *The Anti-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, edited by Allan Menzies (Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1912), 402.

⁷¹ Johanna Kramer, *Between Heaven and Earth: Liminality and the Ascension of Christ in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Manchester University Press, 2017), 157.

⁷² *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament III (Luke)*, edited by Arthur A. Just Jr, general editor, Thomas C. Oden (InterVarsity Press, February 19, 2003), 393.

as a direct reference to Jesus Christ, Satan’s premortal, mortal, and post-mortal antithesis. The latter part of the Psalm also fits into the ascension narrative and is less well known.

Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in.
Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.
Lift up your heads, O ye gates; even lift them up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in.
Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory. Selah
(Psalm 24:7-10, KJV).

“This Psalm introduces to ascension narratives the important motif of the gates, which early Christian authors will interpret as referring to Christ’s arrival at the gates of heaven...by dramatizing the moment before Christ enters heaven, Psalm [24] helps heighten the suspense of the ascension.”⁷³ When the victorious Christ ascends and requests entrance into the heavenly kingdom to culminate his redemptive act, the angels who are manning the gates do not recognize Him. This is due to the fact that “Christ ascended to earth under divine cover but ascended in his human form, which none had seen before.”⁷⁴ This ascent in human form further attests to the fact that in his successful ascent Christ paved the road to heaven for us. When satisfied as to who this “King of glory” really is, the gates are opened unto Him, and as Ambrose (340-397 AD) powerfully proclaimed “it was not merely one man but the whole world that entered, in the person of the All-Redeemer.”⁷⁵

⁷³ Johanna Kramer, *Between Heaven and Earth: Liminality and the Ascension of Christ in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Manchester University Press, 2017), 39.

⁷⁴ Johanna Kramer, *Between Heaven and Earth: Liminality and the Ascension of Christ in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Manchester University Press, 2017), 42.

⁷⁵ Johanna Kramer, *Between Heaven and Earth: Liminality and the Ascension of Christ in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Manchester University Press, 2017), 43.

The fall that came through an imperfect man, Adam, was now fully atoned for as the perfect man, Jesus, rose from death and then ascended into the Father's presence. He did this to present the sacrificial offering and to take his seat on the eternal throne. The ascension of Jesus Christ brings humanity full circle. It is the final phase of the salvation prepared from the foundations of the world. Because he ascended into heaven and sat down on the right hand of God, Jesus "hath answered the ends of the law, and he claimeth all those who have faith in him" (Moroni 7:28). Abinadi's description of how redemption was to be brought about (see Mosiah 18:1-2) was not an afterthought. Ascension was always part of the plan. As Latter-day Saint theologian Terryl Givens has observed, "From a Mormon perspective, grace erupts in the universe when Christ emerges in the pre-existent Council in heaven and says I will step forward and make possible this planned *ascent* of the human family to godliness."⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Faith Matters Podcast, Terryl and Fiona Givens – *A Conversation About A Christ Who Heals*. Transcript accessed May 6th, 2019. <https://faithmatters.org/the-christ-who-heals-a-conversation-with-terryl-and-fiona-givens/> (emphasis added)

Chapter 4: Raised Up Versus Lifted Up

The exchange had at the gates of heaven in Psalm 24 (“Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?”) upon the return of the ascended King adds poignant imagery to a favorite hymn sung by Latter-day Saint congregations, usually around Easter time.

He is risen! He is risen!
He hath opened heaven’s gate.
We are free from sin’s dark prison,
Risen to a holier state.⁷⁷

At face-value, the phrase “risen to a holier state” is typically associated with resurrection.

Douglas Farrow bluntly warned against such a dilution when he wrote that “To cut short the journey of Jesus by conflating resurrection and ascension...is to alter the goal of salvation history.”⁷⁸ It is clear from sacred scripture that not every being who resurrects is automatically “risen to a holier state.” For example, Alma admonishes his son

Behold, it is requisite and just, according to the power and resurrection of Christ, that the soul of man should be restored to its body...Do not suppose, because it has been spoken concerning restoration that ye shall be restored from sin to happiness...the meaning of the word restoration is to bring back again evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish – good for that which is good; righteous for that which is righteous; just for that which is just; merciful for that which is merciful (Alma 41:2,13).

A major contribution to our understanding of this concept came while the prophet Joseph Smith and his scribe, Oliver Cowdery, were working through the inspired translation of the New Testament. Picking up on a piece of the puzzle that is hinted at several times in the Bible, the prophet recorded

⁷⁷ Cecil Frances Alexander, “He Is Risen,” *LDS Hymnal* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 199.

⁷⁸ Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia* (A&C Black, July 1, 2004), 28.

For while we were doing the work of translation, which the Lord had appointed unto us, we came to the twenty-ninth verse of the fifth chapter of John, which was given unto us as follows—

Speaking of the resurrection of the dead, concerning those who shall hear the voice of the Son of Man:

And shall come forth; they who have done good, in the resurrection of the just; and they who have done evil, in the resurrection of the unjust.

Now this caused us to marvel, for it was given unto us of the Spirit.

And while we meditated upon these things, the Lord touched the eyes of our understandings and they were opened, and the glory of the Lord shone round about (D&C 76:15-19).

An inspired meditation as to different types and times of resurrection brought about one of the most groundbreaking revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants. Section 76, known also as ‘the vision,’ is a walkthrough of three kingdoms of glory awaiting humanity after a final judgment (Paul writes about being “caught up to the third heaven” in 2 Corinthians 12:2, which could be referencing this same idea). It is decreed that there will indeed be a first and then later resurrections. Section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants further clarifies that the resurrected bodies we receive directly correlate to the kingdom of glory we earned.

For notwithstanding they die, they also shall rise again, a spiritual body.

They who are of a celestial spirit shall receive the same body which was a natural body; even ye shall receive your bodies, and your glory shall be that glory by which your bodies are quickened.

Ye who are quickened by a portion of the celestial glory shall then receive of the same, even a fulness.

And they who are quickened by a portion of the terrestrial glory shall then receive of the same, even a fulness.

And also they who are quickened by a portion of the telestial glory shall then receive of the same, even a fullness (D&C 88:27-31).

The vision of the afterlife in section 76 goes on to talk about “those who have part in the first resurrection” (D&C 76:64), “who are come unto Mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly place, the holiest of all” (D&C 76:66). “These are they whom he shall bring with him, when he shall come in the clouds of heaven to reign on the earth over his people” (D&C 76:63). In stark contrast, the revelation refers also to the fate of “they who will not be

gathered with the saints, to be caught up unto the church of the Firstborn, and received into the cloud” (D&C 76:102). Only the righteous will be “caught up” to meet Christ.

Part of redemption for all humanity is that everyone who has been born on the earth will resurrect. The resurrection is an unconditional gift to all mankind. In contrast, some of the references made in scripture to being lifted or raised up have conditions attached to them, implying that they refer to a different type of *risen*. This can account for the conditional promise made by Jesus throughout much of scripture that the faithful can indeed “be lifted up at the last day, and shall be saved in the everlasting kingdom of the Lamb” (1 Nephi 13:37). The “everlasting kingdom of the Lamb” mentioned in 1 Nephi 13:37 may be indicative of the highest of the three kingdoms of glory, even exaltation. One is to arrive there not only through resurrection, but through ascension. *Although one cannot ascend without resurrecting, one can resurrect without ascending.* The process of redemption goes beyond resurrection in an even higher and holier way, as modeled by Jesus Christ Himself. We will now discuss how this model encompasses a literal future event for faithful disciples and becomes a metaphorical process that serves as a template by which to live.

The New Testament, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants are replete with conditional offers of ascension. Paul encourages his readers to “press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:14), believing that “he which raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise up us also by Jesus and shall present us with you” (2 Corinthians 4:14). Paul truly trusted that “God hath both raised up the Lord, and will also raise us up by his own power” (1 Corinthians 6:14). James exhorted the early saints to “humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up” (James 4:10). The ultimate promise of being lifted up is given by the Lord himself in Revelation when He promised “To him that

overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame and am set down with my Father in his throne” (Revelation 3:21).

In the Book of Mormon, Alma counsels the people to have “faith in the Lord; having a hope that ye shall receive eternal life; having the love of God always in your hearts, that ye may be lifted up at the last day *and* enter into his rest” (Alma 13:29; emphasis added). In his “crowning jewel” (Book of Mormon, Introduction) visit to the Nephites on the American continent, Jesus Christ urges the humbled people to take his words to heart, for “whoso remembereth these sayings of mine and doeth them, him will I raise up at the last day” (3Nephi 15:1). Both Jacob and Nephi also take salvation one step past resurrection by pleading with their followers to be reconciled to God and “obtain a resurrection, according to the power of resurrection which is in Christ, *and* be presented as the first-fruits of Christ unto God” (Jacob 4:11; emphasis added). “Wherefore may God raise you from death by the power of resurrection, *and also* from everlasting death by the power of the atonement, that ye may be received into the kingdom of God, that ye may praise him through grace divine” (2 Nephi 10:25; emphasis added).

This conditional bonus (resurrection followed by ascension) can also be found in the Doctrine and Covenants. One example is the Lord’s promise to Martin Harris that “*if* thou art faithful in keeping my commandments, thou shalt be lifted up at the last day” (D&C 5:35; italics added). The same promise is offered as a consolation and reassurance to Oliver Cowdery: “Stand fast in the work wherewith I have called you, and a hair of your head shall not be lost, and you shall be lifted up at the last day” (D&C 9:14). Together, the three witnesses were assured: “And if you do these last commandments of mine, which I have given you, the gates of hell shall not prevail against you; for my grace is sufficient for you, and you shall be lifted up at the last day” (D&C 17:8). A final and binding example of the term as equating to exaltation and not only

resurrection is found in the 124th section of the Doctrine and Covenants, where the Lord references “the exaltation *or* lifting up of Zion” (D&C 124:9, italics added). Using an analogy to emphasize the importance of getting ‘on the boat’ with Jesus Christ, President Russell M. Nelson observed “Then we are to stay with Him. And if we don’t get ‘out of the boat’ before we should, we shall reach His kingdom, where we will be lifted up to eternal life.”⁷⁹ Sacred scripture – including the revelations of this dispensation – builds on the implications of Adam being cast out (not down), and reiterates, again and again, humankind’s potential for ascending to glory as did Jesus the Christ.

The ascension of Jesus Christ adds value to humanity’s understanding of their redemption by virtue of what it initiates independent of his sufferings, death, and resurrection. In his book, *The Sufferings, Death, Resurrection and Exaltation of Jesus Christ*, Latter-day Saint scholar Richard Neitzel Holzapfel dissects the significance of the message that was being preached by early Church leaders such as Peter and Paul.

What is entailed here is a three-step process: first, wicked men raise up Jesus on the cross; second, God overrides their condemnation by raising up Jesus through the Resurrection; and finally, God made him both *Christ* and *Lord* by raising up Jesus to the *right hand*. The irony of the situation is apparent – wicked men helped Jesus in his movement back to God...In the end, without a belief in the resurrection *and* exaltation of Christ, his mortal ministry, suffering, and death, give occasion for sorrowful abandonment and despair rather than grounds for a lively hope (see 1 Corinthians 15:19).⁸⁰

Covenant Ascension

Having made the link between ascension, the ‘first’ resurrection, and eternal life, we can

⁷⁹ Russell M. Nelson, *Endure and Be Lifted Up*, April 1997, accessed 2019
<<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1997/05/endure-and-be-lifted-up?lang=eng>>

⁸⁰ Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, *The Sufferings, Death, Resurrection and Exaltation of Jesus Christ* (Bookcraft, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1999), 196, 200; emphasis added.

turn to a concept exemplified in Alma the younger's overview of the baptismal covenant at the waters of Mormon.

And it came to pass that he said unto them: Behold, here are the waters of Mormon (for thus were they called) and now, as ye are desirous to come into the fold of God, and to be called his people, and are willing to bear one another's burdens, that they may be light;

Yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that ye may be in, even until death, that ye may be redeemed of God, and be numbered with those of the first resurrection, that ye may have eternal life—

Now I say unto you, if this be the desire of your hearts, what have you against being baptized in the name of the Lord, as a witness before him that ye have entered into a covenant with him, that ye will serve him and keep his commandments, that he may pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon you? (Mosiah 18:8-10).

It is through making and keeping sacred covenants that Christ's followers are included in the first resurrection and are therefore lifted up as He was. This literal ascension is enriched by its metaphorical implications. President Marion G. Romney drew the following conclusion from the Old Testament account of Jacob's ladder.

When Jacob traveled from Beersheba toward Haran, he had a dream in which he saw himself on the earth at the foot of a ladder that reached to heaven where the Lord stood above it. He beheld angels ascending and descending thereon, and Jacob realized that the covenants he made with the Lord there were the rungs on the ladder that he himself would have to climb in order to obtain the promised blessings—blessings that would entitle him to enter heaven and associate with the Lord.⁸¹

A description of ordinances and covenants found on the temple information website of the Church further explains that “Just as Jacob had to climb each step of the ladder to ascend to

⁸¹ Marion G. Romney, “Temples—The Gates to Heaven,” *Ensign*, Mar. 1971, accessed 2019 <<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1971/03/temples-the-gates-to-heaven?lang=eng>>

heaven, so we must receive and obey the ordinances and covenants of the house of God to return to His presence and become like Him.”⁸² Ascension becomes a process in which followers of Jesus Christ are eventually lifted up. In holy temples, this process is simulated by the reception of higher and higher laws which advance worshippers by degrees until they finally enter into the presence of God. Daniel C. Peterson traced the path of ascent from the baptismal covenant into God’s presence, and pointed it out in both ancient and modern temple worship. Peterson writes:

The Tabernacle, likewise, had areas of increasing holiness as you come in from the outside. In Solomon’s Temple, areas were ever more restrictive, ever more holy. Herod’s Temple as well, in the court of the gentiles, in the court of the women, eventually the holy of holies. You go in deeper and deeper into the divine as you go into the temple. In modern temples, what do we do? We actually ascend. In some of the older temples, it’s a physical ascent. In the Salt Lake temple, as you go through the temple, you’re actually climbing. What’s the lowest point of the temple? The baptismal font.⁸³

The doctrine of ascent into God’s kingdom is crucial to the temple theology restored by Joseph Smith. Even as early as the time he was translating the Book of Mormon, Joseph was piecing together the undertones of a compelling temple ceremony. “And because of the fall of man came Jesus Christ, even the Father and the Son; and because of Jesus Christ came the redemption of man. And because of the redemption of man, which came by Jesus Christ, they are brought back into the presence of the Lord” (Mormon 9:12-13). Because “Everything in the temple points us to Jesus Christ,”⁸⁴ it is fitting that the prophet of the restoration established a

⁸² <<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/temples/ordinances-and-covenants?lang=eng>> Accessed June 4, 2019.

⁸³ Daniel C. Peterson, *The Temple as a Place of Ascent to God*, 2009 FairMormon Conference. <<https://www.fairmormon.org/conference/august-2009/the-temple-as-a-place-of-ascent-to-god>> Accessed June 4, 2019.

⁸⁴ Temples.churchofjesuschrist.org, “The Temple is Centered on the Savior.” <<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/temples/nearer-christ-through-temples?lang=eng>> Accessed June 4, 2019.

framework of ceremonial worship that models mankind falling and being brought back (or lifted) into God's presence. The catalyst for this final step was the ascension of the Savior Himself.

A valuable exploration into the connection between ascension and the temple worship of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was undertaken by independent scholar John Walsh. In a portion of his 2005 doctoral dissertation titled *The Ascension Theology of Joseph Smith: Leaving Modernity and Returning to the Ancient World* (which was later revised, slightly expanded, and published as *Mormon Mysticism, mythology, and Magic: Joseph Smith versus the Metaphysics of Nicene Christianity*), Walsh asserts that "Smith's entire theology is geared towards enabling mankind to achieve ascension."⁸⁵ After discussing in detail beliefs of ascension and deification in old world worship rituals and temple ceremonies, Walsh concludes that Joseph indeed "embraced an ancient mantic worldview that challenged the modern sophic worldview adopted by most Nicenes in nineteenth century America."⁸⁶ For example, "While Nicenes saw ordinances as a bestowal of divine grace via a priestly mediator, Smith viewed ordinances as a ritualized witness of the covenants that enabled a person to develop the mantic power necessary in order to reach ascension."⁸⁷

Compelling evidence of this concept being a restoration of an ancient perspective is found in Joseph O. Schutz's suggestion that within the ancient Near East the process of heavenly ascension could be summarized into eleven themes:

- 1) ascent to heaven, 2) entering the heavenly place, 3) reception by the high god in his assembly, 4) purification, 5) anointing, 6) robing in royal or heavenly garments, 7) handing over the heavenly book or heavenly tablets to

⁸⁵ John Walsh, *Mormon Mysticism, mythology, and Magic: Joseph Smith versus the Metaphysics of Nicene Christianity* (iMormons at Smashwords, Missouri City, Texas, 2011), location 5115.

⁸⁶ Ibid, location 98.

⁸⁷ Ibid, location 1441.

the bearer of revelation, 8) calling with names of honor, 9) initiation into the heavenly secrets, 10) enthronement on the god-father's throne, and 11) sending forth with a commission or a message to instruct the generation.⁸⁸

Although it is not the purpose of this work to delve into the intricacies of temple worship, members of the Church who have participated in it will appreciate the similarities between modern and ancient paradigms. "Mormon temple rituals taken collectively are covenant rituals of theology that imitate the complete ascension process through a course of religious drama and instruction."⁸⁹

In restoration theology, having an ascension-like experience is crucial for coming to know God and becoming like Him. Through the revelation of Book of Mormon text, Joseph Smith added to other ancient ascension narratives such as those of Moses, Elijah, and Enoch (Enoch was lifted up along with his entire city, Zion) by introducing the three Nephites. These Nephites would be spared from death to minister as special witnesses of Christ until His return in glory. Christ promised them "ye shall be even as I am, and I am even as the Father; and the Father and I are one" (3 Nephi 28:10). Then the three Nephites were "caught up into heaven, and saw and heard unspeakable things" (3 Nephi 28:13). Being carried up into heaven was a part of being "even as I (Christ) am." As a result of their ascension "they were sanctified in the flesh, that they were holy, and that the powers of the earth could not hold them" (3 Nephi 28:39). In the temple, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints symbolically go through such an experience again and again, that they also "may go forth from [God's] house armed with [His] power" (D&C 109:22) and eventually "be received into the kingdom of the Father to go no more out, but to dwell with God eternally in the heavens" (3 Nephi 28:40).

⁸⁸ Ibid, location 2326.

⁸⁹ Ibid, location 2342.

The temple insights above fit neatly into a paradigm of ascension and deification, but how are they linked to the actual ascension of Jesus Christ? At least one way is found in Joseph Smith's beliefs about salvation espoused in the Lectures on Faith. This series of essays "represent perhaps the earliest attempt to formulate a systematic Latter-day Saint theology, informed by the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's early revelations."⁹⁰ Although the exact authorship is unknown, "the inclusion of the lectures in the Doctrine and Covenants in 1835 strongly suggests that Joseph Smith approved of the content of the lectures."⁹¹ In the seventh and final lecture, the author posits that in order to be saved, one must know what is required for salvation, or what situation they must be in.

For whatever constitutes the salvation of one, will constitute the salvation of every creature which will be saved: and if we find one saved being in all existence, we may see what all others must be, or else not be saved. We ask, then, where is the prototype? or where is the saved being? We conclude as to the answer of this question there will be no dispute among those who believe the bible, that it is Christ: all will agree in this that he is the prototype or standard of salvation, or in other words, that he is a saved being.⁹²

Because Jesus is the 'prototype' to follow, and He Himself was "carried up into heaven" (Luke 24:51) unto salvation and exaltation, it befalls disciples to also seek an ascension. This sentiment fits in with the Savior's own declaration in the Doctrine and Covenants: "I give unto you these sayings that you may understand and know how to worship, and know what you worship, that

⁹⁰ Lectures on Theology <<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/lectures-on-faith?lang=eng>> Accessed June 5, 2019.

⁹¹ Lectures on Theology <<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/lectures-on-faith?lang=eng>> Accessed June 5, 2019.

⁹² "Doctrine and Covenants, 1835," p. 66, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed October 19, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/doctrine-and-covenants-1835/74>.

you may come unto the Father in my name, and in due time receive of his fulness” (D&C 93:19).

Although the concept of ‘ascended Lord’ is overshadowed by ‘resurrected Lord’ and thus remains mostly unspoken among lay membership, it can be effectively argued that “the ascended Jesus is the primary focus of Mormonism.”⁹³ Members of the Church view the temple as “the great symbol of their membership and the supernal setting for their most sacred covenants.”⁹⁴ At least on a foundational level, they believe that Christ’s ascension led to His exaltation and to mankind’s ultimate redemption, and they seek to imitate that process ceremonially and eventually literally. As such, Latter-day Saints demonstrate everyday how this final salvific act deeply impacts their own atonement theology and worshipful commemoration of Jesus Christ.

Praise to the Man

Joseph Smith continued down this vein of thinking until he was martyred in 1844. Shortly before his death he preached a sermon that has come to be known as the King Follett sermon. In it, he added to resurrection the concept of dwelling in everlasting burnings in immortal glory. “What is it? To inherit the same power, the same glory and the same exaltation, until you arrive at the station of a god, and *ascend* the throne of eternal power, the same as those who have gone before.”⁹⁵ He mentions that ascending is to continue even after this life. And he offers this basic concept: “When you climb up a ladder, you must begin at the bottom, and

⁹³ John Walsh, *Mormon Mysticism, mythology, and Magic: Joseph Smith versus the Metaphysics of Nicene Christianity* (iMormons at Smashwords, Missouri City, Texas, 2011), location 4220.

⁹⁴ Howard W. Hunter, “The Great Symbol of Our Membership,” *Ensign*, October 1994, Volume 24 number 10, <<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1994/10/the-great-symbol-of-our-membership?lang=eng>> accessed 2019.

⁹⁵ "History, 1838–1856, volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844]," p. 1971, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed June 7, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/343>, emphasis added.

ascend step by step, until you arrive at the top; and so it is with the principles of the gospel—you must begin with the first, and go on until you learn all the principles of exaltation.”⁹⁶ The Savior’s ascension is not only a literal foreshadowing, but a symbolic invitation – an invitation in which Joseph delighted to strive for and empowered others to accept.

Surely, Joseph Smith meant it when he exclaimed “I want to come *up* into the presence of God, and learn all things.”⁹⁷ Ascension in the pattern set forth by our Lord may look many different ways at different times and in different settings. Perhaps because it seemed to be so consistently on the prophet’s mind, Latter-day Saints in congregations worldwide sing joyfully not only about an ascended Jesus, but an ascended Joseph.

Hail to the Prophet, ascended to heaven!
Traitors and tyrants now fight him in vain.
Mingling with Gods, he can plan for his brethren;
Death cannot conquer the hero again.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ History of the Church, 6:57; punctuation modernized; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on Oct. 15, 1843, in Nauvoo, Illinois; reported by Willard Richards, emphasis added.

⁹⁸ William W. Phelps “Praise to the Man,” *LDS Hymnal* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 27.

Chapter 5: He Gave Gifts unto Men

New Testament writers and some of the earliest Christian apologists came to connect the ascension of Jesus Christ with an outpouring of the Holy Ghost as a gift for disciples. Quoting the Psalmist, the apostle Paul would later pen “When [Christ] ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men” (Ephesians 4:8).

Justin Martyr’s insightful commentary on Ephesians 4:8 sheds more light on the aftermath of ascension. Justin asserts that all spiritual gifts have come to rest with Christ, and that it is now his privilege to dispense them among worthy believers. Justin makes very clear “I have already said, and do again say, that it had been prophesied that this would be done by Him *after* His ascension to heaven.”⁹⁹ In another section of *Dialogue with Trypho* Justin writes that “after the ascent of Christ to heaven, He would deliver us from error and give us gifts.”¹⁰⁰ There are some gifts, or at least a fulness of them, that Christ could and would bestow on followers because of and *after* his ascension into heaven. To Justin, being delivered from error is one of these bestowals. It also seems that apologists recognized the spirit itself as one of the gifts that was fully received after the Lord’s ascension. Irenaeus of Lyons, a contemporary of Justin explains that

The Lord, receiving [the Spirit] as a gift from His Father, does Himself also confer it upon those who are partakers of Himself, sending the Holy Spirit upon all the earth.¹⁰¹

This aligns with the testimony of Jesus Himself when He explained “it is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send

⁹⁹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* (as translated by Phillip Schaff), LXXXVII, emphasis added.

¹⁰⁰ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* (as translated by Philip Schaff), XXXIX.

¹⁰¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies III* (as translated by Phillip Schaff), XVII, 2.

him unto you” (John 16:7, KJV).

Pentecost

The literal gift-receiving experience which occurred after Christ’s ascension is recorded in the New Testament. It took place during the celebration of Pentecost. What Christ told the apostles before his ascension is of great import to Luke’s succeeding account. Jesus “ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. This, he said, is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (Acts 1:4-5, NRSV). The gift from on high that He promised to send was the Holy Ghost. This promise is received in the very next chapter. Luke describes the events as follows:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2:1-4, NRSV).

In response to the crowd’s reaction, some awe-struck, some mocking, Peter, the chief apostle, delivered a powerful sermon in which he ended by attributing the miraculous baptism by the Holy ghost to the ascended Lord.

This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, "The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool." (Acts 1:32-35, NRSV)

The feast of Pentecost is one of the three times a year when, under the Law of Moses, covenant males were to present themselves before the God of Israel. Pentecost means fifty and is the Greek word for what the Hebrews know as Shavuot, or the Feast of Weeks in English. It is

called this because historically the feast had been kept fifty days after the well-known commemoration of Passover (LDS Bible Dictionary, Feasts). The holy convocation was observed in conjunction with the harvest of wheat being gathered in. The Lord himself referred to the gathering as “the festival of harvest, of the first fruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field” (Exodus 23:16). The feast of Pentecost was also a time to celebrate Moses receiving the law. The following section will explain the possibility of Pentecost being celebrated by the Nephites in the new world and review a very similar experience recorded in the Book of Mormon as a further witness that the ascended Christ “gave gifts unto men.”

A Nephite Pentecost?

It is generally accepted that to some degree, the Nephites were aware of Mosaic law and requirements. Nephi built a temple for his people and testified of the need for obedience to Mosaic decrees as did his brother Jacob. Nephi writes “And we did observe to keep the judgments, and the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord in all things, according to the Law of Moses” (2 Nephi 5:10). Jacob also testified “And for this intent we keep the Law of Moses, it pointing our souls to [Christ]; and for this cause it is sanctified unto us for righteousness” (Jacob 4:5). Several hundred years later, the book of Mosiah records that the people “also took of the firstlings of their flocks, that they might offer sacrifice and burnt offerings according to the Law of Moses” (Mosiah 2:4).

The keeping of the law is referred to throughout the historical record in the books of Mosiah and Helaman. In the book of 3 Nephi, around 120 years after King Benjamin’s sermon, well-intentioned disciples sought to convince the people that “it was no more expedient to observe the Law of Moses” (3 Nephi 1:24). Almost 600 years from their initial split with the Jewish world in the ancient hemisphere, some Nephites are still adherents to the Law of Moses,

even though efforts are being made to persuade the Nephites that it is not necessary to observe the Mosaic Law. Since major feasts, such as Pentecost, were part of the ceremonial law, is it safe to say that the Nephites also held such feasts? Was this part of the ritual observance they maintained in their struggle to cling to their identity as members of the House of Israel?

The Book of Mormon never directly references Mosaic feast days as part of the standard keeping of the law. The only ‘appointed’ feast mentioned in the text is a celebration arranged among the Lamanites by King Lamoni’s father in Alma chapter 18. Despite absences in the narrative, some Latter-day Saint scholars have brought forth a compelling argument regarding feast observance among Book of Mormon peoples. What feast do they specifically believe is evidenced? Pentecost. From where do they draw their argument? The prophet Abinadi’s sermon as found in the Book of Mosiah. Liturgical tradition dictates that specific themes be focused on during the corresponding seasons. Thus, in theory, some discourses were not just given at random. Welch, Thomasson, and Smith point out that “Abinadi could not have picked a better time for these two prophetic moments [his sermons in King Noah’s court] than the Israelite festival of Pentecost, which seems to perfectly fit Abinadi’s message and situation.”¹⁰²

Recognizing that the Feast of Pentecost was a time for the commemoration of the commandments given to Moses as well as the celebration of a successful harvest, these scholars point to some fascinating parallels seen in Abinadi’s speech, which makes its deliverance even more relevant to the context. For example, the festival typically lasted for three days, which is the amount of time that Abinadi’s trial was postponed (Mosiah 17:6). Another example is that

At a time when the priests of King Noah would have been celebrating and pledging allegiance to the Ten Commandments given to Moses, Abinadi rehearses

¹⁰² “Did Abinadi Prophesy during Pentecost?” in *Book of Mormon Central*, KnoWhy #90, May 2, 2016. https://knowwhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/sites/default/files/knowwhy-pdf/2016/did_abinadi_prophesy_during_pentecost.pdf (accessed August 2017).

those commandments and accuses them of not teaching, living, or even understanding them properly.¹⁰³

Yet another is that Abinadi's face shone exceedingly as did Moses' when presenting the law to ancient Israel. Welch, Thomasson, and Smith also identify Abinadi's use of Psalms 50 and 81, which Hebrew University professor Moshe Weinfeld argued were likely sung at Pentecost.¹⁰⁴

Other parallels include: during a time when deliverance from Egyptian bondage was remembered, Abinadi warned that the people would have "burdens lashed upon their backs" (Mosiah 12:5); and throughout the Pentecostal commemoration of a bounteous harvest, Abinadi cursed the Nephite's grain and prophesied of impending hail, pestilence, and insects (Mosiah 12:4-6). This placement of Abinadi's sermons within a feast context is presented as further evidence of a Nephite recognition of Pentecost. He chose to deliver a message that would cut deep by starkly contrasting with the festivities of the season. Professor John W. Welch concludes

Taken together, these details all point to one conclusion: No other day on the ancient Israelite calendar fits the message, words, and experience of the prophet Abinadi more precisely or more appropriately than does the ancient Israelite festival of Pentecost. It is thus ironic, that, at the very time when Noah and his people would have been celebrating the law, the most unfortunate judicial result in Nephite history should have taken place.¹⁰⁵

This discovery strengthens the correlation between Acts 2 and the experience recorded in the third book of Nephi. To think of the following events in the New World as initiated by a celebration of Pentecost further highlights the ascension connection being taught in holy writ.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ John W. Welch, *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: BYU Press and the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2008), 193.

The Book of Mormon Account

The following similarities between the New Testament and Book of Mormon accounts bear witness of the post-ascension spiritual outpourings Christ gave to his followers. After the tragic destruction of Nephite life and property as foretold by numerous prophets, the people are left with lives and cities to rebuild. Sometime after the catastrophic events, 3 Nephi 11 commences by recounting that “there were a great multitude gathered together, of the people of Nephi, round about the temple which was in the land Bountiful” (3 Nephi 11:1). At this site, they hear the voice of the Father announcing the visitation of the Son. Then they witness Jesus Christ himself descend from heaven. Jesus allows the multitude a sacred moment of approaching him one by one. Then delivers the timeless sermon recorded in the book of Matthew. Followed by this interesting observation: “Behold, ye have heard the things which I taught before I ascended to my Father; therefore, whoso remembereth these sayings of mine and doeth them, him will I raise up at the last day” (3 Nephi 15:1). According to Jesus, the Nephites are now on somewhat of a similar plane with the New Testament Jews who heard the Savior speak.

In chapter 17, when Jesus is about to depart, he is filled with compassion for the people who wish him to remain a little longer, and a period of healing and personal ministry continues. He then reminds the Nephites in chapter 18 “And now I go unto the Father, because it is expedient that I should go unto the Father for your sakes” (3 Nephi 18:35). Immediately after this statement, Jesus touches each of the twelve disciples, speaking unto them as he touched them. The general consensus among the people was that this act conveyed to his disciples the power to give others the gift of the Holy Ghost. Afterwards, the account reads that

There came a cloud and overshadowed the multitude that they could not see Jesus. And while they were overshadowed he departed from them, and ascended into heaven. And the disciples saw and did bear record that he ascended again into heaven (3 Nephi 18:38-39).

With their Lord ascended into heaven, and knowing of his return the next day, the Nephites labored all night both to spread the word and to arrive at the designated location (apparently still by the Bountiful temple).

The following morning many people gathered together, including the twelve disciples whom Jesus had chosen. The multitude was so great that they did cause that they should be separated into twelve bodies” (3 Nephi 19:5). The twelve disciples then commenced teaching each multitude, causing the people to kneel down and begin to pray in the name of Jesus Christ. “And they did pray for that which they most desired; and they desired that the Holy Ghost should be given unto them” (3 Nephi 19:9). Then, beginning with the disciple Nephi, the multitude began to be baptized. After this ordinance they experienced something miraculous. We read:

And it came to pass when they were all baptized and had come up out of the water, the Holy Ghost did fall upon them, and they were filled with the Holy Ghost and with fire. And behold, they were encircled about as if it were by fire; and it came down from heaven, and the multitude did witness it, and did bear record; and angels did come down out of heaven and did minister unto them. (3 Nephi 19:13-14)

In the midst of this experience the multitude is joined by Jesus, who commands them to continue praying. As they are praying unto Jesus, He separates himself from the crowd and begins his own prayer. He prays for the people as well as for those who will believe in their words, desiring unity between them all and the Father and Son. His prayer specifically acknowledges the reception of the Holy Ghost. “Father, I thank thee that thou hast given the Holy Ghost unto these whom I have chosen...Father, thou hast given them the Holy Ghost because they believe in me” (3 Nephi 19:20,22). After this personal prayer, Jesus Christ returns and finds that the multitude “did still continue, without ceasing, to pray unto him” (3 Nephi 19:24).

The narrative records that upon returning from praying alone Jesus blessed the disciples and smiled upon them. “And the light of his countenance did shine upon them, and behold they

were as white as the countenance and also the garments of Jesus” (3 Nephi 19:25). The disciples do not cease praying throughout this entire experience. Soon Jesus turns from them again and offers another prayer of gratitude and supplication to the Father. After returning to the disciples, Jesus once again retreats and prays. The spot from which Jesus was praying could not have been out of earshot because the narrative account closes with the following description:

And tongue cannot speak the words which he prayed, neither can be written by man the words which he prayed. And the multitude did hear and do bear record; and their hearts were open and they did understand in their hearts the words which he prayed. Nevertheless, so great and marvelous were the words which he prayed that they cannot be written, neither can they be uttered by man. (3 Nephi 19:32-34)

The Introduction to the Book of Mormon refers to this as part of “The crowning event recorded in the Book of Mormon.” It was a sacred and memorable experience with the resurrected and ascended Lord that greatly enlightened the people and gave them uninhibited access to the Holy Spirit.

The Testimony of Two Nations

This is where the possibility of Pentecost being commemorated by the Nephites comes into play. It is interesting that the Book of Mormon account begins with the multitude having gathered around the temple. The celebration of Pentecost typically involved a universal gathering to the temple so that covenant males might present themselves before the Lord. This tradition can be likewise seen in the Luke-Acts account. Might the observation of Pentecost at the temple be the reason for the multitude suddenly being gathered in that locale? Because the feast of Pentecost was prolonged to at least three days, its commemoration among the Nephites would encompass their first encounter with Jesus, the second day’s experience with receiving the Holy Ghost, and the rest of Christ’s personal ministry among the people altogether.

Pentecost was typically celebrated fifty days after the first day of Passover. The New

Testament confirms that it was during this festival time that Jesus Christ was betrayed and crucified. Give or take a few days for burial and resurrection, add the 40-day ministry mentioned in Acts, and the day of Pentecost really was held according to schedule in Jerusalem. The Book of Mormon does not mention exactly how much time amounted between the destructions experienced among the Nephites at the death of Jesus Christ (which would have been in accordance with Old World Passover timing), and their gathering at the Bountiful temple to witness his glorious descent. However, if one can deduce that the Nephites were gathered to celebrate Pentecost, and that this celebration occurred fifty days after Passover, then it can be estimated that roughly 50 days occurred between the calamities in the New World and the visitation of Jesus Christ.

If the Nephites truly were celebrating Pentecost at or around the same time as their New Testament counterparts, then the outpouring of the Holy Ghost was a universal gift being poured out upon humanity by virtue of the King's triumphant ascension. Jesus was no longer physically present in Jerusalem and could thus be a part of the Nephite Pentecost experience. However, the specific witness delivered by the Holy Ghost to both parties was the same, even in form. Both the New Testament and Book of Mormon Pentecost narratives commence with a large gathering at the temple. Right before this gathering we have very similar accounts of Jesus Christ promising the Holy Ghost and then being taken into heaven. In 3 Nephi, Jesus tells the multitude "And now I go unto the Father, because it is expedient that I should go unto the Father for your sakes" (3 Nephi 18:35). He then confers upon them power to give the Holy Ghost. Though Jesus does not specifically mention the Holy Ghost as the reason why it was expedient for him to leave, the gospel of John includes a very similar statement given by Christ just prior to his departure. "Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not

away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you” (John 16:7). After this explanation to both Old and New World parties, Jesus gives the New Testament groups instructions to await the gift at Jerusalem (in 3 Nephi 17:3, he also lets the Nephites know where to gather the following morning).

After this exchange, both accounts record Christ’s ascension and they describe the same phenomenon. Luke describes Jesus as being taken up and received by a cloud (Acts 1:9). The Nephite account explains that while a cloud overshadowed the multitude, Jesus ascended into heaven (3 Nephi 18:39). Both times, apostles were there to witness the ascent. The ascension of Jesus Christ is a clear pivot point in both narratives. After the ascent the scene in both accounts transitions to the large gatherings at the temple.

During this gathering the Holy Ghost is dispensed. We can assume that the crowds in the Jerusalem temple were ritually worshipping God. The Nephite crowds near the temple were also in the act of worshipping through prayer. In the Old World,

Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2:3-4, NRSV)

This occurrence is matched in the New World by the Holy Ghost descending upon the Nephites and encircling them about “as if it were by fire” (3 Nephi 19:140). The reception of the Holy Ghost is the climax of both narratives. It is what the original Twelve were waiting for and what the new twelve and accompanying multitude were praying for.

The narrative splits ways at this point because in the New Testament account Jesus appears only as mentioned in Peter’s sermon whereas in the New World Jesus physically joins the Nephites. Nevertheless, similarities between the two events are still traceable. One similarity is that when the Holy Ghost descended on the Jerusalem congregation, they began to speak in

tongues. The account reads:

And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? (Acts 2:6-8, NRSV)

Part of the experience wrought by the Holy Ghost was that all in attendance could mutually understand one another despite the wide variety of languages represented in the assembly. This dynamic comes into play in the Book of Mormon account during the Lord's prayer. When Jesus prayed, it was in a language or in a spirit that the human tongue "cannot speak" (3 Nephi 19:32). Despite the seeming barrier, the Nephite multitude had their heart opened that they could understand.

One more aspect of the Pentecost theme that is absent in the New Testament narrative deals with the typical commemoration during Shavuot of Moses receiving the Torah from Jehovah, the God of Israel. During this encounter with deity, the account in Exodus describes that when Moses came down from communing with the Lord in Mount Sinai, "As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God" (Exodus 34:29). This glowing face is synonymous with the law-receiving experience. It is one of the reasons that some scholars, as noted earlier, have equated Abinadi's sermon with the feast of Pentecost. The Book of Mormon specifically draws the comparison between Moses and Abinadi.

Now it came to pass after Abinadi had spoken these words that the people of king Noah durst not lay their hands on him, for the Spirit of the Lord was upon him; and his face shone with exceeding luster, even as Moses' did while in the mount of Sinai, while speaking with the Lord. (Mosiah 13:5)

This aspect of receiving the law and the Holy Ghost together, simultaneously, is again repeated in the 3 Nephi narrative. This time, it is Jesus whose countenance shines, and as he radiates and

smiles upon those whom he has called, they began to shine as well. “And behold the whiteness thereof did exceed all the whiteness, yea, even there could be nothing upon earth so white as the whiteness thereof” (3 Nephi 19:25). This detail and how it parallels with the other accounts could be a conscious decision made by the redactor to carry on a pattern, thus implying that something larger is at play here. The Jerusalem and Nephite Pentecost experiences are an example of the power of the Holy Ghost shed upon mankind after and because of the ascension of Jesus Christ. One counter argument to the correlations presented above is that the Jerusalem Pentecost experience took place pre-baptism, while for the Nephites it all occurred post-baptism, thus negating any real cause and effect comparison. However, the cause and effect comparison that this paper seeks to make identifies the ascension as the cause, and baptism by the Holy Ghost as the effect. This makes the specific order of post-ascension activities an extraneous detail. The central point here is that a gift is being received from the ascended Lord. Disciples in both the Old and New Worlds were to witness of the powerful outpouring of gifts sent forth after the Savior returned to heaven. The ascension witnessed by the Nephites was not a repetition of the redemptive act which brought mankind back into God’s presence once and for all, but was intended as a reminder that the resurrected Lord now had a seat at the right hand of the Father and would from there continue to commune with and bless His people.

It was just as important for the Nephite apostles to witness and certify the Lord’s ascension as it was for the apostles in the Old World. Both records include a special witness of the sufferings, death, resurrection *and* ascension of Jesus Christ. Both records tell of a baptism by fire that came after their witnessing an ascended Christ. Both bear tribute to the fact that having once again communed with the Father, the Son gives gifts unto men. Thus, Christ’s ascension continues to play a large role in the salvation economy of the children of God. This

harmony between both accounts is a fitting example of Nephi’s prophecy that “These last records which thou hast seen among the Gentiles (The Book of Mormon) shall establish the truth of the first (The Bible) ... and shall make known plain and precious things...” (1 Nephi 13:40).

An Ascended Advocate

An additional gift conveyed to humanity through Christ’s ascension is the role He now takes after entering “into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us” (Hebrews 9:24, KJV). Ascension takes him to his father, but what comes after that in terms of our salvation? A possible answer to this question comes from the Doctrine and Covenants, which is rich in descriptive language and imagery. Helping us better visualize the Savior’s role in our redemption after his bodily ascension as recorded in Luke, the Doctrine and Covenants explains how Christ is in the Father’s presence pleading in behalf of his Saints. He proclaims “Behold, and hearken, O ye elders of my church, saith the Lord your God, even Jesus Christ, your advocate, who knoweth the weakness of man and how to succor them who are tempted” (D&C 62:1).

The word “advocate” is used one time in the English-language King James Version of the Bible (see 1 John 2:1). It is used six times in the Doctrine and Covenants, each time by the Savior in reference to Himself and his redemptive work in the presence of the Father. An advocate can be defined as “One who defends, pleads, intercedes, or speaks in behalf of another.”¹⁰⁶ The Doctrine and Covenants offers up a striking illustration of this concept in action. Christ Himself explains

Listen to him who is the advocate with the Father, who is pleading your cause before him—
Saying: Father, behold the sufferings and death of him who did no sin, in whom

¹⁰⁶ Largey, D. L., Dahl, L. E., Black, S. E., Esplin, S. C., Ostler, C. J., Tate, C. D., & Woodford, R. J. (2012). *Doctrine and Covenants reference companion*. Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 10.

thou wast well pleased; behold the blood of thy Son which was shed, the blood of him whom thou gavest that thyself might be glorified;
Wherefore, Father, spare these my brethren that believe on my name, that they may come unto me and have everlasting life (D&C 45:3-5).

While we have a record of Jesus praying for others – even in an intercessory fashion – (see John 17), the Doctrine and Covenants provides a powerful image of the Lord, now ascended, pleading for His people by directing the Father’s attention to the precious blood which He spilt in their behalf. It is presented in the Doctrine and Covenants as a reason to rejoice. “Lift up your hearts and be glad, for I am in your midst, and am your advocate with the Father; and it is his good will to give you the kingdom” (D&C 29:5). The Doctrine and Covenants builds upon the New Testament ascension narrative. It takes us to the final presentation of the atonement offering, to explain the work done by a glorified Christ at the right hand of God while ensuring us that He is still among the saints. Elder Bruce C. Hafen wrote

It is generally true that no one has enough "influence in high places" to compensate for our failure to qualify on our own merits to join them in those high places. However, the Savior has won the right to such influence, not only by his unique family relationship to the Father but also because of his sinless life and his Atonement. And when the merits of our case are not strong enough by themselves to return us to the highest place of all, he, having arrived there ahead of us, will plead our case before God.¹⁰⁷

Christ’s ascension places Him “ahead of us” to perform this most wondrous task.

Hand in hand with advocacy comes the Savior’s promise of forgiveness. Both concepts seem to be declared together, as when the Lord visited Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in the Kirtland temple and stated

I am the first and the last; I am he who liveth, I am he who was slain; I am your advocate with the Father.

¹⁰⁷ Bruce C. Hafen and Marie K. Hafen, *The Belonging: The Atonement and Relationships with God and Family Heart* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1994], 60.

Behold, your sins are forgiven you; you are clean before me; therefore, lift up your heads and rejoice (D&C 110:4-5).

Again, the Doctrine and Covenants records Christ's words

Behold, and hearken, O ye elders of my church, saith the Lord your God, even Jesus Christ, your advocate, who knoweth the weakness of man and how to succor them who are tempted.

Nevertheless, ye are blessed, for the testimony which ye have borne is recorded in heaven for the angels to look upon; and they rejoice over you, and your sins are forgiven you (D&C 62:1,3)

Although Jesus certainly forgave sins before His ascension into heaven, the Doctrine and Covenants' doctrinal and theological contribution of this mercy as continued from above points believers heavenward and fills them with joy at the thought of where Jesus is and where He is intending to take them. His ability to advocate and forgive eternally *from* the throne (see D&C 109:53) of God is a victory won.

Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which entereth into that within the veil;

Whither *the forerunner is for us entered*, even Jesus, made an high priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec. (Hebrews 6:19-20, KJV, italics added).

Tad Callister, now an emeritus general authority of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, offered some thoughts as to why Christ's advocacy is necessary despite the inalterable justice of God.

Such pleadings may open doors for God that would otherwise be closed under the laws of justice. For example, faith opens the door to miracles... In a similar manner, perhaps advocacy, when combined with the Savior's sacrifice, opens the door to divine pardons... In other words, it may be that man, or his divine advocate, must plead his best case before divine pardons are dispensed. Thus it may be that the ardor of the Savior's request for mercy – coupled with his infinite sacrifice – permits the God of heaven, under the laws of justice, to respond in like fashion.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Tad R. Callister, *The Infinite Atonement* (Deseret Book, Salt Lake City, 2000), 316.

This advocacy and forgiveness being poured down from ascended heights to the saints below may be part of the Savior's meaning when he declared "I am from above, and my power lieth beneath" (D&C 63:59). To the saints, knowledge of where He is (certified in our day through the Doctrine and Covenants) combines powerfully with knowledge of what He does. This knowledge empowers faith and breaks down barriers between man and God, for, surely,

Seeing then that we have a great high priest, *that is passed into the heavens*, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession.

Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:14,16, KJV, italics added).

This is only a glimpse into what was made possible for mankind through the ascension of Jesus Christ. The atonement theology of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints expounds upon concepts in the New Testament and gives us a better picture of the ascended Savior. His being carried up into heaven truly does "give gifts unto man." An outpouring of the Holy Ghost and the guarantee of a risen advocate in the heavens are surely among the greatest of these gifts. These blessings and others are what the Savior had in mind when he promised: "He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; *because* I go unto my Father" (John 14:12, KJV).

Chapter 6: Descending Below All Things

This chapter will explore some final aspects of ascension theology: the descent-ascent paradigm, the concept of the body of Christ ascending together, and the implications for such ascent at the Second Coming.

The Doctrine and Covenants examines the link between Christ's descending and ascending, describing how these actions fit into His ability to atone. The apostle Paul (among other early Christian writers) recognized that Jesus Christ descended into "the lower parts of the earth" (Ephesians 4:9). The Doctrine and Covenants adds that the Lord "descended below *all* things" (D&C 88:6, italics added). A poignant revelation received by the prophet Joseph Smith during a torturous imprisonment records the Savior himself summarizing the worst possible things his servant might face.

If thou art called to pass through tribulation; if thou art in perils among false brethren; if thou art in perils among robbers; if thou art in perils by land or by sea; If thou art accused with all manner of false accusations; if thine enemies fall upon thee; if they tear thee from the society of thy father and mother and brethren and sisters; and if with a drawn sword thine enemies tear thee from the bosom of thy wife, and of thine offspring, and thine elder son, although but six years of age, shall cling to thy garments, and shall say, My father, my father, why can't you stay with us? O, my father, what are the men going to do with you? and if then he shall be thrust from thee by the sword, and thou be dragged to prison, and thine enemies prowl around thee like wolves for the blood of the lamb; And if thou shouldst be cast into the pit, or into the hands of murderers, and the sentence of death passed upon thee; if thou be cast into the deep; if the billowing surge conspire against thee; if fierce winds become thine enemy; if the heavens gather blackness, and all the elements combine to hedge up the way; and above all, if the very jaws of hell shall gape open the mouth wide after thee, know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good (D&C 122:5-7).

After this heart-wrenching list of events, Jesus Christ asks a rhetorical question that testifies of what He Himself experienced. “The Son of Man hath descended below them all. Art thou greater than He?” (D&C 122:8).

The Savior’s ministry involved an eternal descent. New Testament writers understood that this was necessary for the redemption of mankind. The Doctrine and Covenants once again explains why. “He descended below all things, in that he comprehended all things, that he might be in all and through all things, the light of truth.” (D&C 88:6). This aligns with Alma’s description of Christ’s atonement given in the Book of Mormon.

And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities.

Now the Spirit knoweth all things; nevertheless the Son of God suffereth according to the flesh that he might take upon him the sins of his people, that he might blot out their transgressions according to the power of his deliverance; and now behold, this is the testimony which is in me (Alma 7:12-13).

The Doctrine and Covenants amplifies our understanding of Christ’s ascension by placing it in tandem with His descent. “He that ascended up on high, *as also* he descended below all things...” (D&C 88:6, italics added). His descent necessarily preceded His ascension and both are key parts of salvation history. President Brigham Young noted, “According to the philosophy of our religion we understand that if he had not descended below all things, he could not have ascended above all things.”¹⁰⁹

In his book, *The Infinite Atonement*, Tad Callister explores the concept of power being proportional to one’s divine attributes. He explains that the atonement of Christ included both the

¹⁰⁹ Watt, G.D. et al., eds. (1854-1886). *Journal of Discourses*. London: Latter-Day Saints’ Book Depot, 3:365.

“acquisition and then the manifestation of incredible power.”¹¹⁰ Having referenced Revelation 5:12, in which angels praise “the Lamb that was slain *to receive* power” (emphasis added), Callister asks, “could it be that the exercise of the power to endure was essential to the acquisition of the power to overcome?”¹¹¹ He makes the point that because of who Christ was, going through one phase of the atoning process enabled Him to enter the next phase and ultimately overcome all things on the throne. “The exercise of those powers necessary to endure the sufferings of all mankind may in turn have opened the door to the additional powers to resurrect, to redeem, and to exalt.”¹¹² Johanna Kramer more clearly connects the power gained from a lifetime of descending below all things to Christ’s ability to ascend and attain exaltation (As interspersed throughout this paper, the ascension scholarship of non-Latter-day Saint scholars such as Kramer’s often meshes well with the Latter-day Saint theological framework and each context is bolstered by the other). “In the Incarnation, Christ deliberately emptied himself and took on the lowly state of humanity while maintaining his divinity. In fact, his humiliation prepares his exaltation; he had to humble himself in order to be exalted in the Ascension.”¹¹³ Through his descending, Jesus Christ is empowered to truly succor all of his creations. His subsequent ascension enables him to take this power to the throne, where he can administer it throughout “the immensity of space” (D&C 88:12).

¹¹⁰ Tad R. Callister, *The Infinite Atonement* (Deseret Book, Salt Lake City, 2000), 71.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid, 70.

¹¹³ Johanna Kramer, *Between Heaven and Earth: Liminality and the Ascension of Christ in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Manchester University Press, 2017), 47.

Elder Russell M. Nelson interpreted Christ's baptism in the Jordan River as a symbol of his descent.

The River Jordan was the site Jesus chose for His baptism by John to “fulfil all righteousness.” (Matt. 3:15; see also 2 Ne. 31:5–6.) Is it significant that this sacred ordinance was performed in virtually the lowest body of fresh water on the planet? Could He have selected a better place to symbolize the humble depths to which He went and from which He rose? By example, he taught us that He literally descended beneath all things to rise above all things.¹¹⁴

Christ needed to willingly descend below all things before He could ascend above them.

The Body of Christ

The ecclesiastical organization that Alma the Elder deemed “the fold of God” (Mosiah 18:8), was called “the body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:27) by the apostle Paul. “For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ...for the body is not one member, but many” (1 Corinthians 12:12,14, KJV). This covenant group is commanded to live and serve together in love and harmony, “That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it” (1 Corinthians 12:25-26). Members comprise the body of the church. Jesus Christ himself constitutes the head of the church (see Colossians 1:18).

The *totus Christus*, or symbol of the complete body of Christ, if taken literally, leaves the church headless and thereby defunct in Christ's absence. This metaphor not only teaches the church of its utter dependence on Christ but also implies a potential for the body that is yet to be unlocked. Johanna Kramer summarizes this potential: “when Christ the Head ascends to heaven,

¹¹⁴ Russel M. Nelson, “Why this Holy Land?”, *Ensign*, December 1989, accessed 2019.
<<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1989/12/why-this-holy-land?lang=eng>>

he marks out the path for the Body to follow, even though the latter remains on the earth; as Christ enters heaven in his dual nature, he exalts humanity.”¹¹⁵ The entire aim of the body is now to follow the head. It is only the head and body together that can attain the highest heights. In the seventh century, In the same way that every part of the body is needed for it to thrive,

As part of the *totus Christus*, Christians have the privileged opportunity to reach heaven, but only if the diverse limbs can discipline themselves enough to jointly follow the head...The body – the Church – does not and cannot consist of individuals but succeeds only through a collaborative – and watchful effort.¹¹⁶

Ascension and exaltation in the Father’s kingdom invoke a joint effort in following Jesus Christ upward.

A collective effort and ‘group ascension’ following the pattern set by Jesus Christ is evidenced in the Pearl of Great Price. After Enoch’s people had truly become “of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness” (Moses 7:18), “Zion, in process of time, was taken up into heaven” (Moses 7:21). The head has entered heaven. What He did on His own, the body can accomplish as a group. This thought was captured beautifully by Sister Linda K. Burton, the Relief Society General President during a conference talk in 2015, centered on the phrase “Thee lift me and I’ll lift thee, and we’ll ascend together.” She closed her message by inviting all to “put our trust in Him to help us help each other live happily and eternally as we ascend together, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Johanna Kramer, *Between Heaven and Earth: Liminality and the Ascension of Christ in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Manchester University Press, 2017), 161.

¹¹⁶ Johanna Kramer, *Between Heaven and Earth: Liminality and the Ascension of Christ in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Manchester University Press, 2017), 163-164.

¹¹⁷ Linda K. Burton, “We’ll Ascend Together,” in *Ensign*, May 2015, 29.

The ascension of Jesus Christ continues to perpetuate the infiniteness of His atoning sacrifice. It penetrated the gates of heaven and left them open for all covenant members of His body. It is a permanent reminder of the heights to which disciples are duty-bound to seek. By promising, but not guaranteeing redemption, the burden of the ascension's individual realization is on the shoulders of the Church and its members. "Much is at stake for [disciples] in the Ascension. It represents both a risk and an opportunity."¹¹⁸ Elder M. Russell Ballard has reminded members of the body of Christ, "Every person has a significant contribution to make. *Every person.*"¹¹⁹ In compiling the viewpoint of early patristic sources on the issue, Johanna Kramer further proposes that

As Christ the Head reaches heaven, he shows Christians what and where they ought to be also. The Body will follow the Head, but until then, the Ascension remains incomplete and believers will have to contribute to its eventual completion through virtuous living. If Christians contribute to this goal successfully by living faithfully and without sin, then the promise of 'what might be' – redemption – will be turned into a permanent state.¹²⁰

Ascending to Meet Him

Luke uses the ascension to epically foreshadow the Savior's return. It is the angels who promise the awed apostles "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" (Acts 1:11, KJV). Once again, where New Testament writers make inspired promises, Jesus Christ validates and expounds upon them

¹¹⁸ Johanna Kramer, *Between Heaven and Earth: Liminality and the Ascension of Christ in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Manchester University Press, 2017), 10.

¹¹⁹ M. Russell Ballard, *Counseling with Our Councils: Learning to Minister Together in the Church and in the Family* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1997), 122.

¹²⁰ Johanna Kramer, *Between Heaven and Earth: Liminality and the Ascension of Christ in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Manchester University Press, 2017), 10.

in first person in the Doctrine and Covenants. Adding his testimony to theirs, the Master explains to the readers of our dispensation

For the hour is nigh, and that which was spoken by mine apostles must be fulfilled; for as they spoke so shall it come to pass;
For *I will reveal myself from heaven* with power and great glory, with all the hosts thereof, and dwell in righteousness with men on earth a thousand years, and the wicked shall not stand (D&C 29:10-11, italics added).

The Doctrine and Covenants takes us from Christ's ascent in the New Testament to His glorious reappearance in the millennium. This made sense to early Latter-day Saints, who, "Like the Puritans of two centuries earlier...were decidedly millennialist in their outlook."¹²¹ Once the pattern of descent-ascent is understood, modern readers can also more fully appreciate this encompassing doctrine of which the Savior speaks in detail. "For the great Millennium, of which I have spoken by the mouth of my servants, shall come" (D&C 43:30).

The symbol of the cloud is found across scriptural narratives. "In the Old Testament, Yahweh's presence is made manifest and His glory shown forth in a cloud."¹²² In the New Testament, it is indicative of divine glory, present during the ascension, and even used in conjunction with the promise of the Savior's return. For "Behold, he cometh with the clouds; and every eye shall see him" (Revelation 1:7, KJV). The Doctrine and Covenants also uses the symbol of the cloud. "And then they shall look for me, and, behold, I will come; and they shall see me in the clouds of heaven, clothed with power and great glory; with all the holy angels; and he that watches not for me shall be cut off" (D&C 45:44).

¹²¹ Thomas Spencer, *The Missouri Mormon Experience* (University of Missouri Press, 2010), 2.

¹²² James Orr, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Delmarva Publications, Inc., July 9, 2015), entry – cloud.

Between ascension through the clouds and return on the clouds, the Savior used the symbol of the cloud in conjunction with the temple to remind His saints of who He is and what will occur. In speaking of a temple the saints are have been asked to build in Missouri, Jesus told them that “verily this generation shall not all pass away until an house shall be built unto the Lord, and a cloud shall rest upon it, which cloud shall be even the glory of the Lord, which shall fill the house” (D&C 84:5). Anciently, the glory of the Lord rested upon the sacred tabernacle in the likeness of a cloud (see Numbers 9, KJV). The author of Hebrews implies that Christ ascended (in the cloud) and entered “a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands” (Hebrews 9:11, KJV). The Doctrine and Covenants takes us to the end of revealed cosmic history, pointing to the millennial day when this celestial tabernacle (whether symbolic of His body or a literal edifice) will be revealed. “And prepare for the revelation which is to come, when the veil of the covering of my temple, in my tabernacle, which hideth the earth, shall be taken off, and all flesh shall see me together” (D&C 101:23).

“The revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants emphasize that the dawning of the Millennium is near, ‘even at the doors,’ and that the Saints must be ready for the time when Jesus Christ will return to the earth to reign.”¹²³ The Millennium will be a thousand-year period of righteousness on earth. The Savior will personally govern. Peace and knowledge will abound and Satan will be bound for a season before a final struggle and certain defeat. “And the end shall come, and the heaven and the earth shall be consumed and pass away, and there shall be a new heaven and a new earth” (D&C 29:23). When viewed under an ascent-descent lens, the Millennium, with the Lukan ascension as its preface, can be described in three phases: The

¹²³ Largey, D. L., Dahl, L. E., Black, S. E., Esplin, S. C., Ostler, C. J., Tate, C. D., & Woodford, R. J. (2012). *Doctrine and Covenants Reference Companion*. Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 403.

Savior ascending in the clouds, the Savior descending in the clouds, and the Savior causing his Saints to ascend in the clouds. In the Doctrine and Covenants, one reads this beautiful promise: “For ye are the church of the Firstborn, and he will take you up in a cloud, and appoint every man his portion.” The Doctrine and Covenants reveals in detail the culmination to Luke’s ascension narrative.

The Saints Will Ascend

The final phase of the millennial day is the promise of the Saints ascending to meet the Lord when He returns. This ascending is also indicative of their receiving a glorified state through “the great Mediator of all men” (2 Nephi 2:27). Orson Pratt, an early Latter-day Saint and Church leader described:

I have read these few passages of Scripture relating to the great day of the coming of our Lord, according as it is predicted by the mouth of the ancient Apostle, and also concerning a very important event which will then happen, namely, the resurrection of the righteous dead—those who are in Christ; and also another event closely connected with the resurrection—namely, the ascension of the Saints then living upon the earth.¹²⁴

Paul is the first to reference the ascension of the Saints as part of the Millennial return of the Savior. Twice in his epistle to the Corinthians, Paul testified “he which raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise up us also by Jesus” (2 Corinthians 4:4, KJV). Using Lukan imagery and resurrection parallelism, the apostle also comforted the Thessalonians by pointing them to the occasion on which

For 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: and so shall we ever be with the Lord (1

¹²⁴ Watt, G.D. et al., eds. (1854-1886). *Journal of Discourses*. London: Latter-Day Saints’ Book Depot, 18:107.

Thessalonians 4:16-17, KJV).

Aside from this reference, direct mention of millennial ascension in the New Testament is scarce. The Doctrine and Covenants picks up where the New Testament leaves off, and, replete with detail, brings the ascension narrative full circle.

After telling of His return in a cloud, “clothed with power and great glory” (D&C 45:44), the Lord states “the saints that have slept shall come forth to meet me in the cloud” (D&C 45:45). The next verse qualifies the group of saints who will ascend to meet the Lord. “If ye have slept in peace, blessed are you; for as you now behold me and know that I am, even so shall ye come unto me and your souls shall live, and your redemption shall be perfected” (D&C 45:46). To have “slept in peace” correlates with the Book of Mormon’s description of the departed faithful “And then shall it come to pass, that the spirits of those who are righteous are received into a state of happiness, which is called paradise, a state of rest, a state of peace” (Alma 40:11). After the resurrection, the righteous followers of Christ are promised ascension. This happens the same way in Luke where Christ’s ascension is recorded as occurring after resurrection. The Doctrine and Covenants suggests that in the ascension of the saints, “redemption shall be perfected” (D&C 45:46).

The group of those who are caught up to meet Christ expands in another millennial revelation. It includes not only the faithful who have died, but also the faithful who yet remain on the earth.

And the saints that are upon the earth, who are alive, shall be quickened and be caught up to meet him.

And they who have slept in their graves shall come forth, for their graves shall be opened; and they also shall be caught up to meet him in the midst of the pillar of heaven—

They are Christ’s, the first fruits, they who shall descend with him first, and they who are on the earth and in their graves, who are first caught up to meet him; and

all this by the voice of the sounding of the trump of the angel of God (D&C 88:96-98).

The revelation continues describing the events of the thousand-year millennium. It is the ascended saints who “shall be filled with his glory, and receive their inheritance and be made equal with him” (D&C 88:107). They have the privilege of ascending to the Lord and then descending with Him. These saints have chosen to be “raised in immortality unto eternal life” (D&C 29:43).

Part of the millennial celebration includes a redemption song of Zion. The 84th section of the Doctrine and Covenants presents the words to the song, which include another reference to a collective group of saints being taken up.

The Lord hath redeemed his people;
And Satan is bound and time is no longer.
The Lord hath gathered all things in one.
The Lord hath brought down Zion from above.
The Lord hath brought up Zion from beneath (D&C 84:100).

In this instance, the Lord causes the city of Enoch to descend and join forces with the ascending Latter-day Zion on earth before they are both fully taken up into heaven. This will fulfill the Lord’s promise to Enoch that

Then shalt thou and all thy city meet them there, and we will receive them into our bosom, and they shall see us; and we will fall upon their necks, and they shall fall upon our necks, and we will kiss each other;
And there shall be mine abode, and it shall be Zion, which shall come forth out of all the creations which I have made; and for the space of a thousand years the earth shall rest (Moses 7:63-64).

The holy reunion of the Lord’s people, a people of truly one heart and one mind (see Moses 7:18), makes ascension a communal experience in which two parties who have been caught up with the Lord because of their righteousness – as evidence of their redemption in Him –rejoice

together as they participate in the ushering in of their Master's reign.

In the Doctrine and Covenants Jesus Christ reminds the Church that trials will come upon those who seek to earnestly follow Him. These will be offset by the promised blessings made available to all who overcome, including a collective ascension.

That through my providence, notwithstanding the *tribulation which shall descend upon you*, that the church may stand independent above all other creatures beneath the celestial world;

That *you may come up* unto the crown prepared for you, and be made rulers over many kingdoms, saith the Lord God, the Holy One of Zion (D&C 78:14-15, italics added).

The Savior descended below all things. A disciple descending into his or her own mortal sphere is surely as way of emulating Christ's life. This includes the tribulations that descend upon them.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland commented:

And the path of salvation has always led one way or another through Gethsemane. So if the Savior faced such injustices and discouragements, such persecutions, unrighteousness, and suffering, we cannot expect that we are not going to face some of that if we still intend to call ourselves His true disciples and faithful followers.¹²⁵

The ascended Christ promises the church that in relying on His covenants throughout their journey of descent, they may come *up* to their exaltation. This fulfills the Savior's explanation "that as I have been lifted up by men even so should men be lifted up by the Father, to stand before me, to be judged of their works, whether they be good or whether they be evil" (3 Nephi 27:14). Elder Jeffrey R. Holland also taught:

Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, suffered, died, and rose from death in order that He could, like lightning in a summer storm, grasp us as we fall, hold us with His might, and through our obedience to His commandments, lift us to

¹²⁵ Jeffrey R. Holland, "Lessons from Liberty Jail," *BYU Devotional*, 7 September 2008, accessed 2019 <<https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/jeffrey-r-holland/lessons-liberty-jail/>>

eternal life.¹²⁶

Being lifted up is based upon individual agency, but is not an event for only one individual. It will come through a truly unified group of sons and daughters of God who have been made perfect in and through Jesus Christ. The Lord reiterates in the 78th section

Wherefore, do the things which I have commanded you, saith your Redeemer, even the Son Ahman, who prepareth all things before he taketh you; For ye are the church of the Firstborn, and he will take you up in a cloud, and appoint every man his portion (D&C 78:20-21).

The ascension principles hinted at by Luke and elaborated upon briefly by later New Testament writers are stated clearly in the Doctrine and Covenants. The ascension is for the individual saint as well as for the church as a whole. It gives meaning to the descent required in mortality. It points the eye of the faithful disciple forward to the glorious moment where he or she will be taken up to meet Christ, and like Him, be granted a place at God's right hand. The Doctrine and Covenants clearly illuminates what Luke left open-ended in the grand finale of the Divine Economy. It places readers into a pattern of ascent-descent modeled by the Savior.

The Doctrine and Covenants makes paramount contributions to our understanding of ascension theology. It solidifies in our minds and hearts the role of an ascended Savior, outlines His millennial post-ascension descent, and reiterates the promise of saints being likewise 'lifted up.'

For the day cometh that the Lord shall utter his voice out of heaven; the heavens shall shake and the earth shall tremble, and the trump of God shall sound both long and loud, and shall say to the sleeping nations: Ye saints arise and live; ye sinners stay and sleep until I shall call again (D&C 43:18).

¹²⁶ Jeffrey R. Holland, "Where Justice, Love, and Mercy Meet," *Ensign*, May 2015, 104.

Chapter 7: The Culmination of Atonement

As I conclude this paper, I reiterate the claims made in the introduction that the ascension of Jesus Christ plays a critical role in the redemption of humanity, that its importance can be attested to from within Latter-day Saint doctrinal and theological sources, and that a theology of ascension can set the ultimate pattern which disciples of Jesus Christ are to strive for on the Latter-day Saint salvific path. It is both a literal event promised to faithful disciples and a metaphorical template by which to pattern our lives. One of the clearest declarations of the importance of the ascension (highlighted even further by the way it is presented in the manual) was made by President Hugh B. Brown of the First Presidency in his book, *Continuing the Quest*. The New Testament Student Manual commentary for Mark 16:19 reads:

[Mark 16:19] records the fulfillment of the Savior’s earlier declarations that He would sit at the right hand of God in heaven. President Hugh B. Brown (1883–1975) of the First Presidency wrote of the importance of the Ascension as the culmination of the Atonement of Jesus Christ: “We believe that the greatest story ever told in all the annals of history, is the story of the atonement of Christ. The record of his resurrection and ascension, without which the atonement would not have been complete, is the climax to that story, and now, two thousand years after the event, it is still central and pivotal in all true Christian thought.”¹²⁷

This “culmination of the Atonement of Jesus Christ” was prophesied by Isaiah, whose testimony is enhanced by the Joseph Smith Translation, which declares that the Messiah would come “to be a light unto all who sit in darkness, unto the uttermost ends of the earth; to bring to pass the resurrection from the dead, and to ascend up on high, to dwell on the right hand of the Father...and all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (JST, Luke 3:7,11).

¹²⁷ New Testament Student Manual: Religion 211-212, 2014. Accessed 2019
<<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/new-testament-student-manual/introduction-to-mark/chapter-14.p59?lang=eng#p59>>

The examples from Hugh B. Brown and the Joseph Smith translation showcase the tendency of Latter-day Saints to mention the resurrection and the ascension together. The union between the events, as well as the logic that one led into the other might explain why they have so frequently been condensed into the same event. In 2007, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland bore testimony of the literal resurrection of the Savior from the tomb and that “after ascending to His Father to complete the process of that Resurrection, He appeared, repeatedly, to hundreds of disciples in the Old world and the New.”¹²⁸ It is easier to emphasize the physicality of resurrection because we can more tangibly relate to the experience of having or losing a body. Additionally, Latter-day Saint theology greatly emphasizes receiving a body as a crucial part of our Heavenly Father’s Plan for us, which underscores, as Elder Holland taught on another occasion, “why the resurrection of the body is so central to the great triumph of Christ’s Atonement.”¹²⁹ It is a lot more abstract to theorize about resurrecting than about being “able to dwell in everlasting burnings, and to sit in glory, as do those who sit enthroned in everlasting power.”¹³⁰ Saint Augustine expressed that “The resurrection of the Lord is our hope, the Lord’s ascension, our glorification.”¹³¹ Because of an experiential gap, and also because members of the Church have sometimes been mischaracterized over their belief in eventual deification, it may be easier theologically to focus more on the “hope” than the “glorification.”

¹²⁸ Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Only True God and Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ Whom He Hath Sent,” *Ensign*, November 2007, 40.

¹²⁹ Jeffrey R. Holland, “Personal Purity,” General Conference, October 1998, accessed 2019. <<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1998/10/personal-purity.p11?lang=eng>>

¹³⁰ *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* [2007], 221-222.

¹³¹ Johanna Kramer, *Between Heaven and Earth: Liminality and the Ascension of Christ in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Manchester University Press, 2017), 46.

Ascension's absence in the consciousness of Latter-day Saints is also evidenced in Robert

L Millet's observation that

It is probably the case that if one hundred Protestants were asked where the atonement of Christ took place, those one hundred persons would answer: At Golgotha, on the cross. It is also no doubt true that if one hundred Latter-day Saints were asked the same question, a large percentage would respond: In Gethsemane, in the garden.¹³²

John Hilton recently summarized an informal survey at Brigham Young University in which

One faculty member gave 110 students in a Book of Mormon class the following fill-in-the-blank question without any prior instruction on the Savior's Atonement: "Where did the Atonement take place?" Of these students, 27 percent wrote only Gethsemane, and 73 percent wrote Gethsemane and the cross.¹³³

These examples are presented not as an indictment that we as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are answering the Atonement question wrong, but to suggest, in light of what has been presented throughout this paper, that there are more questions which we could be asking. If we as Latter-day Saints, recognize that "the Atonement is broader than these two events,"¹³⁴ why have we not more fully explored each of its components?

When Jesus Christ succumbed to death on the cross, Matthew describes that "the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom" (Matthew 27:51, KJV). Just as in the ancient tabernacle on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest was now prepared to ascend into the Holy Holies and with the veil now parted, enter the presence of God and finalize Atonement for

¹³² Robert L. Millet, "This Is My Gospel," in *A Book of Mormon Treasury: Gospel Insights from General Authorities and Religious Educators* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2003), 389–411.

¹³³ John Hilton, "Teaching the Scriptural Emphasis on the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ" in *Religious Educator*, Volume 20 No. 3, 2019, 134.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

His people. This miraculous rending of the veil a distance away from where Christ hung on the cross symbolized the victory being wrought for mankind. It also accentuated where the Lord was yet to head in our behalf, the heavenly Holy of Holies. Elder Bruce R. McConkie noted that because Deity has rent the veil, “The Holy of Holies is now open to all, and all, through the atoning blood of the Lamb, can now enter into the highest and holiest of all places, that kingdom where eternal life is found.”¹³⁵ The tearing of the veil at His death does not make the veil obsolete, but signifies that all who are called up may enter, as is modeled in Latter-day Saint temple worship. The Savior went from the garden to the cross. He descended into the pit of human sin and suffering as well as into the spirit world. He then came out of the tomb and finally ascended up into the Father’s presence. Because of the complete journey undertaken by Jesus Christ, “all men become eligible to pass through the veil into the presence of the Lord to inherit full exaltation.”¹³⁶

Because “Perfect worship is emulation” and “We honor those whom we imitate,” the disciple of Jesus Christ will strive to undertake the journey He laid out. In the Book of Mormon, Jacob invites readers to experience the Atonement by viewing Christ’s death and suffering His cross (see Jacob 1:8). There is also much to glean in seeking to descend and ascend as He did throughout our mortal experience. While our meager efforts can never come close to the Savior’s experiences, we too can choose to willfully descend in ways that yoke our soul to His and secure our eventual ascension. The first principles of the gospel suggest such a descent. As disciples exercise faith, or trust in God, they descend in submission, “becoming subject even unto death, [their wills] being swallowed up in the will of the Father” (Mosiah 15:9). This faith causes us to

¹³⁵ Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 1:830.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

repent and descend “even in the depths of humility...[crying] mightily to God” (Mosiah 21:14).

The covenant of baptism is a clear descent into the water. Elder Russell M. Nelson noted that “Surely, being baptized after the manner of his baptism signifies that through our obedience and effort we, too, can come from the depths to ascend to lofty heights of our own destiny.”¹³⁷

Finally, disciples receive the gift of the Holy Ghost, which is commonly described in scripture as a gift which descends or falls upon recipients (see 3 Nephi 19:13, 2 Nephi 31:8, Luke 3:22, KJV). This gift has clear ties to the ascension as demonstrated in Chapter 5.

The physical act of descending by baptism ties disciples into the body of Christ with which they covenant to descend by bearing one another’s burdens, mourning with those in need of mourning, and comforting whosoever needs comfort (see Mosiah 18:8-9). “It may well be that only those who undergo suffering can fully empathize with the suffering soul. Only those who go down into the depths of humility with a broken heart and a contrite spirit can fully understand the Master and the path he trod.”¹³⁸ This type of ‘descending discipleship’ prepares individuals to better ascend spiritually as they worship in the temple. It propels their prayers as they ascend up like smoke before God (see Revelation 8:4). The pattern of descent-ascent continues in the life of disciples until they are “called *up* to stand before the Lord at the great and judgement day.”¹³⁹ Elder Russell M. Nelson testified that “the lifting power of the Lord can be yours if you will

¹³⁷ Russel M. Nelson, “Why this Holy Land?”, *Ensign*, December 1989, accessed 2019. <<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1989/12/why-this-holy-land?lang=eng>>

¹³⁸ Arthur R. Bassett, “What the Scriptures Say about Suffering,” in *Ensign*, December 1972. Accessed 2019. <<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1972/12/what-the-scriptures-say-about-suffering?lang=eng>>

¹³⁹ Joseph B. Wirthlin, “True to the Truth,” General Conference, April 1997. Accessed 2019. <<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1997/04/true-to-the-truth?lang=eng>>

come unto Christ and be perfected in him.”¹⁴⁰ He shared his prayer “that each of us may so endure and be lifted up at the last day.”¹⁴¹ Each follower of Christ must also descend before he or she can be granted a similar ascent. Surely it is that ascent which we celebrate and long for. As Saint Bede so poetically expressed:

Behold, we have learned in our Redeemer’s ascension wither all our effort should be directed; behold, we have recognized that the entrance to the heavenly fatherland has been opened up to human beings by the ascension into heaven of the Mediator between God and human beings. Let us hurry, with all eagerness, to the perpetual bliss of the fatherland.

In summary, we believe that due to the conditions of the fall as set forth in God’s great plan, “all mankind [is] in a lost and in a fallen state” (1 Nephi 10:6). “We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved [from this fallen state], (Article of Faith 3). This Atonement includes “the sufferings, and death of Christ, and his resurrection and ascension into heaven” (Mosiah 18:2). By these, the Savior “prepareth a way for our escape from the grasp of this awful monster...the death of the body, and also the death of the spirit” (2 Nephi 2:9). His descent below all things filled his bowels with mercy, “that he might know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities.” After His resurrection, His ascension into heaven literally ended mankind’s banishment from the kingdom and secured their being brought back into the presence of God. This ascension provides a framework for mankind’s redemption and guarantees that all others might be lifted up “by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel” (Article of Faith 3). The Bible and the Book of Mormon both attest that “When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men (Ephesians

¹⁴⁰ Russell M. Nelson, “Endure and Be Lifted Up,” General Conference, April 1997. Accessed 2019. <<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1997/04/endure-and-be-lifted-up?lang=eng>>

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

4:8, KJV). These gifts include a fulness of the Holy Ghost and advocacy at the Father's right hand. As disciples of Christ take an active role in covenant obedience and humble service, pressing "toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14, KJV), they too will be lifted up.

Although the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has sufficient material within its own canon to meaningfully contribute to a theology on the consequence of Christ's ascension as an atoning act, a serious conversation on the matter is yet forthcoming. *How does the ascension of Jesus Christ play a role in humanity's redemption in the atonement theology of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?* Truly, "The ascension of Christ is our elevation."¹⁴² It is one of "the fundamental principles of our religion."¹⁴³ Any discussion on the Atonement that culminates in the resurrection of the Savior is incomplete. Even born-again spirits and resurrected bodies need somewhere to go. The Savior blazed the trail by going there Himself - onward and upward. To forego a review of His ascension is to miss the mark of the High Priest who "became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens..." (Hebrews 7:25, KJV).

An intentional examination of ascension theology will add a new dimension to our worship of Jesus. On our walk with Him, we will be enabled to "seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God" (Colossians 3:1, KJV). Grasping more firmly the significance of the ascension of Jesus Christ and its implications for humanity, we can gladly join the refrain expressed by Gounod in his 1882 oratorio, *The Redemption*:

¹⁴² *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament III (Luke)*, edited by Arthur A. Just Jr, general editor, Thomas C. Oden (InterVarsity Press, February 19, 2003), 392.

¹⁴³ "Elders' Journal, July 1838," p. 44, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed January 24, 2019. <<https://josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/elders-journal-july-1838/12>>

Unfold, unfold, unfold,
Ye portals everlasting
Unfold, unfold, unfold,
Ye portals everlasting
With welcome to receive
Him ascending on high
Behold the King of Glory!
He mounts up through the sky,
Back to the heavenly mansions hasting.
Unfold, unfold, unfold,
For lo, the King comes nigh.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Gounod, C., Tours, B. (18). *The Redemption: a sacred trilogy / written and composed by Charles Gounod; the pianoforte acc. arr. by Berthold Tours; the English translation by the Rev. J. Troutbeck*. London: Novello, Ewer and Co.

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