

The Ways of Remembrance

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Careful attention to one particular word used in the Book of Mormon yields some surprising dividends. For example, Lehi pled with his sons to remember his words: “My sons, I would that ye would *remember*; yea, I would that ye would hearken unto my words” (2 Nephi 1:12; italics added here and in subsequent scriptures). Such language may go unnoticed, or it may seem to be merely a request to recall some teachings. The word *remember* seems rather plain and straightforward. But when looked at more closely, the language about remembrance in the Book of Mormon turns out to be rich and complex, conveying important, hidden meaning.

The Book of Mormon uses terms related to *remembering* and *forgetting* well over two hundred times. The ideas intended with these words must be significant. By looking carefully at what the Book of Mormon says about “the ways of remembrance” (1 Nephi 2:24), we can better understand the book’s overall message.

The Lord told Nephi, “They [the Lamanites] shall be a scourge unto thy seed, to stir them up in *remembrance* of me; and inasmuch as they will not *remember* me, and hearken unto my words, they shall scourge them even unto destruction” (2 Nephi 5:25). Since the Book of Mormon ends with the destruction of the Nephites, remembrance seems to have been vitally important, and even decisive, for Lehi’s descendants.

Later, King Benjamin “appointed priests to teach the people, that thereby they might hear and know the commandments of God, and to stir them up in *remembrance* of the oath they had made” (Mosiah 6:3). This was after he had indicated that the original members of the Lehi colony had failed to prosper precisely because part of them had “incurred the displeasure of God upon them; and therefore they were smitten with famine and sore afflictions, to stir them up in *remembrance* of their duty” (Mosiah 1:17).

The first thing to note is that “ways of remembrance” does not mean simply inner reflections, or merely awareness of or curiosity about the past, or even detailed information to be recalled. True, in a number of places the idea of remembrance in the Book of Mormon seems to carry the meaning of recalling information about the past (see, for example, Ether 4:16; Alma 33:3). More commonly, however, remembrance refers to action. This action springs from realizing the meaning of past events. Thus, in the Book of Mormon, remembrance results in action.

The call to remember is often a passionate plea to see God’s hand in delivering his people from bondage and captivity. Alma clearly explained this connection:

When I see many of my brethren truly penitent, and coming to the Lord their God, then is my soul filled with joy; then do I *remember* what the Lord has done for me, yea, even that he hath heard my prayer; yea, then do I *remember* his merciful arm which he extended towards me [at the time I repented]. Yea, and I also *remember* the captivity of my fathers; for I surely do know that the Lord did deliver them out of bondage. . . . Yea, I have always *remembered* the captivity of my fathers; and that same God who delivered them out of the hands of the Egyptians did deliver them out of bondage (Alma 29:10-12).

Later Alma said, “I would that ye should do as I have done, in *remembering* the captivity of our fathers; for they were in bondage, and none could deliver them except it was the God of Abraham” (Alma 36:2; compare v. 29).

Because these Nephites of Alma’s time were distant from God’s acts of deliverance in the past and from the redemption promised in the future to their descendants, they had to rely on the words of prophets, the visions of

seers, and what was recorded in the sacred texts. So formal remembrance took on crucial significance for them. Acts of remembering could let them feel as if they were participating in the past events that saved their forefathers. Meanwhile, remembering the prophecies could help them look forward to events that had not yet taken place. Through remembering the bondage and captivity and then the deliverance of their fathers—from Egypt and from Jerusalem as well as from the desert wilderness and ocean—the Nephites would have their minds turned ahead to the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ—the central event in the overall plan of redeeming men from bondage to sin and death.

From the perspective of the Nephites, remembrance included active participation in some form. For them, it meant recalling not simply with the mind but also with the heart. To remember was to place the event upon the heart, or to turn the heart toward God—to repent or return to him and his ways as righteous forefathers had done. As in the Hebrew Bible, remembering often carries the meaning of acting in obedience to God’s commands. Remembering God and thereby prospering so as to be lifted up at the last day (as in 3 Nephi 15:1 and Alma 38:5) are contrasted with forgetting and then perishing, or being cut off from God’s presence (as at Alma 37:13 and 42:11). These opposites remind us of the grand law of opposition Lehi described in 2 Nephi 2.

Since remembering involved action, what specific actions were the Nephites told to take? The Book of Mormon tells us they were to awaken, soften the heart, see, hear, believe, or trust, as the examples below demonstrate. Overall these actions involved turning to God. People showed this by keeping his commandments: “They did remember his words; and *therefore* they went forth, keeping the commandments of God” (Helaman 5:14).

On the other hand, when people forget, they “do harden their hearts, . . . and do trample under their feet the Holy One” (Helaman 12:2). Forgetfulness is also pictured as a dreadful sleep from which one needs to awake (see 2 Nephi 1:12-13). The person who does not remember suffers from blindness and disbelief (see 3 Nephi 2:1-2). To forget is also to fasten one’s heart upon or worship riches (see Helaman 13:22). It means to engage in wickedness and to become involved deeply in iniquity (see Helaman 11:36). Being “cut off and destroyed forever” (2 Nephi 1:17) is the ultimate and dreadful fruit of forgetfulness.

The Book of Mormon links remembrance with covenants. Remembering is to keep the terms of the covenant between God and his people. The visible way to do that is simply to keep the commandments. At the same time, keeping the commandments strictly leads to remembering. Thus rebellious Israel, the prophet Abinadi tells us, had always been “quick to do iniquity, and slow to remember the Lord their God; therefore there was a law given them [by covenant at Mount Sinai], yea, a law of performances and of ordinances, a law which they were to observe strictly from day to day, to keep them in remembrance of God and their duty towards him” (Mosiah 13:29-30).

Like the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Mormon uses the expressions *keep* and *remember* interchangeably. For example, in Deuteronomy 5:12 the command is given to “keep the sabbath,” while in Exodus 20:8 Israel is required to “remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.” The same connection is found in Jarom 1:5 and Mosiah 18:23, where the expression is “to keep,” and Mosiah 13:16-19, where it is “to remember.” Occasionally “remember to keep” joins both expressions. Thus Nephi pleads with his brothers to “give heed to the word of God and remember to keep his commandments always in all things” (1 Nephi 15:25). The point is that one remembers by actually doing something, not by merely recalling the past out of curiosity or for any other reason than to serve God.

For this reason the Israelite festivals and “performances” were observed, in order to remember and so “keep the commandments.” (This expression occurs eighty-five times in the Book of Mormon, often in connection with remembrance, as in Alma 36:1 and 30.) From the perspective of the Book of Mormon, one does not act only in

order to remember. The two ideas are connected in both directions: a person remembers in the deepest sense only by acting in conformity with the will of God, and the action then stirs remembrance, as Abinadi indicated.

Genuine memory or remembrance occurs in the faithful response to the claims of the covenant God has made with Israel to make Israel his people. Much like the teaching found in Deuteronomy 8:18-19, remembering God, keeping his commandments, and prospering are linked, and then they are contrasted with forgetting him and perishing (see 2 Nephi 9:39; 10:22-23). Memory and covenants are thus constantly linked in the Book of Mormon. “Rememberest thou the covenants of the Father unto the house of Israel?” (1 Nephi 14:8; compare, for example, 17:40; 19:15; 2 Nephi 3:5, 21; 29:1-2, 5, 14).

So it is not surprising to find in certain instances the word *remembrance* as part of the covenant blessing and cursing formula (see Alma 37:13; compare 36:1, 29-30; Mosiah 1:5-7; and 2:40-41). The Book of Mormon is not a secular but a covenant history, that is, one written from the perspective of the promised blessings for keeping the commandments, and also the cursings that follow from their neglect.

God’s demands upon Israel cannot be understood apart from the ways of remembrance. The mighty acts of God on their behalf, including delivering Israel from bondage in Egypt and, finally, atoning for their sins, are crucial. Without his dramatic acts on their behalf, they would be nothing but another little Near Eastern tribe. The commandments he gave them recall and are based in his actions. Therefore the commandments are not just an expression of vague heavenly laws, but are grounded in the key events in their history.

God is carrying out a plan (see 2 Nephi 9:6, 13; Jacob 6:8) that includes the testing of his people Israel—they are on probation (see 1 Nephi 10:21; Mormon 9:28). Part of the plan is to provide a way for their redemption from sin and darkness. But they must trust God, repent, and keep the commandments, or the plan fails. The importance of memory, in the Book of Mormon sense, is to bring about their obedience and so allow them to claim the promised blessings and avoid the cursings.

As in the Hebrew Bible, the language of remembrance includes warnings, promises, threats, pleas, complaints, and so forth. Furthermore, as in the Hebrew Bible, remembering the covenant sometimes is equivalent to possessing a land promised to the descendants of the one who first made the covenant with God, or to those who might be “grafted in” among the literal descendants (see Jacob 5; Alma 16:17). In that regard, Lehi’s dealings with God are shown to us on the model provided by Abraham, and much attention is given in the Book of Mormon to the promise connected to the land.

To this point we have noted little about God remembering. In the Book of Mormon, for God to remember always implies action. God is pictured as remembering, or forgetting, because of a covenant he once made with his people. By forgetting the sins of men, God grants a blessing or gives a gift in accordance with the covenant, which includes mercy or forgiveness (see Mosiah 26:22, 29-30). When God remembers, he does something, just as he expects his people to act when they remember him. He may punish, deliver, preserve, heal, sustain, warn, forgive, or otherwise intervene in human affairs as a result of his remembering or forgetting. For God to remember always implies his working through real events, molding situations and circumstances to further his “eternal plan of deliverance” (2 Nephi 11:5), or “plan of redemption” (Jacob 6:8; Alma 34:9, 16, 31). God’s remembering is more than God merely recalling in his thought—it is rather to act, finally by giving life or death.

The close links between thought and action can also be seen in the way in which remembering in the Book of Mormon is tied to the heart of man (see, for example, Alma 1:24; 10:30). It is also demonstrated in the giving of names. To remember someone is to know or believe on his name. “I would that ye should remember also, that this

is the name that I said I should give unto you that never should be blotted out, except it be through transgression; therefore, take heed that ye do not transgress, that the name be not blotted out of your hearts. I say unto you, I would that ye should remember to retain the name written always in your hearts” (Mosiah 5:11-12). For man, remembering is to awake, to hearken, to heed, to pray, and to obey by keeping the commandments and by knowing, pondering, and being willing to take a name upon them.

The Book of Mormon emphasizes the need to have records (such as the plates of brass) and to preserve them. It also stresses continuing to keep sacred records. In this we may see the kind of connection found in the Hebrew (and Arabic) language between the verb meaning “to remember” and the noun form of that verb which means “record.” There is a “book of remembrance” mentioned in the Book of Mormon (see 3 Nephi 24:16), as well as a “book of life” that records the names of the righteous (see Alma 5:58; 3 Nephi 27:26). To record is to make a memorial of deeds or sayings, that is, to inscribe in a book (Exodus 17:14).

In the Book of Mormon remembering is clearly dependent upon the possession of records (see especially Mosiah 1:3-4). This connection is part of the reason for the obsession with records that the Nephite prophets had. Throughout the Book of Mormon, the fate of the people of God depends on their memory of their past. Without careful attention to the message of historical records, they would fail to fulfill their role in the plan of salvation.

King Benjamin taught his sons

concerning the records which were engraven on the plates of brass, saying: My sons, I would that ye should remember that were it not for these plates, which contain these records and these commandments, we must have suffered in ignorance, even at this present time, not knowing the mysteries of God. For it were not possible that our father, Lehi, could have remembered all these things, to have taught them to his children, except it were for the help of these plates. . . . Were it not for these [records], which have been kept and preserved by the hand of God, that we might read and understand of his mysteries, and have his commandments always before our eyes, that even our fathers would have dwindled in unbelief, and we should have been like unto . . . the Lamanites (Mosiah 1:5).

King Benjamin, using a common expression for instructing sons in the Book of Mormon, teaches his sons:

I would that ye should remember that these sayings are true, and also that these records are true. And behold, also the plates of Nephi, which contain the records and the sayings of our fathers from the time they left Jerusalem until now, and they are true. . . . Now, my sons, I would that ye should remember to search them diligently, that ye may profit thereby; and I would that ye should keep the commandments of God, that ye may prosper in the land according to the promises which the Lord made unto our fathers (Mosiah 1:6-7).

Clearly the memory that is expected of the people of God in both the Bible and Book of Mormon is not mere curiosity; neither is it a matter of being able simply to recall. Rather, the key is righteous deeds.

The covenant that God made with Lehi was renewed from time to time through rituals involving the entire community. Those rituals taught and in fact constituted “ways of remembrance,” as they did with ancient Israel. Remembering the terms of the covenant made with God included the constant stressing of the blessings and cursings that flow from keeping or not keeping the commandments, from the broken hearted and contrite offering of sacrifices as memorials (or fruits) of repentance.

The history found in the Book of Mormon of God's continuously saving or delivering the people is given to enlarge the memory (see Alma 37:8) of the covenant people. It shows a passion for preserving the crucial story of the divine dealings with humans and our halting responses. The heart of that story is the conflict between obedience and rebellion, liberty and bondage, prosperity and suffering. Remembrance thus teaches and warns Israel, although it does not inflate reputations or pride. The people of God need to know how they came to be that; they also need to know how they have strayed, both as a people and as individuals, from the correct path, and how they might once again regain favor in God's eyes by turning away from sin and showing repentance.

We are to remember, as the Nephites of old remembered. We are to remember the curses brought upon the Nephites, which they inflicted upon themselves by forgetting the terms of the covenant. We must understand that to the extent that we fail to remember and keep our covenants we are or will be cut off from God's presence. At that point we are carnal, sensual, and devilish, chained in bondage and captivity.

The sacred records translated as the Book of Mormon provide us with direction from prophets who warn us to preserve and enlarge our own memory of God's mighty deeds and with the terms of the covenant that make us the people of God. These records teach us that we must neither forget what God has done nor what we have covenanted to do. The result of forgetting is to begin following some unholy tradition into darkness and sin. Instead, we must "always remember him, and keep his commandments" (Moroni 4:3) and be willing to take upon us the name of Jesus Christ, for to forget the sacrifice offered by our Lord for our sins by not keeping the commandments is to offend God.