

# "At the Judgment-Seat of Christ" - Larger Perspectives

Though Mark Twain defined a classic as “a book which people praise and don’t read,”<sup>1</sup> the Book of Mormon more properly fits another definition of a classic: “A book that wears you out before you wear it out.”<sup>2</sup> On each rereading, the book becomes more significant, deep, and powerful—and its overall patterns and purposes become more apparent. It is especially instructive to read the beginning from the end. That is, Moroni’s parting words are helpful in orienting the reader to the meanings and purposes of the Book of Mormon on the largest scale. In part, Moroni is responding to his father’s perspective—one of both looking backward at the histories of the Nephites and Jaredites and looking down through time “until the end shall come, when all the saints shall dwell with God,” when Mormon and Moroni can “rest [their] souls in the kingdom of God” and have confirmed the hope of Christ’s “glory and of eternal life” (Moroni 8:26; 9:6, 25). In a similar manner, Moroni in his closing exhortation wants his readers to consider the Lord’s mercies “from the creation of Adam even down unto the time that ye shall receive these things” (Moroni 10:3). Affirming that God is “the same yesterday, today, and forever,” Moroni speaks “unto all the ends of the earth” in declaring that the time comes speedily when they shall see him, Moroni, “at the bar of God” and hear again his testimony (Moroni 10:19, 24, 27).

In the title page—the preface to the book—Moroni hopes his latter-day audience will accept the things of God so as to “be found spotless at the judgment-seat of Christ.” He closes his record with similar words: he promises to meet us “before the pleasing bar of the great Jehovah, the Eternal Judge of both quick and dead” (Moroni 10:34). In presenting the Book of Mormon in such a framework, Moroni establishes the largest possible context for the book. It deals with time and eternity, earth and heaven. It looks at such questions as what is God’s way and how does it differ from the way of the “natural man” (Mosiah 3:19) and what is necessary to inherit eternal life. This earthly life, as Moroni understood and as Alma taught, is “a probationary state; a time to prepare to meet God; a time to prepare for that endless state which has been spoken of by us, which is after the resurrection of the dead” (Alma 12:24). Thus, judgment day is the meeting point between time and eternity. It is when we will be “raised from this mortality to a state of immortality” and “brought before the bar of God, to be judged according to our works” (Alma 12:12). It is when the righteous will “see as they are seen, and know as they are known” (D&C 76:94; see 1 Corinthians 13:12). It is when faith and obedience are rewarded and when the unfaithful find it is everlastingly too late for them.

The testimonies or teachings of Nephi, Jacob, King Benjamin, Alma the Younger, Nephi the son of Helaman, Jesus, Mormon, and Moroni all culminate in reference to the last judgment.<sup>3</sup> For example, in his parting words, Nephi confirms the truthfulness of his writings by saying, “Christ will show unto you, with power and great glory, that [my writings] are [Christ’s] words, at the last day; and you and I shall stand face to face before his bar” (2 Nephi 33:11). By directing our thoughts to the last judgment, these prophets give the Book of Mormon the largest possible sweep of concern pertaining to both time and timelessness, mortality and immortality. That concern is set forth in several overall artistic structures. Examining those structures helps us understand better how the book truly is designed for our day in testifying to a disbelieving world that miracles are real—that earth can and does meet heaven.

## Heaven Meets Earth: Thresholds in the Book of Mormon

Many of the characteristics of God’s ways pertain to thresholds—or, to use a word derived from *limen*, the Latin word for *threshold*, they are *liminal*. The judgment day itself could be called *liminal*, being on the edge, or threshold, between different places and conditions.

A perfect artistic rendition of liminality is Michelangelo's painting in the Sistine Chapel of the creation of Adam. The recumbent Adam is partially lying on earth at a slightly lower level than God, who is in a cloud of heaven. The Father is reaching out toward Adam, His forefinger almost touching Adam's. Though this creation, or birth, of man is liminal in itself, the slight space between the finger of God and the finger of Adam is electrically charged as a threshold between the powers of heaven and the potentials of earth.

In a similar way, the Book of Mormon portrays the connections between heaven and earth. The book begins with Nephi, on earth, recounting his father's being carried away in a vision in which he sees Christ descend "out of the midst of heaven" and with twelve others going "forth upon the face of the earth" (1 Nephi 1:9, 11). At the end of the book, Moroni on earth is soon to go to rest in paradise "until my spirit and body shall again reunite, and I am brought forth triumphant through the air" (Moroni 10:34). The Book of Mormon's story of the fall and return of man portrays limitations, such as materialism and pride, of earth-bound people and, on the other hand, aspirations toward heaven. Awe-inspiring experiences show heaven coming down to earth in the form of the angels that minister to the repentant Lamanites who had imprisoned the brothers Nephi and Lehi (Helaman 5) or in the descent of the resurrected Jesus Christ himself (3 Nephi 11).

The term *liminal* was introduced by Arnold van Gennep in *The Rites of Passage*. There he applies it to people who undergo a "rite of transition," literally or figuratively going through such "neutral zones" as deserts or forests.<sup>4</sup> Liminal persons, according to anthropologist Victor Turner, are "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial."<sup>5</sup> Liminal actions or events are transitions into or across boundaries. "To cross the threshold," van Gennep says, "is to unite oneself with a new world." In the case of entering a temple, it is to move "between the profane and sacred worlds."<sup>6</sup> Purifications, such as Christian baptism, "constitute rites of separation from previous surroundings; there follow rites of incorporation [such as] . . . a shared meal" or naming.<sup>7</sup>

In the Book of Mormon, these liminal actions include going across water (the Lehighes and the Jaredites); going into or out of prison (Alma and Amulek, the brothers Nephi and Lehi); falling into and coming out of trances (Alma, Lamoni, Ammon); escapes (Lehi's family, the people of Limhi); conversion from a world of wickedness to one of righteousness (Alma); initiations (covenant making by King Benjamin's people); and transformations (Zeezrom's change from cunning lawyer to humble missionary).

In the Book of Mormon, liminal persons are those without class or status or those who minimize their status. Although it seems paradoxical, even kings can be liminal. As a good example of this, King Benjamin minimizes his status, reminding the people he has labored with his own hands for his support and identifying himself as a beggar before God. Although holding titles and authority, such kings as Nephi and Mosiah and such high priests as Jacob and Alma the Elder are meek and unpretentious. Mosiah exemplifies humility and warns his people not to let "pride nor haughtiness disturb their peace," but rather, "every man should esteem his neighbor as himself" (Mosiah 27:4). For his part, Alma the Younger readily gives up his status as a judge to preach as a missionary. Captain Moroni and those who rally behind him are liminal persons in desiring freedom and equality.

Liminal persons are also in transition. For them, this world is not their final home. Jacob, for instance, laments that "our lives passed away like as it were unto us a dream, we being a lonesome and a solemn people, wanderers, cast out from Jerusalem, born in tribulation, in a wilderness, and hated of our brethren" (Jacob 7:26). Mormon's son Moroni is a totally isolated wanderer who remains "alone to write the sad tale of the destruction of [his] people" (Mormon 8:3).

A group of liminal persons, according to Victor Turner, form a community marked by spontaneity, freedom, and equality.<sup>8</sup> Turner uses the term *communitas* to define this group who bond together in an unstructured or only rudimentarily structured community. In the Book of Mormon, an ideal *communitas* is found in the disciples of Jesus who have “all things common among them, every man dealing justly, one with another” (3 Nephi 26:19). Likewise, when the Nephites and Lamanites following Christ’s visit are converted,

there were no contentions and disputations among them, and every man did deal justly one with another. And they had all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they were all made free, and partakers of the heavenly gift. . . . There were no robbers, nor murderers, neither were there Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites; but they were in one, the children of Christ, and heirs to the kingdom of God. (4 Nephi 1:2–3, 17)

Conversely, nonliminal persons and places assert structure and classes. In the Book of Mormon, the “natural man,” who is an enemy to God (Mosiah 3:19), inevitably wants to establish classes, whereas the Saint, who is meek and humble, is without status, like a child. King Noah is a perfect example of a nonliminal person. Taxing his people heavily, he builds a large palace and equips it with a throne that is “of fine wood and . . . ornamented with gold and silver and with precious things.” For his high priests, he provides seats “above all the other seats” and which “he did ornament with pure gold.” His tower is built high so he can proudly “look over all the land round about” (Mosiah 11:9, 11, 12).

Those who occupy the great and spacious building in Lehi’s dream are nonliminal. The building itself is defined as the “vain imaginations and the pride of the children of men” (1 Nephi 12:18). The people in it wear “exceedingly fine” clothes denoting their status, and they mock those who partake of the fruit of the tree of life (1 Nephi 8:27). Subsequently, severe structuring of society, with its accompanying abuse of the poor and humble, is evidenced by the wearing of “fine-twined linens” and the like (Alma 4:6). The Zoramites exemplify a classed society: they cast out their poor as pariahs, a group to whom Alma is able to preach successfully his message of faith and love. Other structured persons distinguish themselves “by ranks, according to their riches and their chances for learning” (3 Nephi 6:12). Two centuries after the coming of Christ, the breakdown of Nephite society begins with some prosperous people being

lifted up in pride, such as the wearing of costly apparel, and all manner of fine pearls, and of the fine things of the world. And from that time forth they did have their goods and their substance no more common among them. And they began to be divided into classes; and they began to build up churches unto themselves to get gain, and began to deny the true church of Christ. (4 Nephi 1:24–26)

On the other hand, the great covenant making that King Benjamin sets up for his assembled people is a thoroughly liminal experience. The people stay in tents, linking up with their ancestors in observing what John Tvedtnes has described as a Nephite Feast of Tabernacles.<sup>9</sup> They have come to a liminal place—the temple—and there they undergo a transformation. They humble themselves and “become as little children” (Mosiah 3:18), without class or status. When the people awaken to a sense of their nothingness and their worthless and fallen state, they understand the atonement of Christ, enter into a covenant with God to do his will and keep his commandments, and receive a rebirth and a new name—“the children of Christ” (Mosiah 5:7).

We can understand better the nature and significance of liminality in this experience by considering it as a great Year Rite. Hugh Nibley says that in the ancient East,

all things center in a single supreme rite, performed in its completeness only at a particular place, the shrine that stands at the center of the earth, and a particular time, the New Year's day, when all things are born and the earth is created anew. Since everyone was required by law to be present at this great event, to do homage to the king and receive his blessing for the new age, the result was a tremendous assembly. . . . "The New Year was the birthday of the human race and its rites dramatized the creation of the world; all who would be found in 'the Book of Life opened at the creation of the World' must necessarily attend."<sup>10</sup>

Nibley finds thirty-six ways in which King Benjamin's gathering is a Year Rite. Besides the time (New Year) and place (the temple), these include such liminal elements as giving the people a name, providing a vivid form of instruction unfolding to view the mysteries of God, and renunciation—even reversal—of the conventional claims of kingship.<sup>11</sup>

To be on the threshold or to cross boundaries is not necessarily a positive experience. Liminality—"that which is neither this nor that and yet is both"<sup>12</sup>—is by its nature ambiguous. Fire, a liminal element, can purify or destroy; a visitation by heavenly powers can terrify rather than bless. That duality is especially true with respect to the cataclysmic events that occur at the time of the crucifixion.

The events in Third Nephi are the culmination of liminal imagery and events. The very structures of the earth are shaken and changed as violent earthquakes and accompanying fires and whirlwinds create destruction. After hearing a voice from heaven, the multitude gathered at the temple see "a Man descending out of heaven" who declares himself to be Jesus Christ, "the light and the life of the world" (3 Nephi 11:8, 11). This mediator between heaven and earth parts the veil and allows the people to touch him and hear him. He calls on the people to undergo a transformational process: "Ye must repent, and become as a little child, and be baptized in my name" (3 Nephi 11:37), he says; he teaches them to be one, a *communitas*; then he administers the sacrament to them—a sacred shared meal that van Gennep would call a rite of incorporation.

Earlier, the voice of Jesus was heard telling about the deaths of the unrighteous; later, Jesus in person stands before the people as an affirmation of the resurrection—which is the great transition from death to eternal life. The Holy One of Israel, whose coming the prophets had foretold, now personally covenants with his people. He affirms his power to effect transitions by healing all their sick, opening the eyes of their blind, unstopping the ears of the deaf, and raising a man from the dead. His parting words include an admonition to "repent, all ye ends of the earth, and come unto me and be baptized in my name, that ye may be sanctified by the reception of the Holy Ghost, that ye may stand spotless before me at the last day" (3 Nephi 27:20).

In the book of Ether, which follows soon after Third Nephi and which serves as a microcosm of the whole Book of Mormon, the threshold between heaven and earth is again made transparent. Here Moroni speaks of those like the brother of Jared "whose faith was so exceedingly strong, even before Christ came, who could not be kept from within the veil, but truly saw with their eyes the things which they had beheld with an eye of faith, and they were glad" (Ether 12:19).

While the book of Ether contains an account of an ancient people, it speaks to a future one in richly liminal language. "Come unto me, O ye Gentiles," Moroni quotes Jesus as saying,

and I will show unto you the greater things, the knowledge which is *hid* up because of unbelief. . . . Behold, when ye shall rend that *veil* of unbelief which doth cause you to remain in your awful state of wickedness, and hardness of heart, and *blindness* of mind, then shall the great and marvelous things which have been

*hid* up from the foundation of the world from you— . . . then shall my revelations which I have caused to be written by my servant John be *unfolded* in the eyes of all the people. (Ether 4:13, 15–16)

One of the chief “marvelous things,” Moroni is told, is the record Moroni is involved in writing. It shall come forth “out of the earth,” Moroni says, “in a day when it shall be said that miracles are done away; and it shall come even as if one should speak from the dead” (Mormon 8:26). The book thus is “betwixt” and between the dead and the living (Alma 40:6); of earthly origins, it asserts that it contains the revelations of God; a liminal “voice . . . from the dust” (2 Nephi 33:13), it speaks today with power and beauty.

In Moroni’s title page the Book of Mormon shows God’s dealings with the fathers (heaven contacting earth), presents transformational covenants (such as baptism), and convinces that Jesus Christ is the Son of God—the mediator between heaven and earth. The last assertion of the book resolves liminal tensions: the earthly person can be made heavenly through being “sanctified in Christ by the grace of God”; in the resurrection, Jehovah is “the Eternal Judge of both quick and dead” (Moroni 10:33–34).

In Michelangelo’s painting of the creation of Adam, birth comes from God’s reaching to man. Rebirth, as the Book of Mormon develops it, is initiated by a person’s reaching to God and is answered by an outstretched arm of mercy. It completes and perfects the meeting at the threshold between heaven and earth. This process is described by the voice of the Lord to the Nephite people who are spared the destruction of their cities: “If ye will come unto me ye shall have eternal life,” he says, regarding their obligation. For his part, he says, “Behold, mine arm of mercy is extended towards you, and whosoever will come, him will I receive; and blessed are those who come unto me” (3 Nephi 9:14). Thus, the most liminal person of all is Jesus Christ. He is “the keeper of the gate” (2 Nephi 9:41), “the way” (John 14:6), the divine mediator “standing betwixt [the children of men] and justice” (Mosiah 15:9), the One who descended below all things and whose mercy can satisfy justice and thus allow fallen humankind to be redeemed. The saving power defined in the Book of Mormon hinges on Jesus Christ. “Come unto me,” he says, and be “even as I am”; the true disciple “putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord” (3 Nephi 12:20; 27:27; Mosiah 3:19). This, ultimately, is the sacred liminal connection and transformation.

### **Being Centered in Christ and Lifted up by Him**

**The experience of coming to Christ is the emotional and spiritual focal point of the Book of Mormon. The visit of the resurrected Jesus Christ to the surviving descendants of Lehi is the main event all the prophets anticipate or look back upon. This event brings all else in the book to surround it.<sup>13</sup> Christ the temple (John 2:19) comes to the Nephite temple where the people are gathered “round about the temple” (3 Nephi 11:1). In effect, they surround the temple as a center and then Christ appears “in the midst of them” (3 Nephi 11:8).**

Every temple, Mircea Eliade argues, is a “Sacred Mountain—where heaven and earth meet—[and] is situated at the center of the world. . . . Being an *axis mundi*, the sacred city or temple is regarded as the meeting point of heaven, earth, and hell.”<sup>14</sup> Thus it is appropriate that the temple to be the site where Christ teaches the people and establishes ordinances related to that meeting point.<sup>15</sup> The resurrected Christ, himself the center, provides a memorable scene in which heaven touches earth and others become centers as well. The people see “angels descending out of heaven as it were in the midst of fire.” It is reported that the angels “came down and encircled [the] little ones about, and they were encircled about with fire; and the angels did minister unto them” (3 Nephi 17:24).

Heaven and hell both encircle. Lehi declares to his family, “I am encircled about eternally in the arms of [the Lord’s] love” (2 Nephi 1:15); Nephi pleads for the Lord to “encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness” (2 Nephi

4:33); and Amulek teaches that mercy “encircles [the penitent] in the arms of safety” (Alma 34:16). Conversely, before being spiritually delivered, the fathers “were encircled about by the bands of death, and the chains of hell” (Alma 5:7); Zeezrom is “encircled about by the pains of hell” (Alma 14:6); and Ammon testifies that his Lamanite brethren were formerly “encircled about with everlasting darkness and destruction” (Alma 26:15). These are part of the larger Book of Mormon circles that either save or damn.

Put another way, humanity, the Book of Mormon says, is either encircled and lifted up through mercy or encircled by chains and brought down to hell. This movement, rising and falling, or ascent and descent, develops a way to see the book as a whole as the story of mankind’s journey through life, fall, and redemption. Catherine Thomas made this point in her presentation at the 1991 Sidney B. Sperry Symposium on “Types and Shadows of Deliverance in the Book of Mormon.” She notes,

All major journeys in the Book of Mormon are allegorical as well as actual and reflect not only the different kinds of the Lord’s deliverances but also the principles on which the deliverances depend. All these journeys typify every person’s sojourn on earth and the tasks that each is given to accomplish. . . . The destination of each divinely guided journey is a promised land where spiritual enlargement will be possible.<sup>16</sup>

The book begins with Lehi’s vision of the descent of Christ and others in white clothing and ends with Moroni’s anticipation of being lifted up and “brought forth triumphant through the air” at the last judgment (1 Nephi 1:9–10; Moroni 10:34). In this account of many journeys (which can be seen as figures of the journey of life), materialistic and proud earthbound people move downward to destruction; by heeding angels and other messengers of God, other people, through the grace of Christ, are lifted up. At the end of the book, Moroni and his father are witnesses of the fall of the Nephite people. In his great cry of the heart, Mormon laments: “O ye fair ones, how could ye have rejected that Jesus . . . ! Behold, if ye had not done this, ye would not have fallen. But behold, ye are fallen, and I mourn your loss” (Mormon 6:17–18). Countering that downward movement of the Nephites generally is Mormon’s hope for his son Moroni. “Be faithful in Christ,” Mormon says to him, “and may not the things which I have written grieve thee, to *weigh thee down* unto death; but may Christ *lift thee up*” (Moroni 9:25).

The Savior defines to his disciples how he lifts up others. It necessitates that he first had to be forcibly lifted up and put to death:

And my Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross; and after that I had been lifted up upon the cross, that I might draw all men unto me, 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—And for this cause have I been lifted up; therefore, according to the power of the Father I will draw all men unto me, that they may be judged according to their works. (3 Nephi 27:14–15)

In other words, Christ came down to earth and suffered pain and death that he might lift up others. It was he “that ascended up on high, as also he descended below all things” (D&C 88:6; see also Psalm 68:18; Ephesians 4:8–10). The fallen Adam is allowed to stand again through the resurrection of the Second Adam.

### **“Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End”**

Christ is both the center and the circumference of the Book of Mormon. “I am Alpha and Omega,” he tells the righteous people spared destruction, “the beginning and the end” (3 Nephi 9:18). The destruction and

redemption associated with his coming to the Nephites make this a time of judgment—and connect it with the last judgment: Christ will yet be “the Eternal Judge of both quick and dead” (Moroni 10:34). His chosen servants also have a perspective of the beginning and the end. Such prophets as Lehi, Nephi, Alma, Ether, the brother of Jared, Mormon, and Moroni have visions of God’s dealings with man from the beginning until the last judgment and see how events in their own time will be repeated in the future. As a prominent example, remembering his father’s view that secret combinations were the cause of Nephite destruction, Moroni looks down through time to when the record he hides will be brought forth, and says to the people of that time:

Whatsoever nation shall uphold such secret combinations, to get power and gain, until they shall spread over the nation, behold, they shall be destroyed. . . . Wherefore, O ye Gentiles, it is wisdom in God that these things should be shown unto you, that thereby ye may repent of your sins, and suffer not that these murderous combinations shall get above you. (Ether 8:22–23)

The historical perspective of Book of Mormon prophets is sweeping. The brother of Jared is shown “all the inhabitants of the earth which had been, and also all that would be; and [the Lord] withheld them not from his sight, even unto the ends of the earth” (Ether 3:25). “The Lord knoweth all things from the beginning,” Nephi says, and then he is shown things reserved to be written by John the Revelator (1 Nephi 9:6; 14:24–26). He foretells a sealed book containing a revelation of “all things from the foundation of the world unto the end thereof,” and prophesies that eventually the words which were sealed “shall be read upon the house tops” (2 Nephi 27:10–11).<sup>17</sup> After King Benjamin’s speech, his people declare that through the manifestations of God’s Spirit they “have great views of that which is to come; and were it expedient, we could prophesy of all things” (Mosiah 5:3). In a culminating revelation, the resurrected Christ expounds “all things, even from the beginning until the time that he should come in his glory—yea, even all things which should come upon the face of the earth, even until the elements should melt with fervent heat, and the earth should be wrapt together as a scroll, and the heavens and the earth should pass away” (3 Nephi 26:3).

Because Christ is both the beginning and the end, his course, Nephi says, “is one eternal round” (1 Nephi 10:19). In a divine perspective, the passing away of one condition can usher in the beginning of another—as happens in the New World after the Crucifixion. There is physical and spiritual chaos (for example, rocks are broken up, and people are left desolate); yet out of this destruction comes renewal and hope. The intent of these “signs and these wonders,” Samuel prophesies, is that “whosoever will believe might be saved, and that whosoever will not believe, a righteous judgment might come upon them” (Helaman 14:28–29).

One way to look at “the course of the Lord” (1 Nephi 10:19) through time is to apply some of Northrop Frye’s ideas about phases in the Bible to the Book of Mormon. Frye argues that the Bible progresses through seven phases: creation, revolution or exodus, law, wisdom, prophecy, gospel, and apocalypse.<sup>18</sup> It could be argued that the Book of Mormon also roughly follows this pattern, but Frye’s ideas about creation and apocalypse are especially helpful in seeing how the Book of Mormon treats beginnings and endings of life or civilization. The “beginning,” Frye says, is “the moment of waking from sleep, when one world disappears and another comes into being.”<sup>19</sup> The Book of Mormon begins with this transition from one world to another: Anticipating the imminent destruction of Jerusalem, it gives us Lehi as an Adam starting a new life in the promised land. Lehi is also like Noah in taking seeds of every kind with him. In the new world, creation is reenacted by the actions of Lehi and his family in cultivating the land and taking possession of it. As Mircea Eliade notes, when “possession is taken of a territory . . . rites are performed that symbolically repeat the act of Creation.”<sup>20</sup>

Frye defines *apocalypse*, the Greek word for *revelation*, as “the vision of staggering marvels placed in a near future and just before the end of time.” It “ends with the restoration of the tree and water of life.”<sup>21</sup> The last three books

of the Book of Mormon—those of Mormon, Ether, and Moroni—contain both of these aspects of the apocalyptic vision. The marvels are the destructions of two great civilizations presented first by Mormon and ended by his son. These destructions are types of the end-time “wars, rumors of wars, and earthquakes in divers places” before “that great day when the earth shall be rolled together as a scroll, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat” (Mormon 8:30; 9:2). Current readers are actively brought into the picture by Moroni, who looks centuries into the future and speaks to them “as if ye were present” (Mormon 8:35). Readers are challenged to contemplate the apocalyptic vision Moroni presents in the context of imagining themselves “in that great day when [they] shall be brought to stand before the Lamb of God” (Mormon 9:2). Moroni ends with a powerful future-time joining of writer and reader by testifying that as a resurrected person he would “meet you” before the bar of Jehovah (Moroni 10:34).

With God all things are an eternal round: There is an implied creation at the end of the book as the dust of death gives way to Moroni’s call for Israel to “arise from the dust” (Moroni 10:31). Moroni’s voice is not stilled when he writes his last words on the plates of Nephi. Rather, it comes to life again in the translated record we read.

### **To Moroni’s “Brethren, the Lamanites”**

**To the Gentiles who would profess a belief in Christ but deny miracles, the Book of Mormon affirms the continuing power of God (Mormon 8; Ether 4; Moroni 7). To the Jews who have not yet recognized Jesus Christ as the Messiah, the Book of Mormon affirms that “Jesus is the very Christ” (2 Nephi 26:12). To the Lamanites, the primary audience, the Book of Mormon shows them who they really are and points the way to their redemption.<sup>22</sup>**

With respect to modern-day Lamanites, the overall structure of the Book of Mormon is like a triangle. The book begins and ends with concern for the Lamanites’ receiving the gospel. The title page is balanced with Moroni’s final exhortation to his “brethren, the Lamanites” (Moroni 10:1). Nephi’s account reiterates the main points of the title page in emphasizing that through the Book of Mormon the Lamanites shall know they are of Israel and through it “they shall be restored unto the knowledge of their fathers, and also to the knowledge of Jesus Christ” (2 Nephi 30:1–5). Toward the end of the record, Mormon says much the same thing: “Know ye that ye are of the house of Israel. . . . Know ye that ye must come to the knowledge of your fathers, and repent of all your sins and iniquities, and believe in Jesus Christ” (Mormon 7:2, 5). At the apex of the triangle is an account of a great spiritual change among the Lamanites. That is the turning point because it is the climax of centuries of efforts to bring the gospel to the Lamanites and because of the opposing forces it brings on.

This apex occurs in the physical center of the Book of Mormon. The section of Alma that includes chapters 23 through 26 (which is just one chapter, Alma 14, in the first edition) treats a wholesale conversion of the Lamanites. This central part begins with the decree of the king of the Lamanites that Ammon and his brethren should be free to preach the word of God throughout all the land and ends with gratitude expressed by these great missionaries for the thousands of Lamanite souls “brought to behold the marvelous light of God” (Alma 26:3). The earlier warlike and reprobate nature of the Lamanites has given way to their wholehearted acceptance of the gospel once converted. In their larger context, these chapters provide uplifting lessons of faith and redemption for latter-day Lamanites—which is the persistent prayer of the book’s authors, the main purpose of the Book of Mormon as stated on the title page, and the anticipation of Mormon and Moroni at the end of the book. Then memorably repeated at emotionally charged places are definitions of the gospel, prophetic forewarnings, and examples of a righteous people. Thus this missionary book *about* the conversion of the Lamanites is primarily *for* the conversion of the Lamanites, coming forth as a voice “out of the dust” (2 Nephi 26:16) expressly for that purpose.

As pertaining to the Lamanites, but also to the Jews and Gentiles, the sections of the Book of Mormon progress in this manner: The title page says the abridgment of the record of the people of Nephi was “hid up unto the Lord, that they might not be destroyed”—with the plural *they* referring most appropriately back to the Lamanites. If so, the destruction prevented here would surely be a spiritual destruction, the loss forever of the gospel in their lives. Lehi has the same concern, fearing that his oldest sons and their families will be “cut off and destroyed forever” (2 Nephi 1:17). He calls on them to follow Nephi’s leadership and obey God’s commandments.

The First Book of Nephi defines what it means to keep the commandments. Further, it presents the story of God’s dealings with the “fathers” and tells “the marvelous works which were wrought by the power of God among them” so that latter-day Lamanites will know they are a “remnant of the seed of Jacob” and are “numbered among the people of the first covenant” (Mormon 7:9–10). One part of the message of 1 Nephi is that “the tender mercies of the Lord are over all those whom he hath chosen, because of their faith, to make them mighty even unto the power of deliverance”; the other part, with which Nephi ends 1 Nephi, is that “if ye shall be obedient to the commandments, and endure to the end, ye shall be saved at the last day” (1 Nephi 1:20; 22:31). To both of these truths, Nephi says, “I and my father . . . have testified” (1 Nephi 22:31). The latter-day Lamanites need to know not only of their fathers’ deliverance but also of their fathers’ disobedience, and they need to desire to turn away from the sins of the fathers.

If the main purpose of 1 Nephi is to affirm a testimony of Christ and to assure the Lamanites they are a covenant people with the promises and responsibilities of the same, the main purpose of 2 Nephi is to convince primarily the Jew and also the Gentile that Jesus is the Christ and that he will fulfill his covenants with Israel. A key to the method in 2 Nephi is suggested by 1 Nephi 15:17–20, in which Nephi’s prophecies concerning the “covenant which should be fulfilled in the latter days” are supported and fleshed out by Lehi’s and Isaiah’s prophecies concerning the same matter. In like manner, in 2 Nephi the testimonies of Lehi, Nephi, Jacob, Joseph, and Isaiah are brought together to testify that Jesus Christ is the promised Messiah, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In this respect, Nephi both clarifies and is a second witness of the truth of Isaiah, whereas Isaiah is a second witness of the truth of Nephi’s prophecies.

The selections from Isaiah also have direct relevance for our time. They are verified by Christ and provide an independent witness that the Savior is the promised Messiah. Further, the chosen passages from Isaiah deal with the primary motifs of the Book of Mormon: the truth of the first coming of Christ and the basic prophecies connected with the Restoration and the gathering of Israel in the last days, culminating in the second coming of Christ and followed by the Millennium. A voice out of Israel’s past, Isaiah establishes the grand connection with the house of Israel in the Old World (particularly the Jews), the remnant of Israel in the New World (the Lamanites), and modern-day Israel (especially the blood of Israel intermixed with the Gentiles).

In the accounts of the people of King Benjamin and of Alma we have examples of those who keep the commandments and become the kind of pure and holy people God desires. Set against them are examples of those who, like King Noah, are headed for destruction. Abinadi is an important prophet-messenger who teaches about Christ and declares the possibilities of faith and repentance or destruction. Abinadi’s teachings and testimony set in motion the subsequent events of the books of Mosiah and Alma—leading up to the central conversion of the Lamanites.

The war chapters in the book of Alma show the incursions of apostate-led Lamanites as a consequence of the conversion of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies. These chapters give selective accounts of the inspired activities of the threatened Nephites. At stake is the lust for power over man, best exemplified by Zerahemnah, Amalickiah, and

Ammaron, in opposition to reliance on God's power, demonstrated by Moroni and Helaman. Moroni's courageous assertion, "Ye cannot destroy this our faith" (Alma 44:3), shows his confidence in the Book of Mormon promise regarding the rewards of keeping God's commandments.

The kind of wickedness found in King Noah and his court is intensified in the account of the beginnings of Gadianonism. Remembering that the promise of blessings for the obedient is balanced by the curse of destruction, we can well see the nature of the secret combinations that destroyed both the Nephites and the Jaredites and that will be the chief threat to Gentiles in the last days (Ether 8:20–25).

A prophetic spokesman like Abinadi, Samuel the Lamanite has a similar message about blessings through Christ and his atonement and about calamities to the unrepentant. He, too, prepares the way for the kind of pure and holy people God desires. In this case, they are those converted by Christ's coming.

Most of 3 Nephi then describes the teachings and covenants adhered to by the elect. It describes them in clear and simple language, with the emphasis being on baptism—as it was in the account of Alma's righteous people who joined him at the waters of Mormon (Mosiah 18). Indeed, after the Savior has the multitude come forth to recognize him as the God of Israel, the very first instruction he gives pertains to baptism. Likewise, baptism is at the core of Nephi's counsel at the end of his prophesying unto his "beloved brethren" (2 Nephi 31), as it is in Mormon's parting challenge to the Gentiles (3 Nephi 30) and in his last words to the Lamanites (Mormon 7:10). Baptism is the individual covenant; the group covenant is to receive the Book of Mormon, leading to acceptance of the Savior and baptism.

The gospel message to all three audiences is given prominence in the Book of Mormon. After his teachings about baptism and the Holy Ghost, Nephi declares in his parting testimony: "I have charity for my people. . . . I have charity for the Jew. . . . I also have charity for the Gentiles. But behold, for none of these can I hope except they shall be reconciled unto Christ, and enter into the narrow gate, and walk in the straight path which leads to life, and continue in the path until the end of the day of probation" (2 Nephi 33:7–9). This testimony is echoed again by King Benjamin, by the Savior, and finally by Mormon in his great sermon on faith, hope, and charity (Moroni 7). The essential message, then, is to have faith, repent, be baptized, receive the Holy Ghost, and endure to the end, having faith, hope, and charity.

### **The Book of Ether as a Parable for Our Time**

**In its testimony to its three-part audience, the Book of Mormon has many warnings directed to the Gentiles. These are specified particularly in Mormon 8 and 9 and in the book of Ether. Indeed, by stepping back and looking at its structure, we can see how the book of Ether is a parable for our time. It is the presentation of key ideas with support by elements from a true story rather than a story interrupted by comments. It sets the conditions for prolonged physical and spiritual survival in America, and it warns against secret combinations and resulting destruction.**

We get closer to the essence of the book of Ether by looking at its structure in the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon. Originally it was made up of six chapters: 1 (chapters 1–4 in our current Book of Mormon), 2 (our chapter 5), 3 (chapters 6–8), 4 (chapters 9–11), 5 (chapter 12), and 6 (chapters 13–15). All but one of these chapters begin with "And now I, Moroni," and the fourth sentence of the remaining chapter (5) begins with "And now I, Moroni"—emphasizing the central position of Moroni in the presentation and structure of the book of Ether.

The preface of the book of Ether is the last chapter in the previous book, Mormon (chapter 4 in the 1830 edition; chapters 8 and 9 in the current one), from which we learn that Moroni is the sole survivor "to write the sad tale of the destruction of my people" (Mormon 8:3). He writes specifically for people whom he has seen living when the

Book of Mormon will come forth, cataloging their sins as similar to those that led to the capsizing of the Nephite civilization: pride, materialism, vanity, lack of charity, and sustaining of secret combinations. As does Mormon, Moroni frequently uses a phrase like “thus we see” to signal that he is speaking to his latter-day audience and drawing a moral especially for them.

Having detailed the destruction of the Nephite people, Moroni begins the book of Ether by saying it deals with “those ancient inhabitants who were destroyed by the hand of the Lord” (Ether 1:1). The first chapter (our chapters 1–4) implicitly compares the experience of the Jaredites with that of the Nephites, shows in the account of the brother of Jared the kind of faith that brings the Jaredites to the land of promise where its inhabitants are promised freedom if they “will but serve the God of the land, who is Jesus Christ,” and warns modern-day Gentiles to repent “that ye may not bring down the fulness of the wrath of God upon you as the inhabitants of the land have hitherto done” (Ether 2:12, 11).

The second chapter (our chapter 5), Moroni’s words to the future translator of the book, attests that the Book of Mormon will come forth and that Moroni has authority from God to bear the testimony he does.

The third chapter (6–8) shows patterns of righteousness and unrighteousness by the Jaredites in the promised land, with prophetic warnings that the people will be destroyed if they do not repent and with details of the introduction of a secret combination into the Jaredite society. The specific audience for which the book of Ether was intended, modern-day Gentiles, are warned that secret combinations have caused the destruction of the Jaredites and also of the Nephites—and that “whatsoever nation shall uphold such secret combinations . . . shall be destroyed.” On the other hand, Moroni pleads that his audience will “come unto the fountain of all righteousness and be saved” (Ether 8:21–22, 26).

The fourth chapter (9–11) shows the disastrous effect of secret combinations among the Jaredites, the rise and decline of generations of Jaredites who are warned to possess the land unto the Lord or be destroyed when ripened in iniquity, and Ether’s coming on the scene as the last of a series of prophets warning of utter destruction.

The fifth chapter (12) introduces Ether with his appeal for faith and then almost immediately presents Moroni’s teachings on faith, hope, and charity as the antidote his modern-day audience will need. Implicitly, Moroni identifies with Ether. Each is a prophet who hides to witness the end of his people and then testifies of it to future inhabitants of the land.

The final section (13–15) is Moroni’s completion of his record “concerning the destruction” (Ether 13:1) of the Jaredites. Rejecting the kind of faith and charity outlined in the previous chapter, the people are corrupted by secret combinations (Ether 13:18). Then we see in powerful detail the final destruction of the Jaredites.

Thus the essential elements of the book of Ether are instructions on faith, beautifully illustrated by the brother of Jared; details of the nature and danger of secret combinations; and an account of the destruction of a people who turned away from Jesus Christ, the God of the land. All of this is pointed at the Gentiles among whom the Book of Mormon would come: it is a pattern of what will happen if they do not repent, and it shows how those who heed can turn to the Savior—in whom all who believe on his name shall have “life, and that eternally” (Ether 3:14).

The simplest and most emphasized theme of the Book of Mormon, that of covenant making, is given special point in the book of Ether. “Have faith, repent, and be baptized” is the message each prophet puts in an emphatic place; it is the principal instruction of the resurrected Christ; and it is the culmination of the quoted directions of Jesus Christ to Moroni in the book of Ether. “Come unto me, O ye Gentiles, . . . Come unto me, O ye house of Israel,”

Moroni quotes Jesus as saying; “then shall ye know that the Father hath remembered the covenant which he made unto your fathers, O house of Israel. . . . Therefore, repent all ye ends of the earth, and come unto me, and believe in my gospel, and be baptized in my name” (Ether 4:13–15, 18). As is epitomized in these simple words, ultimately all of the Book of Mormon is centered in Jesus Christ and his gospel.

In the larger context, the book of Ether is a key to its latter-day audience on how to read the Book of Mormon. As with the book of Ether, the Book of Mormon is a highly selected work that is prophetically focused for our time. It has as its main injunction, “Inasmuch as ye shall keep [God’s] commandments ye shall prosper in the land; and inasmuch as ye will not keep [God’s] commandments ye shall be cut off from [his] presence” (2 Nephi 4:4; compare Ether 2:9). It illustrates the conditions of salvation as well as the conditions of physical and spiritual destruction, and it affirms throughout and at the very end the need for faith, hope, and charity. Truly, the Nephite record in the Book of Mormon—and the book of Ether, which is a second witness of it—is designed for our time.

### **The Book of Ether A Miniature of the Book of Mormon**

In the book of Ether we get answers to questions we have been led to anticipate throughout the Book of Mormon. In the title page we are informed that the book tells about the people of Jared dating back to the Tower of Babel. Our interest is piqued by the bits and pieces of the Jaredite story subsequently presented: A large stone found in the days of Mosiah gives an account of Coriantumr, whose “first parents came out from the tower” but whose people were destroyed “and their bones lay scattered in the land northward” (Omni 1:20, 22). The people of Limhi are fascinated with twenty-four engraved gold plates that they presume will tell them about the people who have been destroyed; consequently, they anticipate the translation of the records by Mosiah, a seer through whom shall “secret things be made manifest, and hidden things shall come to light” (Mosiah 8:17). After the people of Zeniff arrive in Zarahemla, King Mosiah translates the plates of gold because his people are “desirous beyond measure to know concerning those people who had been destroyed.” This account, we are told, “shall be written hereafter; for behold, it is expedient that all people should know the things which are written in this account” (Mosiah 28:12, 19). We are next tantalized with the twenty-four plates in Alma’s instructions to his son Helaman. The plates, he says, contain the Lord’s warning that if the people did not repent “they should be destroyed from off the face of the earth.” Through his servant Gazelem, the Lord says the secrets and abominations of the destroyed Jaredites will be brought to light “unto every nation that shall hereafter possess the land” (Alma 37:22, 25).

From the preface forward, then, our curiosity has been building about the Jaredites with one tantalizing piece of information after another. The key elements are these: a record is hidden up unto God, to come forth by the power of God; it will tell about a people who were destroyed; it will answer the question of who were the fathers; it will be translated by a seer; it contains both a warning (bringing sorrow) and knowledge (causing rejoicing).

In effect, the end of the Nephites is recounted just before the full story of the Jaredites is finally given us. In Mormon 8, Moroni is writing after the “great and tremendous battle at Cumorah” and tells us that “I even remain alone to write the sad tale of the destruction of my people” (Mormon 8:2–3). He will write and hide the records in the earth. “Behold,” he says, in a starkly simple statement that echoes the prophecies regarding the time of the Nephite demise, “four hundred years have passed away since the coming of our Lord and Savior” (Mormon 8:6). Moroni then turns from the past to the future: “And whoso receiveth this record . . . , were it possible, I would make all things known unto you. . . . And whoso shall bring [the record] to light, him will the Lord bless. . . . And it shall shine forth out of darkness, and come unto the knowledge of the people; and it shall be done by the power of God” (Mormon 8:12, 14, 16).

The same elements are here that were part of the Jaredite mystery: a hidden record to come forth by the power of God, to be translated by a seer and to tell about a people destroyed through secret combinations and through turning away from their covenants with the Lord. At this culminating juncture of the Nephite and Jaredite stories, we see nearly simultaneously the causes of the destruction of both civilizations and our questions are answered.

The questions set forth about the Jaredites are essentially the same ones implied about the Nephites and their record: Who were these people? Where did the Lamanites come from? What do we have in this strange book, a book written in “reformed Egyptian” (Mormon 9:32)? Where did it come from? What does it mean? What happened to the people it describes? In what ways—and why—were they preserved for a season, and why were they destroyed? This last question is the one with which Mormon mourns his fallen people: “O ye fair ones, how could ye have rejected that Jesus, who stood with open arms to receive you!” (Mormon 6:17).

A counterpart to Mosiah, Joseph Smith was Gazelem, who used interpreters to translate the hidden record.<sup>23</sup> The record he translated has a relationship to its audience today similar to the relationship the twenty-four gold plates had to the people of Limhi and others assembled before King Mosiah to hear his translation. The implied expected response is both sorrow and rejoicing. From a historical perspective, the book ends in the tragic annihilation of a civilization. From an eternal perspective, in God’s time, the book ends hopefully. Moroni expects the bar of God to be pleasing to him and to others who have accepted his parting challenge to “come unto Christ” (Moroni 10:32).

### **Feasting on the Word**

**A person is led to Christ, Nephi explains in figurative language, by feasting on the word:**

If ye shall follow the Son, with full purpose of heart, . . . then cometh the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost; and then can ye speak with the tongue of angels. . . .

Angels speak by the power of the Holy Ghost; wherefore, they speak the words of Christ. Wherefore, I said unto you, feast upon the words of Christ; for behold, the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do. (2 Nephi 31:13; 32:3)

The Book of Mormon is rich in its direct quotation of Christ—indeed, there are nearly 26,000 of the Lord’s words.<sup>24</sup> Feasting on them brings an identification with Christ, an ability through the power of the Holy Ghost to speak his words. It is also implicitly a sacramental experience, a feasting on the Word. “I am the bread of life,” Jesus said to his disciples in the Old World. “He that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst. . . . I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world” (John 6:35, 51).

Both Nephi and Christ poetically use metaphors to communicate most effectively.<sup>25</sup> Feasting has connotations of partaking of a rich and elaborate meal and also of being at a religious festival. “In ancient biblical times,” according to Alvin R. Dyer, “the ‘feast’ was a time of gathering, a time of harvest, a time of rejoicing, and what is more particularly significant, ‘the feast’ was designated by the Lord as a time of remembrance.”<sup>26</sup> Feasting on the sacramental bread is both communal sharing and individual covenant making. And as the most common and universal food, bread, together with water or wine, is life sustaining; the Word, or Bread of Life, brings everlasting life.

The Book of Mormon is itself the word of God, meant to be feasted on. Just as the Nephite disciples ate the bread Jesus broke and blesed and “were filled” (3 Nephi 18:4), so all who “hunger and thirst after righteousness” shall “be filled with the Holy Ghost” (3 Nephi 12:6). Through the Book of Mormon, including through its literary elements that engage the senses, Jesus bids his disciples to “come unto me, that ye might feel and see” (3 Nephi 18:25). The book that is a testament of him and by him calls to those who approach it, “Taste and feast.”

## A Witness and Testimony

From an eternal perspective, the Book of Mormon is designed by Jesus Christ for our day, just as he is responsible for continuing revelation. I believe that though individual authors wrote with distinctive styles and concerns, the final shape of the book is what God intended. Thus he foreknew and provided for Martin Harris's loss of the 116 pages of the Book of Mormon just as he foreknew Martin Harris would visit Charles Anthon (2 Nephi 27). And though Moroni several times thought his end was near, I believe he was allowed to continue writing so he could include the book of Ether where it is and give his latter-day audience all it was supposed to receive from him. Despite his and Mormon's efforts over years of time in "abridging" the Book of Mormon, he did not expect the book to be read until centuries in the future.

The intended audience, structure, and selected materials of the Book of Mormon, then, all prophetically emphasize the latter-day significance of the book. Just as the Savior gave scriptures to the assembled multitude because it was wisdom in the Father "that they should be given unto future generations," so the Book of Mormon as we have it was written "to the intent that they [a 'lesser part' of Christ's teachings and, by extension, all of Mormon's writings] may be brought again unto this people [the modern-day Lamanites], from the Gentiles, according to the words which Jesus hath spoken" (3 Nephi 26:2,8).

These writings in all their richness of style, complexity of poetry, vividness of imagery, and memorability of narrative, reach both the mind and the heart. The content of the Book of Mormon is inseparable from the way it is presented.<sup>27</sup> It is a literary testimony of Christ. Why literature? An answer is found in Nephi's purpose in appealing to the writings of Isaiah, considered some of the most beautiful literature of all time. This purpose applies in turn to the persuasive beauty of Nephi's own writings: "that I might more fully persuade them to believe in the Lord their Redeemer I did read unto them that which was written by the prophet Isaiah; for I did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning" (1 Nephi 19:23). Similarly, the literary character of the Book of Mormon helps "more fully persuade" (1 Nephi 19:23) us. Nephi follows this statement and prefaces his quotation of Isaiah with words that are reminiscent of Isaiah's poetry:

Hear ye the words of the prophet, ye who are a remnant of the house of Israel, a branch who have been broken off; hear ye the words of the prophet, which were written unto all the house of Israel, and liken them unto yourselves, that ye may have hope as well as your brethren from whom ye have been broken off. (1 Nephi 19:24)

These parallel ideas preface Nephi's quotation of Isaiah that continues Nephi's concern with "hearing":

Hearken and hear this, O house of Jacob, who are called by the name of Israel . . . (1 Nephi 20:1)

For those who will hearken to it, the book's message is clear: If the Gentiles in America keep the commandments, they shall prosper; if they do not, they shall be cut off from the Lord. To Lamanites long in a condition of spiritual captivity, the Book of Mormon provides deliverance through their coming to know the promises of the Lord in "the latter times" (Helaman 15:12–13). They are challenged to "arise from the dust," aided by the record that will cry unto them "out of the dust" (2 Nephi 1:14, Moroni 10:27). To the Jews, the Book of Mormon testifies that the Holy One of Israel, Jesus Christ, is the Messiah.

Once we have received the Book of Mormon, we are exhorted to ponder it in our hearts and to ask God, the Eternal Father, about it with a sincere heart and with real intent (Moroni 10:3–4). Further application of the various literary approaches introduced here can help in that pondering. There is much in the book that is plainly in view and yet still to be seen. Its words can and will be more meaningful as the Book of Mormon is studied with "heed and diligence," as Alma puts it; the book increasingly will disclose a greater "portion of his [God's] word"

(Alma 12:9). To the person who “will not harden his heart,” Alma says, “to him is given the greater portion of the word, until it is given unto him to know the mysteries of God until he know them in full” (Alma 12:10).

Considered from this perspective, the Book of Mormon is a Liahona. It provides heaven-sent direction “according to the faith and diligence and heed” given to it (1 Nephi 16:28). Apparently some in Lehi’s party accepted the ball too casually and overlooked it because of its simplicity. For the Liahona to work properly, Alma taught, it was necessary to take it seriously and diligently observe it with faith (Alma 37). So too with the Book of Mormon. And in its literary dimension as well, the Book of Mormon is like a Liahona. Alma uses the example of the Liahona to make concrete to his son Helaman the abstract experience of following Christ. He says,

For just as surely as this director did bring our fathers, by following its course, to the promised land, shall the words of Christ, if we follow their course, carry us beyond this vale of sorrow into a far better land of promise. (Alma 37:45)

The Book of Mormon, too, gains effectiveness and memorability by presenting doctrines and covenants through figurative language, narratives, typology, and the like.

To shift to another of Alma’s metaphors, the tree of life (Alma 32), it is not enough to read the Book of Mormon once and say, “I believe.” That would be like considering the first blossoming of a fruit tree to be the complete horticultural success. The tree needs to be fertilized, watered, pruned, and otherwise nourished until it reaches its full purpose in bearing fruit. Growth (and inspired learning) cannot come without help from God, but much effort is required on our part. As the apostle Paul put it, “I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase” (1 Corinthians 3:6). Or in Nephi’s words, “It is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23). We are like Oliver Cowdery: to read God’s word and translate it fully into our lives, we need to give it our best effort and God will then do his part (D&C 8, 9).

The words of the Book of Mormon weigh into God’s judgments. As Nephi says, “The nations who shall possess [the things he writes] shall be judged of them according to the words which are written” (2 Nephi 25:22). Our further searching of the Book of Mormon “by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118) prepares us to be favorably judged by its words. We will have to account to those inspired prophets who prepared the Book of Mormon for us—to Nephi, whose testimony sealed on earth “shall be brought against [us] at the judgment bar” (2 Nephi 33:15); to Jacob, who will meet his brethren “before the pleasing bar of God” (Jacob 6:13); to Mormon, who has promised that if we follow the example of our Savior, “it shall be well with [us] in the day of judgment” (Mormon 7:10); and to Moroni, who will bear his testimony again “at the judgment-seat of Christ” (title page).

## Notes

1. From *Following the Equator*, in *The Portable Mark Twain*, ed. Bernard DeVoto (New York: Viking Press, 1946), 564.
2. John W. Welch, “Study, Faith, and the Book of Mormon,” *BYU 1987–88 Devotional and Fireside Speeches* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1988), 148; see also Hugh Nibley, *The World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 153.
3. See 2 Nephi 9:22–46; 33:11–15; Jacob 6:9, 13; Mosiah 3:24; 16:10; Alma 5:22; 9:15; 11:44; 12:27; 33:22; Helaman 8:25; 3 Nephi 26:3–5; Mormon 7:7–10; 9:13–14; Moroni 10:27, 34.

4. In *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 11, Arnold van Gennep defines a rite of transition as being a liminal rite between a rite of separation and one of incorporation. Some examples of liminal rites are initiations, “rites of attachment to the deity,” and those “enacting death in one condition and resurrection in another” (12–13).
5. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Press, 1969), 95.
6. Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 20.
7. *Ibid.*, 20, 62.
8. Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974), 49, 202.
9. John A. Tvedtnes, “King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles,” in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:197–237.
10. Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 296–97. Interior quotation is from Nibley, “The Hierocentric State,” *Western Political Quarterly* 4 (1951): 226–27.
11. According to Gabriel Josipovici in *The Book of God: A Response to the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 242, there is an appropriate connection between repentance and ancient New Year rites. Josipovici says, “In the Hebrew Bible, and in Judaism till the present day, the term for repentance is *testuvah*, a turning. You have gone astray in this way or that and now you recognize and admit this and turn back to the right way. The great series of feasts connected with the new year culminates in the Day of Atonement, when, having repented fully, you are forgiven and so can start afresh with the slate wiped clean.”
12. Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1969), 96.
13. Although it is a somewhat trivial analogy, this centering and surrounding is like Wallace Stevens’s jar in “Anecdote of the Jar”:
 

I placed a jar in Tennessee,  
And round it was, upon a hill. It made the slovenly wilderness  
Surround that hill. . . . . It took dominion everywhere.
14. Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 12.
15. For a thorough and convincing treatise on the implications of this with respect to temple ordinances and covenants, see John W. Welch, *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount: A Latter-Day Saint Approach* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990).
16. M. Catherine Thomas, “Types and Shadows of Deliverance in the Book of Mormon,” in *Doctrines of the Book of Mormon: The 1991 Sperry Symposium*, ed. Bruce A. Van Orden and Brent L. Top (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 186–87.

17. This specifies what is to be found in the sealed part of the Book of Mormon—which will come forth and be translated in “the own due time of the Lord . . . ; for behold, they reveal all things from the foundation of the world unto the end thereof” (2 Nephi 27:10; see also 2 Nephi 30:3; Ether 5:1). What is said about the vision of the brother of Jared applies as well to the sealed part of the Book of Mormon: “Ye shall write them and shall seal them up, that no one can interpret them, . . . and I will show them in mine own due time unto the children of men” (Ether 3:22, 27). Moroni then spells out his instructions: “I have written upon these plates the very things which the brother of Jared saw [see v. 25]; and there never were greater things made manifest than those which were made manifest unto the brother of Jared. . . . And [the Lord] commanded me that I should seal them up. . . . For the Lord said unto me: They shall not go forth unto the Gentiles until the day that they shall repent of their iniquity, and become clean before the Lord. And in that day that they shall exercise faith in me, saith the Lord, . . . then will I manifest unto them the things which the brother of Jared saw, even to the unfolding unto them all my revelations. . . . Come unto me, O ye Gentiles, and I will show unto you the greater things, the knowledge of which is hid up because of unbelief” (Ether 4:4–7, 13).

18. Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 106.

19. *Ibid.*, 108.

20. Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 9–10.

21. Frye, *The Great Code*, 136, 137.

22. The term *Lamanites* has several different meanings in the Book of Mormon. At one point, after the Savior’s visit and the conversion of the people, there cease to be Lamanites altogether, but then the name is revived to apply to unbelievers (4 Nephi 1:17, 38). After the eventual destruction of the Nephites as a people, all those who remain are considered Lamanites (Alma 45:14). The term as I use it here in reference to latter-day Lamanites applies generally to all the living descendants of Lehi. That is the way Nephi uses it when he says that “the remnant of our seed” will receive the Book of Mormon (2 Nephi 30:3).

23. Joseph Smith is so called in early versions of the Doctrine and Covenants (78:9; 82:11; 104:26, 43). A possible meaning of the name *Gazelem* is given by George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl in *Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), 4:162. They say it is “a name given to a servant of God. The word appears to have its roots in Gaz—a stone, and Aleim, a name of God as a revelator, or the interposer in the affairs of men. If this suggestion is correct, its roots admirably agree with its apparent meaning—a seer.”

24. In an appendix to my essay, “Taste and Feast: Images of Eating and Drinking in the Book of Mormon,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 33 (1993): 751–52, I provide a guide to the direct words of Christ in the book.

25. Regarding the relationship of metaphor to poetry, in *The Biblical Web* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 109, Ruth apRoberts analyzes the contribution of Robert Lowth to biblical literary criticism and says he cites the two Hebrew words for poem, *mizmor* and *mashal*, with *mizmor* expressing the principle of parallelism and *mashal* meaning “he likened, he spoke in parables, and this expresses the characteristic of figurative language.”

26. Spoken in October 1996 general conference; quoted in *Church News*, 12 October 1996, 24.

27. Wesley A. Kort makes the same point about the Bible in *Story, Text, and Scripture: Literary Interests in Biblical Narrative* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), xi. He says, “The religious

meaning and significance of biblical material and its literary and textual form are inseparable.” It should be added that just as Harold Fisch says regarding the Bible in *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), so with the Book of Mormon: The book is not merely an aesthetic work; the creation does not stop with beauty: it continues.