An Interview with President Cecil O. Samuelson

Balancing Faith and Intellect

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ON THE COVER:
The need to balance faith and intellect is symbolized in this photo of a balanced rock in Arches National Park, Utah.

PHOTO COURTESY GETTY IMAGES
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The Religious Educator is designed to serve the interests and needs of those who study and teach the gospel on a regular basis. The distinct focuses of the Religious Educator are on teaching the gospel; publishing studies on scripture, doctrine, and Church history; and sharing the messages of outstanding devotional essays. The contributions to each issue are carefully reviewed and edited by experienced teachers, writers, and scholars.

We anticipate that the articles published in the Religious Educator will appeal to anyone interested in perspectives on the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Articles will be selected on the basis of their appeal to and appropriateness for religion professors at each of the Brigham Young University campuses, full-time seminary and institute teachers and administrators, volunteer early-morning and home-study seminary teachers, and volunteer institute of religion teachers. In every issue, we plan a selection of articles that will be helpful and appealing to this diverse audience. In each issue, we hope that each group will find one or more articles that meet the individual needs of members of the group. The beliefs of the respective authors are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, or The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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Editors’ Introduction

Last year the Religious Educator dedicated one issue to printing presentations from the Annual Church Educational System Religious Educators Conference. Unfortunately, CES conferences have now been canceled for the foreseeable future. The good news is that our current issue features several articles on the Old Testament that were prepared for the conference as well as a mix of other articles on various themes.

In “Cafeterias or Chef Schools? Getting Students into the Scriptures,” author Timothy L. Carver compares teachers to good mothers. Both groups want to provide “hot meals” that are appealing and nutritious. Even though this is a good goal, teachers sometimes focus their energy too much on the “meal itself” instead of preparing students to feast upon the words of Christ. With helpful hints and scripture study suggestions, this article offers good food for thought.

“God teaches by symbols; it is his favorite method of teaching.” This intriguing quote from a wall inside the Salt Lake Temple ignited the curiosity of author Michael N. Allred. Highlighting memorable examples from the scriptures, and particularly from the Old Testament, Brother Allred urges instructors to follow the Master Teacher’s example in pointing out symbols in the scriptures.

Tired of getting lost in the vast expanse of the Worldwide Web? John P. Livingstone takes the reader by the hand in a “virtual” tour of the scriptural resources available on your own computer. “Tips for Using the Scriptures on Computer” familiarizes readers with helpful resources like CD-ROM and Internet versions of the standard works, making scripture study seem effortless for research, teaching assignments, or even personal scripture study.

How, after suffering injustice, can we live the Golden Rule? Why, though frustrated and hurt, must we forgive and “love one another”? W. Jeffrey Marsh explores the difficult answers to these questions in a unique case study, “Dealing with Personal Injustices: Lessons from the Prophet Joseph Smith.” In this inspiring account that cites numerous incidents from the life of the Prophet, Brother Marsh leaves a lasting impression of Joseph’s Christlike character.

Many other fine articles will help you feast upon the words of the scriptures.

Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Editor-in-Chief
Ted D. Stoddard, Associate Editor
R. Devan Jensen, Executive Editor
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President Cecil O. Samuelson, October 15, 2003

Photos by Mark A. Philbrick, BYU
Balancing Faith and Intellect: An Interview with President Cecil O. Samuelson

Devan Jensen

Devan Jensen is executive editor at the Religious Studies Center.

Balance seems to be the best word to characterize the service of President Cecil O. Samuelson. Over the years he has juggled many challenging demands, serving as a father, medical doctor, university professor, health-care administrator, member of the Presidency of the Seventy, and Sunday School general president. Now, with characteristic enthusiasm, he steps into his new role as the twelfth president of Brigham Young University, the first physician to hold this office.

President Samuelson, tell us a little about your teaching background and service as Sunday School general president. How did that open your mind to the role of teachers in the Church?

I don’t know that it dramatically opened my mind about teachers in the Church. I have been interested in teaching for a long time. My mother was a teacher. My father was a teacher and a professor. Both of my sisters have been teachers and one a professor as well. Both of my brothers were teachers. So education has been an important part of our lives.

When I was an undergraduate university student, I was a Sunday School president. I recognized that there was a great deal of responsibility for teaching. Only recently has the Sunday School again been given the responsibility for improving the quality of teaching. I hope that it is a positive step, and I hope I had a little bit to do with that. It was important for several reasons. One is that given the changes that have occurred in the Sunday School over the years with the block schedule...
and the other related things, the Sunday School presidency does not have quite the scope of responsibilities they used to have with opening exercises, song practices, or two-and-a-half-minute talks and those kinds of things. Likewise, in much of the developing world where leadership sometimes is a little thin, we do not have strong leaders in the Sunday School, and branch presidents, bishoprics, and others have sometimes taken over the responsibility for all the teaching.

I have been very concerned about the quality of teaching in the Church for years—not because of bad teaching but because of the concern we had that the teaching be as good as it ought to be. I think that over the years we have seen some dramatic improvements in the curriculum, in the materials available for teachers, and in teacher-preparation materials. I think we are now in the situation where we have some wonderful teachers who are doing a superb job, but we still have a few who are not reaching their potential. We still have a way to go, I think, to upgrade our teaching and frankly to “enthrone” teachers as important as I believe they are.

If you were to offer some general advice for teachers, whether at a Church-sponsored institution or in local wards or branches, to help them teach with the Spirit or make an impact on people’s lives, what would you suggest?

Let me offer two or three suggestions. First, as President Harold B. Lee and others have said, including our current prophet, if we are going to lift people, we have to stand on higher ground. A teacher’s life has to be in order. If you want to have the Spirit in your teaching, you have to live your life in a way that merits the ministration of the Spirit. That means you have to get the distractions out of your life. It means that if you have unresolved issues, you need to repent. It means that you need to be living in such a way that the Holy Ghost will find you to be a welcome receptacle.

Second, preparation for teachers is very important. I have a good friend who tells me that the quality of the instruction of his high priests group depends on how many verses of the opening song they sing in priesthood meeting—meaning, did the instructor arrive unprepared, go through the manual, and then stand before the group? I think that preparation is very important. The teacher needs to have command of the material.

Third, there are some things that the teacher is and some things that the teacher is not. One of the things that a teacher should not be is a performer. Teachers who are focused more on drawing attention
to themselves than the materials will not succeed to the degree that they should. We all know of people who are very charismatic, who can draw big crowds, and who are wonderfully entertaining. And while that is not necessarily bad, I am concerned that it may draw attention away from the subject material. Particularly in the Church, we are talking about a curriculum that is approved by the Brethren with the use of the scriptures in Sunday School. We use the teachings of the presidents of the Church in priesthood and Relief Society. Those are very important resources, and the focus of teachers ought to be on the topics and the students, not on themselves.

One of the things I learned very early is that good teachers not only are fairly articulate in their ability to express ideas and to share information but also are good listeners. I am a physician by background. In the particular area where I work, much of my effort is focused on diagnostics, to really understand what is happening. Much of my effort has been focused on teaching patients how to deal with their problems, the kinds of things they ought to do. I think much of that is analogous to teaching in a classroom at the university, the Church, or wherever you are. To be an exceptional teacher, you need to be a very good listener. It is understandable but sometimes regrettable that teachers are overly concerned about their appearance or their performance or about getting through all the material or being creative or being innovative or all the other things that people seem to try to do. I think one of the common mistakes made is to forget that an important role is to listen.
very carefully to students—what is going on in the discussion, what is not being said as well as where the students are in their level of understanding. Are they being polite and quiet? Are they being reflective? Are they being prompted and taught by the Holy Ghost? I think the Holy Ghost will help teachers with all of those questions. But it means that teachers have to be active and intent listeners. So, yes, preparation is important; knowing your topic is important; but listening, reflecting, empathizing, and relating are also important characteristics of teachers.

If you were to give advice to a brand-new seminary teacher or a brand-new Gospel Doctrine teacher, what would you say in terms of balancing schedules and reaching the hearts of the students?

Let me make one comment about balance. By definition, something that is perfectly balanced does not move back and forth. Second, living a balanced life does not necessarily mean you do everything the same every day. For example, we applaud those who live a missionary schedule—who are up at 6:30 a.m. and who are in by 9:30 p.m., who do all the things they do all day, the prescribed study and all of those important things. The principles you learn in terms of discipline and order and all the rest are the same, but most of us cannot, and in my view, should not live the schedule of a full-time missionary all our lives. There are times when we should. There are times when we are involved in other things.
In part of my training I was an intern. Training in medicine is a little more humane than it used to be, but it is still very, very intense. If you were to try to carve as much time for gospel study out of every day as you did when you were a full-time missionary, most of the time it would be very difficult and sometimes it would be impossible. Likewise, when I served as a bishop or a stake president, it was not nearly as easy to find reflective time and time for independent study as it was when I was a Gospel Doctrine teacher. That was one of the wonderful blessings of being a Gospel Doctrine teacher for short periods a couple of times in my life. I have had only a chance to do that a little bit. I could spend roughly the same amount or much less time studying the gospel, thinking about how to share ideas, wondering what would be most important, praying, pondering, and fasting sometimes, and doing all those things. I was able to give much greater intensity than when much of life was occupied with administrative duties.

Balance is very important. I would come back to the question about the new seminary teacher by stating that what teachers are doing is very important, but it is important not only in the context of what it means to the students in the classroom but in what it means in their lives. Therefore, if I were counseling a new young seminary teacher, I would say, “Be sure your life is in balance and that things are in order.” Most of our young seminary teachers are newly married with young families; that needs some time. Because they are active and faithful in the Church, they most often have Church callings; that needs some time. Because they are coming into Church education, all of them need to be honest with their employer. And so teachers need to find a way to balance all of those kinds of things.

Recognize that all teachers do in seminary and institute—and it should be the aim of all education—is focused on the students. What is it that really blesses the students’ lives? Is it to discipline them? Is it to bore them or anesthetize them? Is it to inspire them? Is it to help them feel the Holy Ghost? Is it to increase their understanding of gospel doctrine and basic principles to increase their love for the scriptures? Most of the answers would be yes; some of those would be no. I think if we are constantly focused on the students—pondering about them, thinking about them, praying about them and for them—then we will know what it is that we should do. Most of us who have been in the classroom have our own unique characteristics and styles.

One of the best pieces of advice I had when I became a General Authority was to be yourself. Do not try to imitate anyone else. If you try to be like Elder So-and-So or somebody else, you will not be able
to; you will fail. I thought about that as I came to BYU and thought of my eleven illustrious predecessors. I can think of things or ways that each of them has greatly exceeded my talents and capacities. While I am very humbled by that and worried that I do not shortchange the students and the university, I do not feel the need to compete with any of them on any of those grounds. I do feel the need to be my best self. I do feel the need to try to analyze carefully what the university needs at this time in its history or what the students need at this time in their course work. I am satisfied that if I do my very best, the Lord and the Holy Ghost will help me be successful in the eyes of the students. I think that applies for a new seminary teacher as much as it does for an old university president.

You have been serving as president of BYU for a few months. Do you have a new vision of where the university should be heading? Do you have a particular mission the university should achieve?

Well, people sometimes ask that question. Let me just say that BYU is a unique place and probably less influenced by the proclivities and preferences of the president than most other places. I think that the Brethren expect the Seventy to be largely interchangeable. In fact, President Merrill J. Bateman and I exactly traded jobs. I think there is probably a message in that someplace. And so I would say that I do not believe that I have a new vision as much as I have an expanded vision and an expanding vision of BYU.

I have watched BYU with great interest and mainly admiration most of my life. I grew up in Salt Lake County, but the fact that I was not a student here does not mean that I wasn’t aware of BYU. I watched it and participated in various ways on the campus. It is clear to me now that I am involved in thinking about BYU constantly rather than episodically and casually, that I’m having an expanded vision of what it is that the Brethren and the Lord intend for BYU. They want it to be the very best university it can be—to be the light on the hill that demonstrates that a university can be absolutely excellent academically without compromising in any way and can be excellent in enlarging and strengthening the faith and testimonies of our students. I am absolutely convinced that these missions are not only complementary—they are not competitive—but they really are synergistic. In other words, our spirituality can be better than it ever could be because we encourage people to think, to study, and to learn, and we help them do that with great academic distinction and great academic capacity.
You might say that is not particularly new. It is not new, but it is enlarged for me. In my inaugural remarks, I made reference to the *charted course*. I did that for a couple of reasons. One is that those who know the history of Church education would know that was the term President J. Reuben Clark used in the 1930s when he gave strong words of counsel at the university. He also used that term for seminary and institute teachers. So for those who would be sensitive and would be knowledgeable of that history, they would say, “Okay, steady as she goes; we are still committed to the notion of academic excellence with an absolute commitment to the reality of our Father in Heaven and His Son, Jesus Christ, the Restoration of the gospel through the Prophet Joseph Smith, and all that it entails.”

As President James E. Faust has said, the gospel is not a smorgasbord. We do not go through and pick out things we like and leave the things we do not like. We accept it all.

That is the charted course here at BYU. In recent years, others have written down the mission statements and the aims and objectives, and those have been published. As you know, I spent a considerable amount of time in my August university conference address quoting directly from those documents, not because I felt that others necessarily needed to be reminded, although I think all of us do, but so that I could make an affirmative statement that (a) I knew and understood them, (b) I endorse them, and (c) they would be the measures by which we would judge what it is we do and do not do here.
What part does religious education play at BYU?

Well, religious education at BYU is quite unique in the sense that we have religious education classes that are part of the curriculum. That is part of our graduation requirement and our continued participation requirement. Even more fundamental than all that, religious education by modeling, by precept, and by example should be pervasive in everything we do. Even when we don’t mention the word religion or even when we don’t talk directly about basic gospel principles using doctrinal terms and so forth, religious education is part of what we do.

One of the things I noticed that the trustees are most pleased about is the recognition our students have for their reputation of integrity. I consider that to be part of religious education. Hopefully, those who have grown up in the Church or in good families have learned that at their mothers’ knees. The kinds of values that undergird the gospel of Jesus Christ should be pervasive in everything we do here. Religious education will continue to be a strong part of what we do at BYU. I cannot foresee it ever being minimized. On the other hand, we do other things that great universities do. The influence of our religion, our faith, and our beliefs should pervade everything we do.

On August 26 at a university conference, you said that teachers will often feel “a dynamic tension between our teaching commitments, our research and creative demands, and the resources to accomplish what we want to do.” As one who has successfully
balanced many challenging assignments, what advice can you offer to the faculty?

I think faculty members just need to recognize that all of those issues are there. We all deal with dynamic tensions. We want to do well in everything, but we may not have enough strength or may not have whatever we need to accomplish what we need to. I think one of the responsibilities I have in the administration with my colleagues who work here is to try to keep an appropriate balance in terms of all the things we ask people to do and the expectations we have. What I would say to the faculty is, “Look, realize that we ask many things of you and you have a lot to do with what you do; you will never have everything that you would like to have. That will probably be a blessing in your life because you will learn to prioritize, you will learn to be efficient, you will learn to save, you will learn to conserve, and you will learn to do all those things that really are fundamental values for developing a well-balanced Latter-day Saint.”

What role does sacrifice have in the lives of the teachers as they are balancing competing demands?

Sacrifice is a fundamental gospel principle. We know of the Savior’s sacrifice and the Atonement and what that means to us. But we also know that each of us is asked to sacrifice, and most of us have had the sacred opportunity of making sacred covenants that we would sacrifice. Part of the element of sacrifice is that it is sanctified. It is a reminder not only to our Heavenly Father and the Savior but also to ourselves that, yes, there are some things more important than our comfort or our own egocentric needs or wishes.

The trustees recognize that this is a wonderful place and commit tremendous resources here. They also recognize that the needs of Brigham Young University and the Church Educational System can be voracious and relentless. The trustees have the difficult but important responsibility of allocating resources. When you think about the things that go on here at BYU and recognize that many of our Church members live in the developing world where they do not even have opportunities for basic education or for meaningful jobs so they can support their families, be active in the Church, pay their tithing, and send their children on missions, and so forth, then you understand why our prophet, who is also chairman of the board, focuses so much on the Perpetual Education Fund.
Even if there were sufficient resources to do everything, I think it is very clear that the board does not necessarily want people to be at BYU or to be anywhere in Church education because that is where they can make the most money or where their life can be easiest. In fact, I think there is a real advantage in having people make an affirmative decision that yes, I might, in the eyes of the world, do better doing something else, but because I am absolutely committed to the mission of Church education, wherever it is that I am working, I have made the decision to try to qualify to be involved there. That is the element of sacrifice. My job and that of other administrators is to make sure that because people make that commitment and are willing to sacrifice, we do not allow the gap to grow too large between what is possible in other places and what is necessary to keep body and soul of the family together. We need to be sure that gap does not get too wide. I think that sacrifice is an essential element. Someone who does not subscribe to that probably would be happier not being in Church education or at BYU.

You have referred to compensatory blessings that come as we sacrifice and as we serve—the increase in character and the ability to prioritize. What are some of the other compensatory blessings that you have experienced or that others will experience?

Well, there are many. I happen to agree and endorse those words that begin the last verse of the hymn “Praise to the Man”—“Sacrifice brings forth the blessings of heaven.” That was clearly true with the Prophet Joseph, but I think it is true for everyone else who has applied it. Now, we often think of blessings in monetary value or in terms of things. In my view, the greatest blessing that comes from sacrifice is the confirmation of the Spirit that comes when you are doing what you should be doing for the right reasons. The peace that comes from that, the assurance that your life is being lived in a way that is consistent with God’s will for you, and the joy that comes when you recognize that your sacrifice is improving and helping others have a better life—those are tremendous sources of blessings.

All of us have unique and special blessings that come to us in various ways, but I think those are the fundamental kinds of blessings that come. My suggestion is—and I have never had anybody argue with me about this—that if you really make a sacrifice for the right reasons and your heart is there, and then you carefully examine whether you received blessings for it, you will never be able to say, “No, I’ve done it for the right reasons, I have examined it, and I can’t identify the bless-
ings.” People say, “You know, you are right; I have been blessed much more than I could have ever anticipated. I have been repaid.” I have had great blessings as have other people. I think the greatest blessing of all is to recognize the source of the blessings we receive.

We all experience trials in our lives. You have had your own share of trials. What counsel can you give to those who have gone through challenges such as the loss of a loved one?

I think there are many things. I think you trust in the Lord. I learned very early that wonderful little scripture from the third chapter of Proverbs: “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths” (Proverbs 3:5–6). I think that is true. I think that we sometimes get distracted by the proximate and tend to forget how it fits into the big plan.

I would just say that I am now old enough to be grateful that many of my prayers have not been answered the way I wanted them answered. There were times when I thought maybe they were not being answered at all. But I have to say that some blessings—both ones that may be obvious publicly but also ones that are very sacred and private—would not have come to me if my life had been led the way I thought I would lead it as a young man. I am thinking about the time I came home from my mission and decided that I understood the
plan of salvation; I had been teaching it as a missionary. (I have a nice little letter from some people that I tracted out some years ago who have been just wonderful, and it is exciting to see what has happened to them.) I thought you kept the commandments and lived happily ever after; you did not have any problems. Last night I talked to Rebecca, my adopted daughter. I have two daughters; one is adopted, and one came the usual way. Had my wife and I not had some real heartache and disappointment in having our children come when they did, she would not be my daughter. I probably would not have known her. What a tragedy that would have been! So there is a recognition that the Lord will sustain us—He knows us, He loves us—if we do what we need to do and recognize that trials are part of the gospel. I think we stay on the course even as it veers in unexpected directions, and we then will know that things will eventually work out. One of the great things about the gospel is that if things do not work out in this life, we have time for the Lord to make things right.

Your exercise regimen is somewhat legendary already. Tell us about your routine.

I don’t know if it should be legendary, and I’m not a masochist, but I do enjoy exercising. I enjoy exercising in the morning. I’ve tried it at different times, day and night, and for me it works best first thing in the morning. It gets the blood flowing for the other things I need to do. I am not one who shaves and brushes my teeth and eats my breakfast and reads the paper while I drive, but I do like to multi task. Because I am a bit of a news junkie, I watch various news channels in the morning, and I have them all timed so that I don’t spend any time on commercials. I am a typical male in that I have the remote in my hand and know when to move to other things. I find exercising to be invigorating and relaxing. Over the years when I have had a regular program, I found that it is really very helpful to me.

How do you accomplish so much?

Just do the best you can do. That’s what President Gordon B. Hinckley says. Just plan your day and focus on the things that are most important; and when something more important comes its way, you sometimes just have to put things by the side. I can never do everything I would like to do. I always have a stack of books I would love to read sometime. Sometimes I’m involved in three or four at a time. I find that as I get older, my energy to work late into the night is lessened. Things that I used to think were important are not very important anymore.
In your inaugural address, you quoted Elder Neal A. Maxwell as saying, “LDS scholars can and should speak in the tongue of scholarship, but without coming to prefer it and without losing the mother tongue of faith” (*Deposition of a Disciple* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976], 16). How can teachers and scholars stay well grounded in faith?

I think you have to remember that faith is the first principle of the gospel. We were talking about teaching before. I want to be very careful because I go to different Sunday School classes and so forth. I don’t ever want to be offensive, but sometimes we can get into the situation where we are so excited about something new or unique or different that we get away from the basics. Years ago when I was a fairly new General Authority, I heard President Hinckley say, speaking of the Seventy, “I’m turning the administration of the Church over to you. Now, that’s a great simplification, but I have worked on it all of these years. Now I’m just going to focus on teaching people faith.” He was being partly facetious but also being really very truthful. I use that little quote because thinking about it helps me keep the balance. Elder Maxwell said that in a number of different ways. His discourses, both his public and his private counsel over the years, have been, I think, consistent with that statement.

I think if you remember who you are and what you are about and why you are about it, you will be all right. We do it in different ways. We have different interests, we have different talents, we have different attitudes, and at different stages in our lives we do things in different ways. I never felt that I was violating the basic suggestion Elder Maxwell made when I was teaching medicine, nor did I feel like I was violating it when I was teaching Gospel Doctrine, although my study and my preparation for both of those were very singular. But when I was teaching my medical students, part of my prayer was that I would be an effective teacher. Having prayed about it, I felt obliged to study as hard as I could and to think about ways to be true. Likewise, when I am dealing with things of the Spirit, I believe that if I am going to get help, I need to be rigorous in my academic skills. The fact that I am thinking about faith does not excuse me from thought. The fact that I am thinking about substantive issues in science or education does not excuse me from listening to the promptings of the Spirit.
A sample of useful teaching tools produced by the Church
We have been charged to “teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom. Teach ye diligently,” the Lord implores, “and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient for you to understand” (D&C 88:77–78). But what exactly are we to teach? What is doctrine?

Before beginning this discussion, let me affirm that I understand implicitly that the authority to declare, interpret, and clarify doctrine rests with living apostles and prophets. This article will thus speak only about doctrine and in no way attempt to reach beyond my own stewardship.

**Doctrine: Its Purpose, Power, and Purity**

Doctrine is “the basic body of Christian teaching or understanding (2 Timothy 3:16). Christian doctrine is composed of teachings which are to be handed on through instruction and proclamation. . . . Religious doctrine deals with the ultimate and most comprehensive questions.”¹ Further, “gospel doctrine is synonymous with the truths of salvation. It comprises the tenets, teachings, and true theories found in the scriptures; it includes the principles, precepts, and revealed philosophies of pure religion; prophetic dogmas, maxims, and views are embraced within its folds; the Articles of Faith are part and portion of it, as is every inspired utterance of the Lord’s agents.”²

The central, saving doctrine is that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the Savior and Redeemer of humankind; that He lived, taught,
healed, suffered, and died for our sins; and that He rose from the dead the third day with a glorious, immortal, resurrected body (see 1 Corinthians 15:1–3; D&C 76:40–42). It was the Prophet Joseph Smith who spoke of these central truths as the “fundamental principles” of our religion to which all other doctrines are but appendages. President Boyd K. Packer observed: “Truth, glorious truth, proclaims there is . . . a Mediator. . . . Through Him mercy can be fully extended to each of us without offending the eternal law of justice. This truth is the very root of Christian doctrine. You may know much about the gospel as it branches out from there, but if you only know the branches and those branches do not touch that root, if they have been cut free from that truth, there will be no life nor substance nor redemption in them.”

Such counsel really does point us toward that which is of most worth in sermons and in the classroom, that which should receive our greatest emphasis. There is power in doctrine, power in the word (see Alma 31:5), power to heal the wounded soul (see Jacob 2:8), power to transform human behavior. “True doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behavior,” President Packer taught. “The study of the doctrines of the gospel will improve behavior quicker than a study of behavior will improve behavior. That is why we stress so forcefully the study of the doctrines of the gospel.” Elder Neal A. Maxwell also pointed out that “doctrines believed and practiced do change and improve us, while ensuring our vital access to the Spirit. Both outcomes are crucial.”

Those of us who are teachers associated with the Church of Jesus Christ are under obligation to learn the doctrines, teach them properly, and bind ourselves to speak and act in harmony with them. Only in this way can we perpetuate truth in a world filled with error, avoid deception, focus on what matters most, and find joy and happiness in the process. “I have spoken before,” President Gordon B. Hinckley stated, “about the importance of keeping the doctrine of the Church pure, and seeing that it is taught in all of our meetings. I worry about this. Small aberrations in doctrinal teaching can lead to large and evil falsehoods.”

**How Do We “Keep the Doctrine Pure”? What Might We Do?**

1. We can teach directly from the scriptures, the standard works. The scriptures contain the mind and will and voice and word of the Lord (see D&C 68:3–4) to men and women in earlier days and thus contain doctrine and applications that are both timely and timeless. “And all scripture given by inspiration of God, is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that
the man [or woman] of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (Joseph Smith Translation, 2 Timothy 3:16–17).

2. We can present the doctrine the same way the prophets in our own day present it (see D&C 52:9, 36)—in terms of both content and emphasis. Mormon wrote: “And it came to pass that Alma, having authority from God, ordained priests; . . . and he commanded them that \textit{they should teach nothing save it were the things which he had taught}” (Mosiah 18:18-19; emphasis added). “Therefore they did assemble themselves together in different bodies, being called churches; every church having their priests and their teachers, and every priest preaching the word according as it was delivered to him by the mouth of Alma. And thus, notwithstanding there being many churches they were all one church, yea, even the church of God” (Mosiah 25:21–22; emphasis added).

3. We can pay special attention to the scriptural commentary offered by living apostles and prophets in general conference addresses, cross-reference the same in our scriptures, and teach this commentary in conjunction with the scriptures. For example, we can study what

- Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught concerning the parable of the prodigal son in the April 2002 general conference;
- Elder Robert D. Hales taught concerning the covenant of baptism in October 2000;
- Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin taught concerning the principles of fasting as found in Isaiah 58 in April 2001;
- Elder Dallin H. Oaks taught concerning conversion and “becoming” as well as his thoughtful commentary on the parable of the workers in the vineyard in October 2000;
- Elder M. Russell Ballard taught concerning “Who is my neighbor?” And what may be called the doctrine of inclusion in October 2001.

4. We can teach the gospel with plainness and simplicity, focus on fundamentals, and emphasize what matters most. We do not tell all we know, nor do we teach on the edge of our knowledge. The Prophet Joseph Smith explained that “it is not always wise to relate all the truth. Even Jesus, the Son of God, had to refrain from doing so, and had to restrain His feelings many times for the safety of Himself and His followers, and had to conceal the righteous purposes of His heart in relation to many things pertaining to His Father’s kingdom.”

5. We can acknowledge that there are some things we simply do not know. President Joseph F. Smith declared: “It is no discredit to our
intelligence or to our integrity to say frankly in the face of a hundred speculative questions, ‘I do not know.’ One thing is certain, and that is, God has revealed enough to our understanding for our exaltation and for our happiness. Let the Saints, then, utilize what they already have; be simple and unaffected in their religion, both in thought and word, and they will not easily lose their bearings and be subjected to the vain philosophies of man.”

**Doctrinal Parameters**

In recent years, I have tried to look beneath the surface and discern the nature of the objections that so many in the religious world have toward the Latter-day Saints. To be sure, the growth of the Church poses a real threat to many—more specifically, the Christian groups resent the way we “steal their sheep.” We are not in the line of historic Christianity and thus are neither Catholic nor Protestant. We believe in scripture beyond the Bible and in continuing revelation through apostles and prophets. We do not accept the concepts concerning God, Christ, and the Godhead that grew out of the post-New Testament church councils. All these things constitute reasons why many Protestants and Catholics label us as non-Christian. We have tried, with some success I think, to speak of ourselves as “Christian but different.” But there is another reason we are suspect, one that underlies and buttresses large amounts of anti-Mormon propaganda—namely, what they perceive to be some of our “unusual doctrines,” much of which was presented by a few Church leaders of the past.

Let me illustrate with an experience I had just a few months ago. A Baptist minister was in my office one day. We were chatting about a number of things, including doctrine. He said to me, “Bob, you people believe in such strange things!” “Like what?” I asked. “Oh, for example,” he said, “you believe in blood atonement. And that affects Utah’s insistence on retaining death by a firing squad.” I responded, “No, we don’t.” “Yes, you do,” he came right back. “I know of several statements by Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Jedediah Grant that teach such things.” “I’m aware of those statements,” I said. I then found myself saying something that I had never voiced before: “Yes, they were taught, but they do not represent the doctrine of our Church. We believe in the blood atonement of Jesus Christ, and that alone.” My friend didn’t skip a beat: “What do you mean they don’t represent the doctrine of your Church? They were spoken by major Church leaders.”

I explained that such statements were made, for the most part, during the time of the Mormon Reformation and that they were examples
of a kind of “revival rhetoric” in which the leaders of the Church were striving to “raise the bar” in terms of obedience and faithfulness. I assured him that the Church, by its own canonical standards, does not have the right or the power to take a person’s life because of disobedience or even apostasy (see D&C 134:10). I read to him a passage from the Book of Mormon in which the Nephite prophets had resorted to “exceeding harshness, . . . continually reminding [the people] of death, and the duration of eternity, and the judgments and the power of God, . . . and exceedingly great plainness of speech” in order to “keep them from going down speedily to destruction” (Enos 1:23).

This seemed to satisfy him to some extent, but then he said: “Bob, many of my fellow Christians have noted how hard it is to figure out what Mormons believe. They say it’s like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall! What do you people believe? How do you decide what is your doctrine and what is not?” I sensed that we were in the midst of a very important conversation, one that was pushing me to the limits and requiring that I do some of the deepest thinking I had done for a long time. His questions were valid and in no way mean-spirited. They were not intended to entrap or embarrass me or the Church. He simply was seeking information. I said, “You’ve asked some excellent questions. Let me see what I can do to answer them.” I suggested that he consider the following three ideas:

1. The teachings of the Church today have a rather narrow focus, range, and direction; central and saving doctrine is what we are called upon to teach and emphasize, not tangential and peripheral teachings.

2. Very often what is drawn from Church leaders of the past is, like the matter of blood atonement mentioned above, either misquoted, misrepresented, or taken out of context. Further, not everything that was ever spoken or written by a past Church leader is a part of what we teach today. Ours is a living constitution, a living tree of life, a dynamic Church (see D&C 1:30). We are commanded to pay heed to the words of living oracles (see D&C 90:3–5).

3. In determining whether something is a part of the doctrine of the Church, we might ask, Is it found within the four standard works? Within official declarations or proclamations? Is it discussed in general conference or other official gatherings by general Church leaders today? Is it found in the general handbooks or approved curriculum of the Church today? If it meets at least one of these criteria, we can feel secure and appropriate about teaching it.

A significant percentage of anti-Mormonism focuses on Church leaders’ statements of the past that deal with peripheral or noncentral
issues. No one criticizes us for a belief in God, in the divinity of Jesus Christ or His atoning work, in the literal bodily resurrection of the Savior and the eventual resurrection of mankind, in baptism by immersion, in the gift of the Holy Ghost, in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, and so forth. But we are challenged regularly for statements in our literature on such matters as the following:

- God’s life before He was God
- How Jesus was conceived
- The specific fate of sons of perdition
- Teachings about Adam as God
- Details concerning what it means to become like God hereafter
- That plural marriage is essential to one’s exaltation
- Why blacks were denied the priesthood prior to 1978

**Loyalty to Men Called as Prophets**

While we love the scriptures and thank God regularly for them, we believe that anyone can have sufficient confidence and even reverence for holy writ without believing that every word between Genesis 1:1 and Revelation 22:21 is the word-for-word dictation of the Almighty or that the Bible now reads as it has always read. Indeed, the Book of Mormon and other scriptures attest that plain and precious truths and many covenants of the Lord were taken away or kept back from the Bible before it was compiled (see 1 Nephi 13:20–29; Moses 1:40–41; Articles of Faith 1:8). But we still cherish the sacred volume, recognize and teach the doctrines of salvation within it, and seek to pattern our lives according to its timeless teachings.

In like manner, we can sustain with all our hearts the prophets and apostles without believing that they are perfect or that everything they say or do is exactly what God wants said and done. In short, we do not believe in apostolic or prophetic infallibility. Moses made mistakes, but we love and sustain him and accept his writings nonetheless. Peter made mistakes, but we still honor him and study his words. Paul made mistakes, but we admire his boldness and dedication and treasure his epistles. James pointed out that Elijah “was a man subject to like passions as we are” (James 5:17), and the Prophet Joseph Smith taught that “a prophet [is] a prophet only when he [is] acting as such.” On another occasion, the Prophet declared: “I told them I was but a man, and they must not expect me to be perfect; if they expected perfection...
from me, I should expect it from them; but if they would bear with my infirmities and the infirmities of the brethren, I would likewise bear with their infirmities.”

“I can fellowship the President of the Church,” said Lorenzo Snow, “if he does not know everything I know. . . . I saw the . . . imperfections in [Joseph Smith]. . . . I thanked God that He would put upon a man who had those imperfections the power and authority He placed upon him . . . for I knew that I myself had weakness, and I thought there was a chance for me.”

As we have been reminded again and again, whom God calls, God qualifies. That is, God calls His prophets. He empowers and strengthens the individual, provides an eternal perspective, loosens his tongue, and enables him to make divine truth known. But being called as an Apostle or even as President of the Church does not remove the man from mortality or make him perfect. President David O. McKay explained that “when God makes the prophet He does not unmake the man.”

“I was this morning introduced to a man from the east,” Joseph Smith stated. “After hearing my name, he remarked that I was nothing but a man, indicating by this expression, that he had supposed that a person to whom the Lord should see fit to reveal His will, must be something more than a man. He seemed to have forgotten the saying that fell from the lips of St. James, that [Elijah] was a man subject to like passions as we are, yet he had such power with God, that he, in answer to his prayers, shut the heavens that they gave no rain for the space of three years and six months.”

“With all their inspiration and greatness,” Elder Bruce R. McConkie declared, “prophets are yet mortal men with imperfections common to mankind in general. They have their opinions and prejudices and are left to work out their problems without inspiration in many instances.”

“There have been times,” President Harold B. Lee pointed out, “when even the President of the Church has not been moved upon by the Holy Ghost. There is, I suppose you’d say, a classic story of Brigham Young in the time when Johnston’s army was on the move. The Saints were all inflamed, and President Young had his feelings whetted to fighting pitch. He stood up in the morning session of general conference and preached a sermon vibrant with defiance at the approaching army, declaring an intention to oppose them and drive them back. In the afternoon, he rose and said that Brigham Young had been talking in the morning but the Lord was going to talk now. He then delivered an address in which the tempo was the exact opposite.
of the morning sermon. Whether that happened or not, it illustrates a principle: that the Lord can move upon His people but they may speak on occasions their own opinions.”

In 1865, the First Presidency counseled the Latter-day Saints as follows:

We do not wish incorrect and unsound doctrines to be handed down to posterity under the sanction of great names to be received and valued by future generations as authentic and reliable, creating labor and difficulties for our successors to perform and contend with, which we ought not to transmit to them. The interests of posterity are, to a certain extent, in our hands. Errors in history and in doctrine, if left uncorrected by us who are conversant with the events, and who are in a position to judge of the truth or falsity of the doctrines, would go to our children as though we had sanctioned and endorsed them . . . We know what sanctity there is always attached to the writings of men who have passed away, especially to the writings of Apostles, when none of their contemporaries are left, and we, therefore, feel the necessity of being watchful upon these points.

President Gordon B. Hinckley stated: “I have worked with seven Presidents of this Church. I have recognized that all have been human. But I have never been concerned over this. They may have had some weaknesses. But this has never troubled me. I know that the God of heaven has used mortal men throughout history to accomplish His divine purposes.” On another occasion, President Hinckley pleaded with the Saints that “as we continue our search for truth . . . we look for strength and goodness rather than weakness and foibles in those who did so great a work in their time. We recognize that our forebears were human. They doubtless made mistakes . . . There was only one perfect man who ever walked the earth. The Lord has used imperfect people in the process of building his perfect society. If some of them occasionally stumbled, or if their characters may have been slightly flawed in one way or another, the wonder is the greater that they accomplished so much.

Prophets are men called of God to serve as covenant spokesmen for His children on earth, and thus we should never take lightly what they say. The early Brethren of this dispensation were the living prophets for their contemporaries, and much of what we believe and practice today rests upon the doctrinal foundation they laid. But the work of the Restoration entails a gradual unfolding of divine truth in a line-upon-line fashion. Some years ago, my colleague Joseph McConkie remarked to a group of religious educators: “We have the scholarship of the early brethren to build upon; we have the advantage of additional history;
we have inched our way up the mountain of our destiny and now stand in a position to see some things with greater clarity than did they. . . . We live in finer houses than did our pioneer forefathers, but this does not argue that we are better or that our rewards will be greater. In like manner our understanding of gospel principles should be better housed, and we should constantly be seeking to make it so. There is no honor in our reading by oil lamps when we have been granted better light.” Thus, it is important to note that ultimately the Lord will hold us responsible for the teachings, direction, and focus provided by the living oracles of our own day, both in terms of their commentary upon canonized scripture as well as the living scripture that is delivered through them by the power of the Holy Ghost (see D&C 68:3–4).

**Facing Hard Issues**

My experience suggests that anti-Mormonism will probably continue to increase in volume, at least until the Savior returns and shuts down the presses. Because we believe in the Apostasy and the need for a restoration of the fulness of the gospel, we will never be fully accepted by those who claim to have all the truth they need in the Bible. But I want to note two things about anti-Mormon material definitely affects more than those who are not Latter-day Saints. Not only does it in some cases deter or frighten curious or interested investigators but it also troubles far more members of the Church than I had previously realized. I must receive ten phone calls, letters, or e-mails per week from members throughout the Church asking hard questions that have been raised by their neighbors or some literature they read. A short time ago a young man (married, with a family) phoned me in late afternoon, excused himself for the interruption, and then proceeded to tell me that he was teetering on the edge of leaving the Church because of his doubts. He posed several questions, and I responded to each one and bore my testimony. After about a half-hour chat, he offered profound thanks and indicated that he felt he would be okay now. Such an experience is not uncommon. I guess what I am saying is that antagonistic materials are here to stay and are affecting adversely both Latter-day Saints and the attitudes of those of other faiths.

Second, very often the critics of the Church simply use our own “stuff” against us. They do not need to create new material; they simply dig up and repackage what some of our own Church leaders have said in the past that would not be considered a part of the doctrine of the Church today. Latter-day Saints are eager to sustain and uphold
their leaders. Consequently, we are especially hesitant to suggest that something taught by President Brigham Young or Elders Orson Pratt or Orson Hyde might not be in harmony with the truth as God has made it known to us “line upon line, precept upon precept” (Isaiah 28:10; 2 Nephi 28:30).

Some time ago a colleague and I were in southern California speaking to a group of about five hundred people, both Latter-day Saints and Protestants. During the question-and-answer phase of the program, someone asked the inevitable: “Are you really Christian? Do you, as many claim, worship a different Jesus?” I explained that we worship the Christ of the New Testament, that we believe wholeheartedly in His virgin birth, His divine sonship, His miracles, His transforming teachings, His atoning sacrifice, and His bodily resurrection from the dead. I added that we also believe in the teachings of and about Christ found in the Book of Mormon and modern revelation. After the meeting, a Latter-day Saint woman came up to me and said, “You didn’t tell the truth about what we believe!”

Startled, I asked, “What do you mean?”

She responded, “You said we believe in the virgin birth of Christ, and you know very well that we don’t believe that.”

“Yes, we do,” I retorted.

She then said with a great deal of emotion, “I want to believe you, but people have told me for years that we believe that God the Father had sexual relations with Mary and thereby Jesus was conceived.”

I looked her in the eyes and said, “I’m aware of that teaching, but that is not the doctrine of the Church; that is not what we teach in the Church today. Have you ever heard the Brethren teach it in conference? Is it in the standard works, the curricular materials, or the handbooks of the Church? Is it a part of an official declaration or proclamation?” I watched as a five-hundred-pound weight seemed to come off her shoulders, as tears came into her eyes, and she simply said, “Thank you, Brother Millet.”

Not long ago, Pastor Greg Johnson and I met with an Evangelical Christian church in the Salt Lake area. The minister there asked us to come and make a presentation (“An Evangelical and a Latter-day Saint in Dialogue”) that Greg and I have made several times before in different parts of the country. The whole purpose of our presentation is to model the kind of relationships people with differing religious views can have. This kind of presentation has proven, in my estimation, to be one of the most effective bridge-building exercises in which I have been involved.
On this particular night, the first question asked by someone in the audience was on DNA and the Book of Mormon. I made a brief comment and indicated that a more detailed (and informed) response would be forthcoming in a journal article from a BYU biologist. There were many hands in the air at this point. I called on a woman close to the front of the church. Her question was, “How do you deal with the Adam-God doctrine?”

I responded, “Thank you for that question. It gives me an opportunity to explain a principle early in our exchange that will lay the foundation for other things to be said.” I took a few moments to address the questions, “What is our doctrine? What do we teach today?” I indicated that if some teaching or idea was not in the standard works, not among official declarations or proclamations, was not taught currently by living apostles or prophets in general conference or other official gatherings, or was not in the general handbooks or official curriculum of the Church, it is probably not a part of the doctrine or teachings of the Church.

I was surprised when my pastor friend then said to the group: “Are you listening to Bob? Do you hear what he is saying? This is important! It’s time for us to stop criticizing Latter-day Saints on matters they don’t even teach today.” At this point in the meeting, two things happened: first, the number of hands went down, and second, the tone of the meeting changed quite dramatically. The questions were not baiting or challenging ones but rather were efforts to clarify. For example, the last question asked was by a middle-aged man: “I for one would like to thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for what you have done here tonight. This thrills my soul. I think this is what Jesus would do. I have lived in Utah for many years, and I have many LDS friends. We get along okay; we don’t fight and quarrel over religious matters. But we really don’t talk with one another about the things that matter most to us—that is, our faith. I don’t plan to become a Latter-day Saint, and I’m certain my Mormon friends don’t plan to become Evangelical, but I would like to find more effective ways to talk heart to heart. Could you two make a few suggestions on how we can deepen and sweeten our relationships with our LDS neighbors?”

At that point, I sensed that we had somehow gotten through to some of the audience. Richard Mouw, one of my Evangelical friends, has suggested the need for “convicted civility,” the challenge to be true to our own faith and not compromise one whit of our doctrine and way of life, and at the same time strive to better understand and respect our neighbors who are of another religious persuasion. These
experiences highlight for me the challenge we face. I have no hesitation telling an individual or a group “I don’t know” when I am asked why men are ordained to the priesthood and women are not; why blacks were denied the blessings of the priesthood for almost a century and a half; and several other matters that have neither been revealed nor clarified by those holding the proper keys. The difficulty comes when someone in the past has spoken on these matters, has put forward ideas that are out of harmony with what we know and teach today, and when those teachings are still available, either in print or among the everyday conversations of the members, and have never been corrected or clarified. The underlying questions are simply, “What is our doctrine? What are the teachings of the Church today?” If we could somehow help the Saints (and the larger religious world) know the answers to those questions, it would no doubt enhance our missionary effort, our convert retention, our activation, and the image and overall strength of the Church. If presented properly, it need not weaken faith or create doubts. It could do much to focus the Saints more and more on the central, saving verities of the gospel.

Further Illustrations

We discussed earlier that one of the ways to keep our doctrine pure is to present the gospel message the way the prophets and apostles today present it. Similarly, our explanations of certain “hard doctrines” or deeper doctrines should not go beyond what the prophets believe and teach today. Let us take two illustrations. The first is an extremely sensitive matter, one that currently affects and will continue to affect the quantity and quality of convert baptisms in the Church. I speak of the matter of the blacks and the priesthood. I was raised in the Church, just as many readers were, and was well aware of the priesthood restriction. For as long as I can remember, the explanation for why our black brethren and sisters were denied the full blessings of the priesthood (including the temple) was some variation of the theme that they had been less valiant in the premortal life and thus had come to earth under a curse, an explanation that has been perpetuated as doctrine for most of our Church’s history. I had committed to memory the article of our faith that states that men and women will be punished for their own sins and not for Adam’s transgression (see Articles of Faith 1:2) and later read that “the sins of the parents cannot be answered upon the heads of the children” (Moses 6:54), but I had assumed that somehow these principles did not apply to the blacks.

In June of 1978 everything changed—not just the matter of who
could or could not be ordained to the priesthood but also the nature of the explanation for why the restriction had been in place from the beginning. Elder Dallin H. Oaks, in a 1988 interview, was asked: “As much as any doctrine the Church has espoused, or controversy the Church has been embroiled in, this one [the priesthood restriction] seems to stand out. Church members seemed to have less to go on to get a grasp of the issue. Can you address why this was the case, and what can be learned from it?” In response, Elder Oaks stated that “if you read the scriptures with this question in mind, ‘Why did the Lord command this or why did he command that,’ you find that in less than one in a hundred commands was any reason given. It’s not the pattern of the Lord to give reasons. We can put reason to revelation. We can put reasons to commandments. When we do we’re on our own. Some people put reasons to the one we’re talking about here, and they turned out to be spectacularly wrong. There is a lesson in that. The lesson I’ve drawn from that [is that] I decided a long time ago that I had faith in the command and I had no faith in the reasons that had been suggested for it.”

Then came a follow-up question: “Are you referring to reasons given even by general authorities?” Elder Oaks answered: “Sure. I’m referring to reasons given by general authorities and reasons elaborated upon that reason by others. The whole set of reasons seemed to me to be unnecessary risk taking. . . . Let’s don’t make the mistake that’s been made in the past, here and in other areas, trying to put reasons to revelation. The reasons turn out to be man-made to a great extent. The revelations are what we sustain as the will of the Lord and that’s where safety lies.”

In other words, we really do not know why the restriction on the priesthood existed. “I don’t know” is the correct answer when we are asked “Why?” The priesthood was restricted “for reasons which we believe are known to God, but which he has not made fully known to man.” I have come to realize that this is what Elder McConkie meant in his August 1978 address to the Church Educational System when he counseled us to:

forget everything that I have said, or what President Brigham Young or President George Q. Cannon or whosoever has said in days past that is contrary to the present revelation. We spoke with a limited understanding and without the light and knowledge that now has come into the world.

We get our truth and our light line upon line and precept upon precept. We have now had added a new flood of intelligence and light
on this particular subject, and it erases all the darkness and all the views and all the thoughts of the past. They don’t matter any more. . . . It is a new day and a new arrangement, and the Lord has now given the revelation that sheds light out into the world on this subject. As to any slivers of light or any particles of darkness of the past, we forget about them.  

It seems to me, therefore, that we as Latter-day Saints have two problems to solve in making the restored gospel available more extensively to people of color. First, we need to have our hearts and minds purified of all pride and prejudice. Second, we need to dismiss all previous explanations for the restriction and indicate that while we simply do not know why the restriction existed before, the fulness of the blessings of the restored gospel are now available to all who prepare themselves to receive them. Elder M. Russell Ballard observed that “we don’t know all of the reasons why the Lord does what he does. We need to be content that someday we’ll fully understand it.”  

Now to the second illustration. When I open the discussion to questions before a group of persons not of our faith, I am always asked about our doctrine of God and the Godhead, particularly concerning the teachings of Joseph Smith and Lorenzo Snow. I generally do not have too much difficulty explaining our view of how through the Atonement man can eventually become like God, become more and more Christlike. For that matter, Orthodox Christianity, a huge segment of the Christian world, still holds to a view of human deification. The Bible itself teaches that men and women may become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4), “joint-heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:17), gain “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16), and become perfect, even as our Father in heaven is perfect (see Matthew 5:48). The Apostle John declared, “Beloved, now are we the [children] of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). Perhaps more important, this doctrine is taught powerfully in modern revelation (see D&C 76:58; 132:19–20).  

The tougher issue for other Christians to deal with is the accompanying doctrine set forth in the King Follett sermon and the Lorenzo Snow couplet—namely, that God was once a man. Latter-day scriptures state unequivocally that God is a man, a Man of Holiness (see Moses 6:57) who possesses a body of flesh and bones (see D&C 130:22). These concepts are clearly a part of the doctrinal restoration. We teach that man is not of a lower order or different species than God. This, of course, makes many of our Christian friends extremely
nervous (if not angry), for it appears to them that we are lowering God in the scheme of things and thus attempting to bridge the Creator/creature chasm.

I suppose all we can say in response is that we know what we know as a result of modern revelation and that from our perspective the distance between God and man is still tremendous, almost infinite. Our Father in Heaven is indeed omnipotent, omniscient, and, by the power of His Holy Spirit, omnipresent. He is a glories, exalted, resurrected being, “the only supreme governor and independent being in whom all fullness and perfection dwell; . . . in him every good gift and every good principle dwell; . . . he is the Father of lights; in him the principle of faith dwells independently, and he is the object in whom the faith of all other rational and accountable beings center for life and salvation.”

Modern revelation attests that the Almighty sits enthroned “with glory, honor, power, majesty, might, dominion, truth, justice, judgment, mercy, and an infinity of fulness” (D&C 109:77).

And what do we know beyond the fact that God is an exalted man? What do we know of His mortal existence? What do we know of the time before He became God? Nothing. We really do not know more than what was stated by the Prophet Joseph Smith, and that is precious little. Insights concerning God’s life before Godhood are not found in the standard works, in official declarations or proclamations, in current handbooks, or in curricular materials, nor are doctrinal expositions on the subject delivered in general conference today. This topic is not what we would call a central and saving doctrine, one that must be believed (or understood) to hold a temple recommend or be in good standing in the Church.

This latter illustration highlights an important point: a teaching may be true and yet not a part of what is taught and emphasized in the Church today. Whether it is true or not may, in fact, be irrelevant, if indeed the Brethren do not teach it today or it is not taught directly in the standard works or found in our approved curriculum. Let’s take another question: Was Jesus married? The scriptures do not provide an answer. “We do not know anything about Jesus Christ being married,” President Charles W. Penrose stated. “The Church has no authoritative declaration on the subject.” So whether He was or was not is not part of the doctrine of the Church. It would be well for us to apply the following lesson from President Harold B. Lee: “With respect to doctrines and meanings of scriptures, let me give you a safe counsel. It is usually not well to use a single passage of scripture [or, I would add, a single sermon] in proof of a point of doctrine unless it is confirmed...
by modern revelation or by the Book of Mormon. . . . To single out a passage of scripture to prove a point, unless it is [so] confirmed . . . is always a hazardous thing.”

Conclusion

There is a very real sense in which we as Latter-day Saints are spoiled. We have been given so much, have had so much knowledge dispensed from on high relative to the nature of God, Christ, man, the plan of salvation, and the overall purpose of life here and the glory to be had hereafter, that we are prone to expect to have all the answers to all the questions of life. Elder Neal A. Maxwell pointed out that “the exhilarations of discipleship exceed its burdens. Hence, while journeying through our Sinai, we are nourished in the Bountiful-like oases of the Restoration. Of these oases some of our first impressions may prove to be more childish than definitive. . . . In our appreciation, little wonder some of us mistake a particular tree for the whole of an oasis, or a particularly refreshing pool for the entirety of the Restoration’s gushing and living waters. Hence, in our early exclamations there may even be some unintended exaggerations. We have seen and partaken of far too much; hence, we ‘cannot [speak] the smallest part which [we] feel’ (Alma 26:16).”

We have much, to be sure, but there are indeed “many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God” yet to come forth (Articles of Faith 1:9). The Lord stated to Joseph Smith in Nauvoo: “I deign to reveal unto my church things which have been kept hid from before the foundation of the world, things that pertain to the dispensation of the fulness of times” (D&C 124:41; compare 121:26; 128:18). As Elder Oaks observed, we have been given many of the commands but not all of the reasons why, many of the directives but not all of the explanations. I regularly state to my classes that it is as important for us to know what we do not know as it is for us to know what we know. Far too many things are taught or discussed or even argued about that fit into the realm of the unrevealed and thus the unresolved. Such matters, particularly if they do not fall within the range of revealed truth we teach today, do not edify or inspire. Often, very often, they lead to confusion and sow discord.

This does not in any way mean that we should not seek to study and grow and expand in our gospel understanding. Peter explained that there needs to be a reason for the hope within us (see 1 Peter 3:15). Our knowledge should be as settling to the mind as it is soothing to the heart. Elder Maxwell taught that some “Church members know
just enough about the doctrines to converse superficially on them, but their scant knowledge about the deep doctrines is inadequate for deep discipleship (see 1 Corinthians 2:10). Thus uninformed about the deep doctrines, they make no deep change in their lives.”

President Hugh B. Brown once observed: “I am impressed with the testimony of a man who can stand and say he knows the gospel is true. What I would like to ask is ‘But, sir, do you know the gospel?’ . . . Mere testimony can be gained with but perfunctory knowledge of the Church and its teachings. . . . But to retain a testimony, to be of service in building the Lord’s kingdom, requires a serious study of the gospel and knowing what it is.”

On another occasion, President Brown taught that we are required only to “defend those doctrines of the Church contained in the four standard works. . . . Anything beyond that by anyone is his or her own opinion and not scripture. . . . The only way I know of by which the teachings of any person or group may become binding upon the church is if the teachings have been reviewed by all the brethren, submitted to the highest councils of the church, and then approved by the whole body of the church.”

Again, the issue is one of focus, one of emphasis—where we choose to spend our time when we teach the gospel to both Latter-day Saints and to those of other faiths.

There is a valid reason why it is difficult to “tie down” Latter-day Saint doctrine, one that derives from the very nature of the Restoration. The fact that God continues to speak through His anointed servants; the fact that He, through those servants, continues to reveal, elucidate, and clarify what has already been given; and the fact that our canon of scripture is open, flexible, and expanding—all of these things militate against what many in the Christian world would call a systematic theology.

It is the declaration of sound and solid doctrine, the doctrine found in scripture and taught regularly by Church leaders, that builds faith and strengthens testimony and commitment to the Lord and His kingdom. Elder Maxwell explained that “deeds do matter as well as doctrines, but the doctrines can move us to do the deeds, and the Spirit can help us to understand the doctrines as well as prompt us to do the deeds.”

He also noted that “when weary legs falter and detours and roadside allurements entice, the fundamental doctrines will summon from deep within us fresh determination. Extraordinary truths can move us to extraordinary accomplishments.”

The teaching and the application of sound doctrine are great safeguards to us in these last days, shields against the fiery darts of the adversary. Understanding true doctrine and being true to that doctrine
can keep us from ignorance, from error, and from sin. The Apostle Paul counseled Timothy: “If thou put the brethren [and sisters] in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, whereunto thou hast attained. . . . Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine” (1 Timothy 4:6, 13).

Notes

2. Bruce R. McConkie, Mormon Doctrine, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 204.
4. Boyd K. Packer, Conference Report, April 1977, 80; emphasis added; cited hereafter as CR.
6. Neal A. Maxwell, One More Strain of Praise (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1999), x.
8. Smith, Teachings, 392.
11. Smith, Teachings, 278.
14. David O. McKay, in CR, April 1907, 11–12; see also October 1912, 121; April 1962, 7.
15. Smith, Teachings, 89.
23. See Richard Mouw, Uncommon Decency (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-
What Is Our Doctrine?

27. M. Russell Ballard, remarks at Elijah Abel memorial service; reported in *Church News*, October 5, 2002, 12.
The Scriptures

Photo by Roger Tuttle
Cafeterias or Chef Schools?
Getting Students into the Scriptures

Timothy L. Carver

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Perhaps Church Educational System teachers are like good mothers. We always want to have a nice hot meal ready for our students when they arrive. But sooner or later a good mom realizes that someday her children will be on their own and will need to know how to cook for themselves.

Leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and of the Church Educational System have long encouraged us not only to provide lessons that are ready to be eaten but also to help our students learn how to cook on their own. President Howard W. Hunter taught:

I strongly encourage you to use the scriptures in your teaching and to do all within your power to help the students use them and become comfortable with them. I would like our young people to have confidence in the scriptures, and I would like you to interpret that phrase two ways.

First, we want the students to have confidence in the strength and truths of the scriptures, confidence that their Heavenly Father is really speaking to them through the scriptures, and confidence that they can turn to the scriptures and find answers to their problems and their prayers. That is one kind of confidence I would hope you give your students, and you can give it to them if you show them daily, hourly, that you trust in the scriptures just that way. Show them that you yourself are confident that the scriptures hold the answers to many—indeed most—of life’s problems. So when you teach, teach from the scriptures.

Obviously another meaning implied in the phrase “confidence in the scriptures” is to teach students the standard works so thoroughly
that they can move through them with confidence, learning the essential scriptures and sermons and texts contained in them. We would hope none of your students would leave your classroom fearful or embarrassed or ashamed that they cannot find the help they need because they do not know the scriptures well enough to locate the proper passages.

We have a great responsibility as religious educators in the Church to make sure our own members, our own young people, do not fall into that unfortunate category of being blinded, of being good, fine, worthy young men and women who are kept from the truths of the scriptures because they do not know where to find those truths and because they do not possess confidence between the covers of their standard works.

Our great task is to ground these students in what can go with them through life, to point them toward him who loves them and can guide them where none of us will go. Make certain that when the glamour and charisma of your personality and lectures and classroom environment are gone that they are not left empty-handed to face the world. Give them the gifts that will carry them through when they have to stand alone. When you do this, the entire Church is blessed for generations to come.

We ought to have a Church full of women and men who know the scriptures thoroughly, who cross-reference and mark them, who develop lessons and talks from the Topical Guide, and who have mastered the maps, the Bible Dictionary, and the other helps that are contained in this wonderful set of standard works. There is obviously more there than we can master quickly.

Not in this dispensation, surely not in any dispensation, have the scriptures—the enduring, enlightening word of God—been so readily available and so helpfully structured for the use of every man, woman, and child who will search them. The written word of God is in the most readable and accessible form ever provided to lay members in the history of the world. Surely we will be held accountable if we do not read them, and surely you will be held accountable as professional teachers if you do not wholly invest your students in them.

### Four Helpful Scripture Study Skills

There are many scripture study skills that might be discussed. Space will allow only four:

1. **Teach students to read for understanding.** Many times students will skip over words, phrases, or verses they do not understand because they are more focused on getting done than they are on getting understanding. Encourage students to set an amount of time to read instead of a number of verses to read, and they will be much more likely
to search than to skim. President Hunter also stated: “It is better to have a set amount of time to give scriptural study each day than to have a set amount of chapters to read. Sometimes we find that the study of a single verse will occupy the whole time.”

2. **Teach students how to use the scripture helps.** In 1982, Elder Bruce R. McConkie stated that the new Latter-day Saint edition of the scriptures was one of three most significant things that had happened in recent Church history. He then added, “We are somewhat saddened, however, that the generality of the Saints have not yet caught the vision of what our new scriptural publications contain and are not using them as they should. . . .

“Never since the day of Joseph Smith; never since the translation of the Book of Mormon; never since the receipt of the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants and the inspired writings in the Pearl of Great Price—never has there been such an opportunity to increase gospel scholarship as has now come to us.”

These scripture helps include chapter headings, the Joseph Smith Translation, alternate words, and maps.

**Chapter headings.** Prior to attending a Shakespearean play, many people will take the time to read a summary of the plot. Though doing so does not ensure total understanding, it greatly increases comprehension of the story they are about to see. A chapter heading does the same for a chapter of scripture. Teach the students to take a few moments to read the chapter heading.

**The Joseph Smith Translation.** In the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh, the King James Version tells us that “the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh” (Exodus 9:12). At the bottom of the page, we find the Joseph Smith Translation to this verse: “And Pharaoh hardened his heart, and he hearkened not unto them.” Teach students that the term **appendix** in the footnotes refers to a section in the back of the Bible (just before the maps) containing longer additions of the Joseph Smith Translation that would not fit at the bottom of the page.

**Alternate words.** You will also see the following abbreviations in the footnotes:

“HEB” gives an alternate translation from the original Hebrew word. Genesis 6:6 reads: “And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth.” At the bottom of the page we find that an alternate Hebrew translation for repent is to be sorry.

“IE” provides a simple explanation of a difficult word or phrase. In 1 Samuel 17:6, we read that Goliath wore “greaves of brass.” The “IE” footnote at the bottom explains the word greaves as shin armor.
“OR” gives an alternate word for an archaic English word. For example, 1 Samuel 14:20 states that “there was a very great discomfiture.” The “OR” footnote informs us that discomfiture is an archaic word for panic.

Maps. How far did the Wise Men travel in their journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem in their search for the Christ child? Your students will probably be surprised to learn that it is only about five miles. Maps are very helpful in visualizing the distances and locations of significant sites and journeys. The campaign of Joshua against the Canaanites, the locations of Gethsemane and Calvary, and the journey of the Saints from Nauvoo to the Salt Lake Valley are just a few examples of information that becomes much more visual with the help of maps.

3. Teach students to use two dictionaries. What is a soothsayer? What are frankincense and myrrh? What was Isaiah prophesying when he told disobedient Israel that “ten acres of vineyard shall yield one bath, and the seed of an homer shall yield an ephah” (Isaiah 5:10; emphasis added)? Helpful insights into all these words can be found in the Bible Dictionary. Show the students the value of taking time to look up words they do not understand.

Not all difficult words are found in the Bible Dictionary, however. Another great help is to have a regular dictionary on hand. How often do students come across the words woe and verily in the scriptures? Do they know what these words mean? Looking up these words in a dictionary will significantly enhance their understanding of this warning from the Lord: “Verily, I say unto you, that woe shall come unto the inhabitants of the earth if they will not hearken unto my words” (D&C 5:5; emphasis added).

A good dictionary will also offer insights into the meaning of a word by breaking it down into its roots. Isaiah teaches us that Jesus Christ “bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:12). The dictionary shows that the word intercession consists of two Latin roots: inter (between) + cedere (to go). This understanding provides greater insight into why Jesus Christ is called our Intercessor with the Father. Try it with the word transgressor and see what you discover.

4. Teach students how to find doctrines and principles. Though the terms doctrine and principle can be used interchangeably, it might be helpful to consider the following simple definitions:

Doctrine: “An eternal truth we learn.”

• The Father has a body of flesh and bone.
• There are three degrees of glory.
• Jesus Christ created the earth.

Principle: “An eternal truth we live.”

• Repentance
• Prayer
• The Word of Wisdom

What is the value of learning the doctrines? President Boyd K. Packer said: “True doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behavior. The study of the doctrines of the gospel will improve behavior quicker than a study of behavior will improve behavior. . . . That is why we stress so forcefully the study of the doctrines of the gospel.”

Living the principles always brings forth the blessings attached to them. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated—and when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated” (D&C 130:20–21).

President Packer further said of principles: “The Word of Wisdom was ‘given for a principle with promise’ (D&C 89:3). That word principle in the revelation is a very important one. A principle is an enduring truth, a law, a rule you can adopt to guide you in making decisions.”

A principle stated with its promised blessing becomes a “principle with promise.” Some examples of principles with promise are:

• True repentance brings a forgiveness of sin.
• Those who endure to the end will be saved.
• Those who live the Word of Wisdom will run and not be weary.

Determining the doctrines and principles within a block of scripture is not a quick skill to learn, but it is a skill well worth the time to develop. Elder Richard G. Scott has said: “As you seek spiritual knowledge, search for principles. Carefully separate them from the detail used to explain them. Principles are concentrated truth, packaged for application to a wide variety of circumstances. . . . It is worth great effort to organize the truth we gather to simple statements of principle.”

Some scriptural writers point out principles with the phrase “thus we see”: 
• “And thus we see that by small means the Lord can bring about great things” (1 Nephi 16:29).

• “And thus we see that the devil will not support his children at the last day, but doth speedily drag them down to hell” (Alma 30:60).

• “Thus we may see that the Lord is merciful unto all who will, in the sincerity of their hearts, call upon his holy name” (Helaman 3:27).

Principles are sometimes stated (or implied) in “if . . . then” terms:

• “And if it shall so be that they shall believe these things then shall the greater things be made manifest unto them” (3 Nephi 26:9; emphasis added).

• “If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine” (John 7:17).

Some scriptures merely imply the “if . . . then” term:

• “And inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper” (1 Nephi 2:20).

• “Behold, he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven” (D&C 58:42).

Many doctrines and principles lie quietly hidden within the stories of the scriptures. The story of David and Goliath can be told as an exciting tale of a boy who slew a giant. But the relevance to our lives is lacking unless we find the doctrines and principles that lie beneath the storyline:

• God is more powerful than any man, any armor, or any army. (doctrine)

• We should trust in the arm of God and not in the arm of flesh. (principle)

• Those who trust in God will be supported by God. (principle)

• The Lord will do battle for His people. (doctrine)

The stories, events, revelations, and sermons of the scriptures are filled with doctrines and principles. How unfortunate if our youth see only facts and history.
Gullible Gulls

President Marion G. Romney, former member of the First Presidency, tells a story from Reader’s Digest that ties directly to our students’ development of scripture skills. Part of it reads as follows:

In our friendly neighbor city of St. Augustine, great flocks of sea gulls are starving amid plenty. Fishing is still good, but the gulls don’t know how to fish. For generations they have depended on the shrimp fleet to toss them scraps from the nets. Now the fleet has moved. . . .

The shrimpers had created a Welfare State for the . . . sea gulls. The big birds never bothered to learn how to fish for themselves and they never taught their children to fish. Instead they led their little ones to the shrimp nets.

Now the sea gulls, the fine free birds that almost symbolize liberty itself, are starving to death because they gave in to the “something for nothing” lure! They sacrificed their independence for a handout.

We as teachers must avoid the temptation to provide a daily handout and concentrate on developing in our students the skills needed to feed themselves from the scriptures. Sharing with students the hope of Church leaders that students acquire these skills will increase their desires to learn how to cook and lessen their disappointment in not always being served a hot meal.

Notes

2. Howard W. Hunter, “Reading the Scriptures,” Ensign, November 1979, 64.
The Abrahamic Covenant: A Foundational Theme for the Old Testament

Michael Goodman

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In 1993, President Boyd K. Packer taught us that “if you give each one of [your students] a framework upon which the truths they discover at random can be organized into a personal testimony, you will have served them well. . . . There is great value in presenting a brief but very carefully organized overview of the entire course at the very beginning.”

I have found President Packer’s counsel to be true in my own teaching. I have especially enjoyed teaching the Old Testament. It contains so many faith-filled stories as well as soul-stirring symbols that are a joy to share with our students. However, with the tremendous length and diversity of the book, we can get lost in the details and forget our purpose in teaching it in the first place. The Abrahamic covenant provides a foundational theme and conceptual framework from which we can better understand God’s work in the Old Testament. From the days of Adam, the Lord has always worked through covenants to save His children. By studying how God worked with ancient Israel, we will understand the importance of covenants today as well as the consequences of obedience or disobedience to those covenants.

The Gospel and Abraham

The gospel is generally known as “the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Nevertheless, gospel is used in other instances, such as “the gospel of the kingdom” (Matthew 4:23), “the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts
20:24), “the gospel of God” (Romans 1:1), “the gospel of peace” (Romans 10:15), and “the gospel of your salvation” (Ephesians 1:13). However, for our purposes in the Old Testament, the name “the gospel of Abraham” (D&C 110:12) is of particular interest. It is the only name that refers to someone other than Christ. The other names are simply descriptive terms.

Why would the Lord refer to His own gospel as the gospel of Abraham? A similar example is the renaming of the higher priesthood. We learn from Doctrine and Covenants 107:2–4 that the name of the priesthood was changed to avoid the too-frequent repetition of the Lord’s name and to honor Melchizedek, who was a great high priest and who serves as a type or shadow of Christ. In the same way, the gospel covenant given to Abraham serves as a type and shadow of the gospel covenant given to us through Jesus Christ. Therefore, to understand the Abrahamic covenant is to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Covenants and Ordinances

Before we define the Abrahamic covenant and apply it to our study of the Old Testament, a brief discussion of covenants and ordinances may be helpful. A covenant denotes an agreement between two parties and, in the gospel sense, is a binding agreement between God and man. This connecting link gives us access to a protection and power far beyond our own unaided efforts. Heavenly Father works through covenants to save His children, both in times past as well as today.

Ordinances are closely related to the principle of covenants. Elder Henry B. Eyring taught: “Our Heavenly Father . . . provided covenants we could make with him. And with those covenants he provided ordinances where he could signify what he promised or covenanted to do and we could signify what we promised or covenanted to do.”3 Doctrine and Covenants 84:20–21 states: “Therefore, in the ordinances thereof, the power of godliness is manifest. And without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh.” It would be difficult to find a place in the scriptures where ordinances and covenants are more central to the text than in the Old Testament. By making the study and understanding of ordinances and covenants in the Old Testament a foundational principle, we are enabled to understand the power of godliness and of God Himself.
The Abrahamic Covenant—The Lord’s Part

A number of key scripture passages help us define the Abrahamic covenant. Genesis 12:1–3 and Abraham 2:9–11 list several aspects of the covenant. The Lord promised Abraham that he would become a great nation, that his name would be great, that he would be blessed, that the Lord would bless them that blessed him and curse them that cursed him, that he would be a blessing to his own seed, and that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed. In Genesis 13:14–16, the Lord summarizes several of these blessings in two main promises: first, that Abraham would receive an eternal inheritance of land and second, that he would be blessed with “seed as the dust of the earth,” or in other words, innumerable posterity. The other blessings fit into the category of Abraham’s becoming a blessing to his seed and to all the families of the earth. Abraham 2:9–10 says that “thou shalt be a blessing unto thy seed after thee, that in their hands they shall bear this ministry and Priesthood unto all nations; and I will bless them through thy name; for as many as receive this Gospel shall be called after thy name.” Thus, Abraham was promised that the priesthood and the gospel would be given to him and his posterity through eternity. We can summarize the Lord’s part of the Abrahamic covenant with three promised blessings: land, seed, and the gospel. Once we understand these three principles, we will begin to see them throughout the Old Testament, especially in the book of Genesis.4

These three promises have more than local significance to Abraham and his family. They were promised to all of Abraham’s seed. Abraham 2:10 teaches us that all who accept the gospel are accounted as his seed. Thus, these promises apply to us as well. However, we must see them in an eternal perspective if we are to apply them to our own lives. Abraham was promised a land of inheritance for all eternity. From the prophets, we learn that this earth will be perfected and receive its paradisiacal glory and ultimately become our celestial kingdom.5 If Abraham is (and we ourselves are) given an everlasting inheritance on this earth, we are ultimately promised eternal life in the celestial kingdom if we are faithful to our covenant. Abraham was (and we were) promised seed as the sands of the seashore or the stars of the sky. This promise can also be fulfilled only through our exaltation, which will allow us to have eternal increase. Finally, through living the gospel, we, just like Abraham, will ultimately inherit eternal life. So the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant can be summarized as celestial inheritance, eternal increase, and eternal life. These promises make up God’s part of the Abrahamic covenant.
The Abrahamic Covenant—Abraham’s Part

As shown above, the promises of the Lord to Abraham are truly remarkable. So what was Abraham’s part in this covenant? Ultimately, it can be divided into two parts. Two of Abraham’s promised blessings would have to await fruition until after his death. He would never own all the land the Lord promised him, nor would his posterity number as the stars in the sky in his lifetime. However, the third promise, the bestowal of the gospel, was given to him in his life.

As a consequence, two things were required of him in relation to this promised blessing. In Genesis 17:1, the Lord said to Abraham, “I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect.” Simply speaking, Abraham was commanded to be obedient. This is the first aspect of Abraham’s part. Second, as contained in so many of the scriptures promising Abraham the gospel, he was to share the gospel with the rest of Heavenly Father’s children. Repeatedly, he was told that he would be a blessing to his own seed and to all nations. One example of this work can be seen through his missionary labors in Haran (see Genesis 12:5). In Abraham 2:6, the Lord says, “I have purposed to take thee away out of Haran, and to make thee a minister to bear my name.” To summarize, Abraham’s (and our) part in the covenant is to live the gospel teachings and commandments and to share them with those around us.

In Genesis 17:7, the Lord promised Abraham, “And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.” In Exodus 6:7, the Lord told Moses, “And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God: and ye shall know that I am the Lord your God.” This could be said to be the ultimate summary of the Abrahamic covenant. The Lord covenants to be our God and to exalt us (see Moses 1:39) if we will but be His people and stay faithful to Him. All scripture can and must be interpreted through this very lens. All that the Lord does is for our ultimate exaltation (see 2 Nephi 26:24). If we remember this as we strive to understand difficult aspects of the Old Testament as well as while we strive with difficult aspects of our own lives, we are likely to gain a greater understanding of the Lord’s role in the scriptures and in our daily lives.

Framing the Old Testament in the Abrahamic Covenant

With a basic understanding of the Abrahamic covenant, we can begin to understand better the extraordinary and yet diverse storyline
and text that make up the Old Testament. Consider the story of Noah. It is difficult for many people to understand how a loving God would drown all but eight of His children. Why would an all-loving God be so harsh? The answer to such a question lies in a basic understanding of the eternal nature of our existence and the relationship God desires to have with us. At the time of Noah, God’s children had become very wicked. Genesis 6:11 states, “The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence.” It is difficult to imagine the pain of an all-loving Father as He watched His children destroy one another. Not only were they prematurely ending each other’s mortal lives but also they were damning themselves in the process and thus destroying the possibility of returning to live with Heavenly Father again. Is it any wonder that the God of heaven looked down and wept? (see Moses 7:28). However, we should realize the importance of understanding the Lord’s love, not only for those who were hurt but also for those doing the hurting.

Though the scriptures speak of His indignation and anger, He did not send the floods to further damn His children but to stop them from further damning themselves. Once His children had gone past the point of repentance, leaving them in that state would be contrary to the Abrahamic covenant and the plan of salvation. It would further damn the people who perpetrated the wickedness and make it impossible for His innocent children to live safely. In such conditions, they could never continue to grow in the gospel and to share with others the promised covenant blessings. Hence, the most merciful, loving thing the Lord could do was to interrupt the perpetual cycle of violence and wickedness, thus sending the perpetrators to another realm in which they could be taught and hopefully saved (see 1 Peter 4:6).

The story of Israel’s removal to Egypt, four hundred years of enslavement, subsequent exodus, and settlement in the promised land begins to take on new meaning when viewed through the lens of the Abrahamic covenant and the plan of salvation. At the time of Israel’s removal from Canaan to Egypt, the people of Israel were barely more than an extended clan. Together, only seventy souls went with Jacob to Egypt. Remember that one of the responsibilities borne by the children of Abraham under the covenant was to share the gospel with the world. Seventy souls in the midst of the most powerful (and hostile) nations of the day stood very little chance of surviving, much less of proselyting. However, as the Lord had done with Abraham before, and as He would do in the future with His Only Begotten Son, the Lord used Egypt as a safe haven for the protection and growth of His cov-
enant people. Life was not easy for Abraham’s descendants in Egypt; nevertheless, they thrived and became a mighty people as a result of their time there. By the time the Israelites left Egypt, they numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Once again the Lord placed them in the middle of the most powerful nations on earth, at the crossroads of the ancient world. But this time, if they would be faithful, they would be ready to fulfill their role in the covenant and share the gospel with all those with whom they came in contact. There was an obstacle, though: the land they were to inherit already belonged to another group of people—the Canaanites.

It might seem strange that the Lord would command the Israelites not to mingle with the Canaanites if He really wanted to share the gospel with all of His children. However, as with His children in the time of Noah, the Canaanites appear to have passed the point of repentance. The Lord knew the corrupting influence they could have on those assigned to share the gospel with the rest of the world. Thus, He commanded the Israelites not only not to interact with them but also to remove them from the land. Through these actions the Canaanites, like the people in Noah’s day, could be sent into another sphere where hopefully they would be ready to listen, and the Lord’s covenant people could begin in earnest to fulfill their part of the covenant and bring the gospel to all the earth.

The Israelites were not faithful to the Lord’s command to remove the Canaanites from the land and, as a result, lived among a people who would not of themselves repent and who posed a great threat to the purity and integrity of the Lord’s covenant people. Could this be the reason behind so many of the Lord’s commandments not to mingle with their neighbors? Even before they entered the promised land, the Lord was already teaching the Israelites to be a separate people. So many of the regulations in the law of Moses set Israel up as a separate people right down to what they ate (see Leviticus 11), what they wore, and even how they farmed (see Leviticus 19). These restrictions would seem to make it impossible for them to fulfill their covenant responsibility to share the gospel with the rest of Heavenly Father’s children. However, they were not commanded to be separate from all people—just from those with whom the Lord commanded them not to live. A careful reading of many of the commandments shows them to be related to keeping the Israelites separate from the Canaanites. They were commanded to be a peculiar people, not an exclusionary people (see Exodus 19:5). However, exclusionary is what they began to be. The Israelites, as Abraham’s descendants, simply had to live and share
the gospel. The story of the Old Testament largely witnesses to what happens when the Lord’s people do not do these two things.

It seems obvious that when we get past Abraham himself, there appears to be little effort by the Israelites to share the gospel with the world. When the Israelites had righteous leadership, it appears that the Lord’s focus was to get the people obedient and ready so they could begin to share the gospel with others. The Lord constantly sent His servants, the prophets, to call Israel to repentance. Whether we speak of Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Ezra, or Malachi, the prophets were doing then exactly what prophets are doing now—trying to bring the covenant people to the point of obedience and readiness where they can share the gospel with the rest of Heavenly Father’s children. By evaluating God’s work in light of His desire to prepare us to live and share the gospel, we stand on more solid ground in our attempt to understand difficult passages in the Old Testament.

Without an understanding of the Abrahamic covenant and the plan of salvation, it might appear that the Old Testament is somehow different from the gospel of Jesus Christ. Though many of the practices differed, the gospel was the same and the Lord’s purposes were the same. John Taylor taught that “the same principles that now exist, in relation to the gospel, existed in the various dispensations that have been in being in the different ages of the world. They existed in the days of Moses, in Enoch’s day, and in the days of Adam; and they existed in eternity in the mind of God, before this world rolled into existence, the morning stars sang together, or the sons of God shouted for joy.” Brigham Young also taught that “we are safe in saying that from the day that Adam was created and placed in the Garden of Eden to this day, the plan of salvation and the revelations of the will of God to man are unchanged, although mankind have not for many ages been favored therewith, in consequence of apostasy and wickedness. There is no evidence to be found in the Bible that the Gospel should be one thing in the days of the Israelites, another in the days of Christ and his Apostles, and another in the 19th century, but, on the contrary, we are instructed that God is the same in every age, and that his plan of saving his children is the same. The plan of salvation is one, from the beginning of the world to the end thereof.”

**The Old Testament and the Restored Gospel**

This knowledge helps us relate the Old Testament directly to the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Though forms or practices may change, the purposes of the Lord do not. He desires to help us become His
people not only in name but also in deed. He sought to prepare ancient Israel to share the gospel as He continues to prepare modern Israel to share the gospel. The Lord Himself desired to dwell among His people and be their God as He desires to dwell with us and be our God (see Exodus 29:45–46; Doctrine and Covenants 110:7–8). This was part of what He covenanted to do with Abraham. However, from the beginning, ancient Israel seemed ill at ease having a living God in their presence. When the Lord commanded Israel to come up to Mount Sinai, the people were afraid of the Lord’s presence and said to Moses, “Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die” (Exodus 20:19). In further attempts to “dwell amidst” His people, the Lord commanded Israel first to build a tabernacle and later in the Old Testament to build a permanent temple. In Exodus 40, we see that when the tabernacle was completed, the presence of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Likewise, in our day, the Lord has repeatedly asked us to build temples so He can dwell with us. We have so much to learn from both the successes and failures of ancient Israel.

Like the ancient Israelites, we have been commanded to be a peculiar people. This commandment means we must not touch that which will corrupt us spiritually. Like ancient Israel, we have been asked to be a separate people. We have been given a dietary law to keep us healthy and safe from unclean substances. We have been asked to abstain from some of the fashions of the day that are offensive to God. We have been asked to be a temple-building and temple-attending people. In all things, the Lord continues to try to “bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). The question is whether we personally will be more successful than ancient Israel in fulfilling our part of the covenant. We have so many examples in the Old Testament of various individuals and groups who were more or less faithful to their covenants. The Old Testament may be one of the clearest places to see the results of faithfulness to the covenant versus the lack thereof.

So as we, like ancient Israel, strive to be faithful to the gospel covenant, what would the Lord have us do? First, like Abraham himself, the Lord would have us be humble, faithful, and fully obedient. One of the finest formulas for accomplishing this is contained in Abraham 1:2: “And, finding there was greater happiness and peace and rest for me, I sought for the blessings of the fathers, and the right whereunto I should be ordained to administer the same; having been myself a follower of righteousness, desiring also to be one who possessed great knowledge, and to be a greater follower of righteousness, and to possess a greater knowledge, and to be a father of many nations, a prince of
peace, and desiring to receive instructions, and to keep the commandments of God, I became a rightful heir, a High Priest, holding the right belonging to the fathers.” Abraham wanted what we all want: greater happiness, peace, and rest. His formula was simple. He sought greater knowledge of God and of the gospel so he could be more righteous than he was. He also knew that as he grew more righteous, he would gain more knowledge. And in turn, this knowledge would enable him to be more righteous. It is a great circle. This circle can be restated in terms of the first principles and ordinances of the gospel. We all seek to increase our faith in Christ. As our faith in Christ increases, the natural result is that we want to repent (see Helaman 14:13). As we repent and draw nearer to God, we make covenants with Him. As we keep those covenants, His presence in the form of the Holy Ghost begins to play a more active role in our lives. The Holy Spirit confirms and strengthens our faith, which starts the cycle over again.

It is important to remember that there are two aspects to our part in the Abrahamic covenant. First, we must live the gospel, and then we must share it. The Lord told Abraham in Abraham 2:11 that in him and in his seed “shall all the families of the earth be blessed, even with the blessings of the Gospel, which are the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal.” How was this to happen? Though there is little information in the Old Testament on this aspect of the covenant, the latter-day prophets have helped us to understand it more clearly. President Spencer W. Kimball said in the Saturday morning session of the April 1981 general conference,

My brothers and sisters, as the Brethren of the First Presidency and the Twelve have mediated upon and prayed about the great latter-day work the Lord has given us to do, we are impressed that the mission of the Church is threefold: To proclaim the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people; To perfect the Saints by preparing them to receive the ordinances of the gospel and by instruction and discipline to gain exaltation; To redeem the dead by performing vicarious ordinances of the gospel for those who have lived on the earth. All three are part of one work—to assist our Father in Heaven and His Son, Jesus Christ, in Their grand and glorious mission “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39).”

It is through working to accomplish the threefold mission of the Church that we will ultimately be able to fulfill our part of the covenant. There are really only two groups of people associated with “all the families of the earth.” There are those who are living and those who
are dead. The only way we can bless those who have passed on with “the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal” is through our efforts to redeem the dead. It is through our family history and temple work that we are able to be ministers of salvation to our ancestors. As for the living, they can also be divided into two groups: those who are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and those who are not. For those who are not members, the only way we can bring them salvation is to proclaim the gospel to them. This great missionary effort of the Lord’s covenant people is part of what the Lord referred to when He told Abraham that in him and in his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed. Finally, membership in the Lord’s Church does not promise salvation or exaltation. These promised blessings are gained as we are faithful to the covenants we make in the Lord’s Church. Therefore, there is a great need to minister even among those who are already members. We call this ministry the work of perfecting the saints. Thus, by proclaiming the gospel, perfecting the saints, and redeeming the dead, we are ultimately fulfilling our part of the great covenant God established and named the Abrahamic covenant.

Conclusion

The Old Testament is the first testament of Jesus Christ. Rather than an out-of-date, irrelevant story of a people long since passed, the Old Testament is the story of Israel's attempt to live faithful to the covenants the Lord had given to them. This, of course, did not start with the prophet Abraham. Adam, Seth, Enoch, Noah, and all of the other prophets before Abraham lived the same covenant just as Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Nehemiah, and all the prophets after Abraham continued to live the same covenant. However, it did not stop at the end of the Old Testament or at the end of the New Testament. Joseph Smith and all the prophets of this dispensation continue the very same work. The work goes by many names, two of which are the gospel of Abraham and the Abrahamic covenant. By framing our study of the Old Testament within this covenant, not only are we able to understand the Old Testament better but we are also better able to live our own covenants in this the dispensation of the fulness of times.

Notes

1. Boyd K. Packer, “The Great Plan of Happiness,” address delivered at the seventeenth annual Church Educational System Religious Educators’ Symposium, August 10, 1993, 2; emphasis in the original.
4. See Genesis 15:5–7; 17:2–8; 18:18–19; 22:17–18; 26:3–4; 28:13–14 for examples of these three promises being given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
The First Presidency: Gordon B. Hinckley, Thomas S. Monson, and James E. Faust
How blessed we are as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to be led and instructed by inspired prophets, seers, and revelators—men who have been groomed and tutored by the Lord over many years of devoted service to the kingdom of God. The extended periods of time that our apostles and prophets serve ensure that our leaders are well schooled and seasoned in the ways of the Lord, and that they are firmly rooted in the doctrine of the Lord and “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Enos 1:1).

President Gordon B. Hinckley said concerning this topic:

Some express concern that the President of the Church is likely always to be a rather elderly man, to which my response is, “What a blessing!” The work in this dispensation was first put in place through the instrumentality of the Prophet Joseph Smith. He was at the time young and vigorous, one whose mind was not set in the traditions of his day. His was a youthful mind which the Lord could mold as fresh, moist clay as he initiated the work.

Joseph’s successor was relatively young when he was faced with the terrible responsibility of leading an entire people across the wilderness to pioneer a new land.

But the basics of our doctrine are now well in place, and we are firmly established as a people, at least until the Lord should mandate another move. We do not need innovation. We need devotion in adherence to divinely spoken principles. We need loyalty to our leader, whom God has appointed. . . .
To my mind there is something tremendously reassuring in knowing that for the foreseeable future we shall have a President who has been disciplined and schooled, tried and tested, whose fidelity to the work and whose integrity in the cause have been tempered in the forge of service, whose faith has matured, and whose nearness to God has been cultivated over a period of many years.¹

President Spencer W. Kimball reassured us that the Lord is in control of the leadership of His Church: “Full provision has been made by our Lord for changes. . . . Since the death of his servants is in the power and control of the Lord, he permits to come to the first place only the one who is destined to take that leadership. Death and life become the controlling factors.”²

President Hinckley has served as the President of the Church since March 1995, and no changes in the membership of the First Presidency or the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles have occurred during that period. This article presents information dealing with long periods during which there have been no changes in these quorums.

The First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve

Courtesy Church Archives

No Changes in the First Presidency or Quorum of the Twelve

Listed below are the ten longest periods without a change in the First Presidency or Quorum of the Twelve, beginning with the longest period:
Lengths of Service for the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve

No Changes in the First Presidency

Listed below are the ten longest periods without a change in the members of the First Presidency, beginning with the longest period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of Period</th>
<th>Dates of Period</th>
<th>Church President; President of the Quorum of the Twelve</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8 yrs 9 mo</td>
<td>12 Mar 1995–present</td>
<td>Gordon B. Hinckley; Thomas S. Monson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 yrs 6 mo</td>
<td>7 Oct 1989–6 Apr 1996</td>
<td>Wilford Woodruff; Lorenzo Snow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 yrs 0 mo</td>
<td>28 May 1925–16 May 1931</td>
<td>Heber J. Grant; Rudger Clawson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 yrs 10 mo</td>
<td>26 Aug 1860–1 Jul 1866</td>
<td>Brigham young; Orson Hyde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 yrs 1 mo</td>
<td>12 Feb 1849–11 Mar 1854</td>
<td>Brigham Young; Orson Hyde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 yrs 11 mo</td>
<td>8 Dec 1911–18 Nov 1916</td>
<td>Joseph F. Smith; Francis M. Lyman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 yrs 2 mo</td>
<td>17 Mar 1921–15 May 1925</td>
<td>Heber J. Grant; Rudger Clawson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 yrs 10 mo</td>
<td>8 Apr 1954–11 Feb 1958</td>
<td>David O. McKay; Joseph F. Smith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 yrs 4 mo</td>
<td>8 Aug 1950–10 Apr 1974</td>
<td>George Albert Smith; George F. Richards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Item of interest: On September 2, 2003, Elder David B. Haight became the oldest living Apostle at age 97.
No Changes in the Quorum of the Twelve

Listed below are the ten longest periods without a change in the Quorum of the Twelve, beginning with the longest period. During some of these periods, the seniority of members of the Twelve changed—but not the Brethren serving in the quorum (the 1870 to 1878 period is an example of this).

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Church President; President of the Quorum of the Twelve</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 yrs 2 mo</td>
<td>17 Mar 1921–16 May 1931</td>
<td>Heber J. Grant; Rudger Clawson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 yrs 9 mo</td>
<td>12 Mar 1995–present</td>
<td>Gordon B. Hinckley; Thomas S. Monson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 yrs 5 mo</td>
<td>3 Jul 1870–28 Nov 1878</td>
<td>Brigham Young; Orson Hyde, and John Taylor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 yrs 1 mo</td>
<td>26 Aug 1860–6 Oct 1867</td>
<td>Brigham Young; Orson Hyde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 yrs 6 mo</td>
<td>7 Oct 1889–6 Apr 1896</td>
<td>Wilford Woodruff; Lorenzo Snow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 yrs 3 mo</td>
<td>4 Oct 1963–18 Jan 1970</td>
<td>David O. McKay; Joseph Fielding Smith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 yrs 1 mo</td>
<td>12 Feb 1849–11 Mar 1854</td>
<td>Brigham Young; Orson Hyde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 yrs 11 mo</td>
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<td>8 Apr 1954–11 Feb 1958</td>
<td>David O. McKay; Joseph F. Smith</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Quorum of the Twelve: (front row, left to right) Boyd K. Packer, L. Tom Perry, David B. Haight, Neal A. Maxwell; (back row, left to right) Russell M. Nelson, Dallin H. Oaks, M. Russell Ballard, Joseph B. Wirthlin, Richard G. Scott, Robert D. Hales, Jeffrey R. Holland, Henry B. Eyring.

Photo by Jed Clark
Notes

Amos through Malachi: Major Teachings of the Twelve Prophets

Blair G. Van Dyke and D. Kelly Ogden

Blair G. Van Dyke teaches in the Church Educational System and is an instructor of ancient scripture at BYU. D. Kelly Ogden is a professor of ancient scripture at BYU.

The writings of Amos through Malachi are frequently skirted as blocks of scripture to be quickly dealt with toward semester’s end after the “important” writers of the Old Testament have received more careful and thoughtful treatment. Such a course is lamentable because these prophets consistently prophesied in days of great wickedness among God’s people—when they indulged in priestcraft, sorcery, and idolatry and when they mistook outward symbols of covenants for heartfelt, sincere worship. In this regard, the parallels between their days and ours are striking. Following a brief introduction to the writings of these twelve prophets, this article will explore some of the major teachings within their historical and spiritual context. We anticipate that this will lead to a greater desire and a greater capacity to integrate into religious education the principles of the gospel contained in the writings of the twelve prophets.

The Book of the Twelve

Anciently, the writings of these twelve prophets comprised one book known as the Book of the Twelve and were included in the Old Testament canon as such. The earliest acknowledgment of the significance of their writings comes from the Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach, a book written early in the second century BC and now included in what we call the Apocrypha. It says, “May the bones of the Twelve Prophets send forth new life from where they lie, for they comforted
the people of Jacob and delivered them with confident hope.” For us, the most compelling evidence for the continued value of the writings found in the Book of the Twelve may be that they have been quoted extensively over the past two millennia and on significant occasions. Some examples include Stephen’s quoting Amos 5:25–27 as part of his stinging rebuke of the Sanhedrin just before his martyrdom (see Acts 7:42–43); the Savior’s inclusion of Malachi’s writings to the scriptural canon of the Nephites, explaining that “it was wisdom in him that they [Malachi’s writings] should be given unto future generations” (3 Nephi 26:2); the Savior’s quoting several passages of Micah during His Nephite ministry (see, for example, 3 Nephi 20:18–19); Moroni’s recital of portions of Joel and Malachi to the Prophet Joseph Smith in September 1823; and, finally, the citing of Joel and Zechariah in the Doctrine and Covenants (see D&C 45:40–42, 51). These and other examples illustrate that the writings of the prophets in the Book of the Twelve have been highly valued for over two thousand years.

We will now survey the historical background of the twelve prophets and consider some of their major teachings in chronological order.

Sick, Decrepit, and Broken: The Rise and Demise of Israel in the Eighth Century BC

With the eighth century BC came a period of wealth and prosperity to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah unknown since the monarchy of David and Solomon. Israel’s former enemy, Damascus, was recuperating from crushing blows by Assyrian King Adad-nirari, allowing Israel to escape the weight of Syria’s heavy hand (see 2 Kings 13:5). Assyria, in turn, was weakened by internal struggles and threatened by the rising powers of the neighboring kingdom of Urartu. Israel capitalized on the absence of a dominant foreign military force by recapturing territory and trade routes previously lost to Damascus (see 2 Kings 13:25). Judah was able to do the same, recovering lands that had been lost to Edom.

Following her victories, Judah, under the reign of King Amaziah, rashly rose up against Israel. This was nearly fatal because Israel, led by King Joash (Jehoash) invaded Judah and defeated her armies at Beth-shemesh. Joash then drove his armies to the heart of Judah, broke down the northern wall of Jerusalem, looted the temple and royal palace, and took King Amaziah prisoner. Amaziah was eventually freed and allowed to regain his throne but as a vassal of the king of Israel. On the heels of these embarrassments came plots to remove Amaziah from the throne. In response, he fled Jerusalem only to be overtaken and assassinated at Lachish, leaving his son Uzziah (Azariah) to reign
in his stead (see 2 Chronicles 25). Meanwhile, Jeroboam II (son of Joash) assumed the throne in Israel (see 2 Kings 14:23).

The chroniclers note that Uzziah (783–742 BC) and Jeroboam (786–746 BC) each reigned for about four decades. During this time their military expansion was impressive. As mentioned above, Uzziah regained firm control of Judah’s southern territory and rebuilt the port at Ezion-geber (Elath; see 2 Kings 14:21). At the same time, Jeroboam expanded the northern border of Israel to “the entering of Hamath” (2 Kings 14:25) beyond Damascus. A similar expansion eastward into transjordanian regions may be safely assumed. From north to south the combined land holdings of Israel and Judah rivaled those held by Solomon two centuries earlier. It was a time of great confidence, open trade, and wealth. Unfortunately, this prosperity led Israel (even more so than Judah) to swell with pride, merge iniquitous pagan rites with the worship of Jehovah, and embrace opulence and materialism at the expense of social justice for the poor. By the mid-eighth century, the true worship of Jehovah in Israel was a mere shadow of its legitimate self. External ritual, laden with watered-down conviction, replaced deep and meaningful worship. Even so, Israel continued to prosper and accumulate wealth, all the while claiming promised blessings of protection from Jehovah that were reserved for the righteous. The people of Israel were convinced that material prosperity was an absolute sign of God’s pleasure resting upon them, yet the northern kingdom of Israel was sliding rapidly toward her destruction at the hands of Assyrian forces in 721 BC. Under these circumstances, Amos, Hosea, Jonah, and Micah ministered.

Amos. The prophet Amos was, before his call to be a prophet, “among the herdmen of Tekoa” (Amos 1:1). While Amos spent his ministry among peoples of the northern kingdom of Israel, Tekoa lies deep in the tribal lands of the southern kingdom of Judah (about six miles southeast of Bethlehem and twelve miles from Jerusalem). Amos provides an account of his call to minister in Amos 7, explaining that “I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet’s son; but I was an herdman, and a gatherer of sycamore fruit: and the Lord took me as I followed the flock, and the Lord said unto me, Go, prophesy unto my people Israel” (Amos 1:14–15).

Amos is to Israel in the seventh century BC what Jeremiah is to the kingdom of Judah one century later. Both are known as prophets of doom. The tone of Amos’s ministry is set in the initial lines of the book. Amos forms in the reader’s mind the image of a roaring lion ready to pounce on a foolish and helpless victim. This imagery evokes
a sense of God’s frustration with Israel and her neighbors (see Amos 1:2). The words of Amos are not soft, kind, or gentle; rather, they are ferocious and filled with yearnings for justice. This is because Israel knowingly turned away from God. Additionally, Israel’s neighbors Damascus (to the northeast of Israel), Gaza (southwest), Tyrus (north), Edom (southeast), and Ammon (east) are condemned for their wickedness and listed by Amos as soon-to-be recipients of God’s wrath. This listing of nations provides a visual, wherein Israel is surrounded on all sides by idolatry and gross wickedness. This, however, is not the great calamity of Amos’s day. The problem is not that northern Israelites are surrounded by wickedness but that, like their neighbors, they have become wicked themselves. God’s people are supposed to withstand such pressures. For example, Noah was surrounded by wickedness, refused to embrace it, and was lifted above it in the ark (see Genesis 7:17); Abraham did the same, allowing him to become a “greater follower of righteousness” (Abraham 1:2); Moses was surrounded by wickedness and bondage yet shunned the worldliness of Egypt and was led away and allowed to ascend the mountain of the Lord in Sinai (see Exodus 19; Hebrews 11:24–29). Unfortunately, Israel, in the days of Amos, typified the world.

Amos provides a troubling catalog of Israel’s sins (see Amos 2–9). Like a prosecuting attorney hungry for justice, Amos hurls accusations at Israel at a dizzying pace. But two sins are dominant in his appeal to God for a swift judgment against Israel. First, the Israelites have turned from Jehovah to idolatry. “But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream. Have ye offered unto me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel? But ye have borne the tabernacle of your Moloch and Chiun your images, the star of your god, which ye made to yourselves” (Amos 5:24–26; see also 2:8; 8:14). Second, they have severely treaded upon the poor. “Hear this word, ye kine [cows] of Bashan, that are in the mountain of Samaria [capital of Israel], which oppress the poor, which crush the needy, which say to their masters, Bring, and let us drink” (Amos 4:1; see also 2:6–7; 5:11; 8:4–5). The burden of these sins is felt so keenly by Amos that he declares: “Behold, I am pressed under you, as a cart is pressed that is full of sheaves” (Amos 2:13).

Amos offers no hope to ancient Israel. The die is cast; their doom is sure. “The end is come upon my people of Israel” (Amos 8:2). Their inheritance includes howling, mourning, famine, sifting, destruction, and death by the sword (see Amos 8:1–12; 9:1–10). Amos concludes his call for justice by proclaiming that Israel “shall fall, and never rise
up again” in antiquity (Amos 8:14).

All of these prophecies of doom were fulfilled within a few decades of Amos’s ministry to Israel. The writings of Amos depict God as one who is offended by rebellion. More to the point, He loathes spiritual infidelity and any abuses of the disadvantaged, poor, and downtrodden. Guilty people may expect the justice of God in full measure. Nevertheless, in a pattern that is common among the twelve prophets, Amos concluded his teachings with a message of hope. He beheld the flourishing of gathered Israel in the last days and prophesied:

“In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen . . . and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old. . . .

“Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed” (Amos 9:11, 13).

These promises remind the reader that while God’s judgments against the wicked are harsh, the gate of repentance is ever open.  

We, like ancient Israel, are surrounded by the wickedness of the world. If we embrace wickedness, as Israel did in the eighth century BC, we may expect to see the consequences of justice. However, if we learn the lessons of Amos, maintain loyalties to our God, and care for the downtrodden, we may hope for the perpetual harvest and generous prosperity He promised.

_Hosea_. Hosea is a contemporary of Amos. Given Israel’s condition one might reasonably expect an additional witness of justice and doom to match that of Amos. Instead, Hosea encourages healing and reconciliation. The way Hosea encourages Israel to be reconciled with her God constitutes one of the most poignant and, for some, troubling episodes in the Old Testament—the Lord’s command for Hosea to marry a wife of whoredoms (see Hosea 1:2; 3:1). Hosea complied to this command by marrying Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim.

Regarding Hosea’s union to Gomer, it seems apparent that Hosea knew before their marriage of her tendencies toward harlotry (see Hosea 1:2; 3:1). In this light, the following scenario seems likely: at some point prior to her marriage to Hosea, Gomer had embraced the wickedness so prevalent in Israel at the time; later, she forsook her sins and married Hosea; then, tragically, she returned to wickedness, committed adultery, and broke Hosea’s heart. This marriage is then likened to Israel’s relationship to Jehovah. The principal lesson to be learned from this parallel is that, in the Lord’s eyes, idolatry is adultery. Therefore, unlike Amos, who describes Israel’s wickedness from the prosecutor’s perspective, Hosea is uniquely qualified to describe
Israel’s offenses from the touching and tender viewpoint of Jehovah as a victim who has been jolted by infidelity but still lovingly yearns for the return of His bride.

These yearnings provide the context for language rich in tones of love and intimacy. These messages constitute the major teachings of Hosea. For example:

“I taught Ephraim also to [walk], taking them by their arms;
“. . . And I was to them as they that take off the yoke on their jaws, and I laid meat unto them.
“. . . How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee, Israel? . . .

“I will not execute the fierceness of mine anger, I will not return to destroy Ephraim: for I am God, and not man. . . .

“They shall walk after the Lord: he shall roar like a lion . . . and I will place them in their houses, saith the Lord” (Hosea 11:3–4, 8–11).

These verses describe Jehovah as a parent, master, loyal companion, and guardian. First, He is like a loving parent of Israel who, bent over and anxious, holds on to the arms of His toddler to teach her to walk. Second, Jehovah is a gentle master showing deep concern for His prized animal by carefully removing the bit from her mouth and feeding her life-sustaining meat. He is also a loyal companion who will do for Israel what mortals frequently will not do on the heels of adultery—take back His errant, backsliding, and rebellious spouse. Finally, Jehovah is a roaring lion. In stark contrast to the imagery employed by Amos, Hosea’s lion defends the returning prodigal and escorts her to a haven of safety. Without question, Hosea depicts the depth of love and devotion that God maintains for His children under all circumstances.

In the last days, the world is fraught with idolatrous temptations that tug at our loyalties. From Hosea we learn the need for absolute spiritual fidelity. God makes it clear that any tampering with the false gods of our modern world is deeply troubling to Him and should be stopped immediately. For any who have succumbed to such influences, Hosea’s message is also clear: Jehovah shows mercy when we meekly return to Him and worship God in truth.

**Jonah.** Jonah was a court prophet from Gath-hepher, a small village north of Nazareth in Galilee. He apparently had a local mission to the court of Jeroboam II in Samaria, as noted in 2 Kings 14:25, but the Lord had other plans for Jonah. The Lord said, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me” (Jonah 1:2). Instead of traveling northeast toward the Assyrian capital, he fled in the opposite direction to escape contact with
the hated Assyrians. As with most Israelites in the eighth century BC, Jonah evidently held deep and bitter feelings against Israel’s enemy. As will be seen, his troubling experiences and miraculous deliveries serve as a type or shadow of God’s dealings with the entire house of Israel.

Assyrians were infamous for their barbarous methods of conquest and their treatment of captured enemies. They were known to force captives to parade through the streets of Nineveh with other captives’ decapitated heads around their necks. The Assyrians were masters of torture, cutting off noses and ears and yanking out tongues of live enemies. They flayed prisoners and skinned them alive or, as depicted on the Lachish siege panels from Sennacherib’s palace at Nineveh, they rammed sharpened poles up through their captives’ mid-sections, mounted them vertically, and left them to die. In light of these atrocities, Jonah’s response to the Lord’s call could be summarized as follows: “I’ll go where you want me to go, dear Lord, except Nineveh!”

Despite Jonah’s rebellious flight, the Lord mercifully orchestrated his delivery to Nineveh in the belly of a great fish and gave him a second chance to fulfill his mission. Unfortunately, when the people of Nineveh hearkened to his preaching, repented, and avoided destruction, Jonah could not let go of his hatred of Assyrians. He would rather die than see an Assyrian saved (see Jonah 4:1–3). He went to the eastern edge of the city, built a booth, sat under it, and waited in hopes that God would still destroy the repentant inhabitants of Nineveh.

At this juncture, the Lord could have justifiably smitten Jonah for his lack of compassion. Instead, He extended another measure of mercy to Jonah in an effort to teach him a lesson. He raised up a gourd under which Jonah could find additional relief from the heat. This gourd made him extremely glad. The next day the Lord killed the gourd, and Jonah became angry. God also raised the temperature by sending a sweltering east wind to beat upon him.

In this state of discomfort and disgust, Jonah asked the Lord for the second time to end his life. The Lord then said:

“Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night:

“And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than six-score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?” (Jonah 4:10–11).

By recording this question, Jonah teaches his contemporaries and latter-day readers that the worth of souls is great in the sight of God (see D&C 18:10, 15–16). Jonah had underestimated the love and
mercy that God has for all His children. This point is accentuated by the Lord’s proclaiming that He not only wants to save the people of Nineveh, He also wants to save their cattle! In other words, the spiritual and temporal welfare of all God’s creations matter.

Considering how the Lord often teaches us through types and symbols, Jonah represents, in a sense, the whole Israelite people, who were trying to flee from their appointed mission. As Jonah was swallowed by a great fish, so Israel would be swallowed by disaster and exile, but some would then be brought back and allowed once again to be tried and proved in fulfilling their role as a covenant people.

From time to time, Latter-day Saints are mocked, scorned, and made “a hiss and a byword” (1 Nephi 19:14). At these moments, it may be tempting to look upon those we suppose to be our enemies and despise them so that we remove any desire in our hearts that God save them. At such times, we should learn from Jonah’s poignant experiences and leave such things in the hands of God.

**Micah.** Micah was a Morasthite (see Micah 1:1), one who came from Moresheth-gath, about twenty miles southwest of Jerusalem, near the border between Judah and Philistia. His ministry was during the reigns of Jotham (742–735 BC), Ahaz (735–715 BC), and especially Hezekiah (715–687 BC), all kings of Judah (see Jeremiah 26:18). Micah was a contemporary of the prophets Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, and Jonah. All of their ministries were fraught with similar spiritual, social, and political struggles, and their messages necessarily addressed similar ills in the Israelite kingdoms. Micah’s call was specifically to the capital cities of Samaria (Israel) and Jerusalem (Judah). He prophesied the captivity of Samaria in the north and Judah in the south, their ultimate restoration to the land, and the coming of the Messiah.

As we have seen, Israel and her capital city Samaria were guilty of gross idolatry. Micah is quick to point out that Judah, like Israel, had stooped to “the hire of an harlot” by forsaking her covenant relationship with Jehovah and worshiping false gods (Micah 1:7). Like Israel, Judah indulged in blatant greed. The poor were robbed, and even women and children were commonly plundered, exploited, and left homeless to appease the growing appetite for accumulated wealth among Judahites (see Micah 2:2, 9). This corruption infected every level of society, leading Micah to proclaim: “The good man is perished out of the earth. . . . The best of them is as a brier” (Micah 7:2, 4). Finally, as with Israel, Judah was guilty of hollow and impersonal worship of Jehovah. Like Amos and Hosea, Micah teaches that ritual without righteous intent is repugnant to the Lord. “Will the Lord be
pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? . . . He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” (Micah 6:7–8). As a result of these maladies, Micah foretold the destruction of Jerusalem which, like Samaria, would “be plowed as a field” and become heaps (Micah 3:12).

With the image of rampant corruption and the capital cities smoldering in the dust of their own destruction, Micah follows the prophetic pattern of providing a message of hope to the inhabitants of Israel and Judah (see Micah 4:1). His message is simple: at all cost, Israelites must maintain a clear focus on Jehovah and true worship in His temple.

Concerning Jehovah, Micah prophesied of a coming day when the Messiah would condescend and be born in Bethlehem (see Micah 5:2). The remainder of Micah 5 is full of blessings promised to Israelites who will focus their lives on Him. These will “stand and feed in the strength of the Lord” (Micah 5:4); they will enjoy peace and be delivered from their enemies (Micah 5:5–6, 9); they will be like nourishing dew and life-saving rain to the rest of the world (see Micah 5:7); they will enjoy the collective awe of the Gentiles “as a lion among the beasts of the forest” (Micah 5:8); and they will not be caught in the snares of idolatry as their forebears so frequently were (see Micah 5:12–13). Concerning the temple, Micah taught that:

“The mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established in the top of the mountains . . . and people shall flow unto it.

“And many nations shall come, and say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord . . . and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for the law shall go forth of Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem” (Micah 4:1–2).

Micah’s teachings are equally applicable in our day. If Latter-day Saints will maintain a clear focus on the Savior and the temple, they will receive three blessings: first, they will be taught the truth; second, they will receive strength to walk in God’s prescribed path as outlined in the temple; and third, they will be governed by the Lord in all they do. If Latter-day Saints follow this course, it is unlikely that they will repeat the mistakes of ancient Israel and Judah.

From Hezekiah to Josiah: Zephaniah and the Turbulent Seventh Century BC

As alluded to earlier, the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed in 721 BC by Assyria. Many Israelites were killed at this time, many
others were scattered throughout Assyrian provinces, and many were left in the lands around Samaria where they intermingled with Assyrian citizens who were moved to the region to ensure, as much as possible, a stable and loyal population (a political ploy often called “transpopulation”). More than a hundred years later, the southern kingdom of Judah suffered a similar fate at the hands of the Babylonians.

The final century of Judah’s existence was fraught with upheaval (see 2 Kings 21–25; 2 Chronicles 33–36). King Hezekiah of Judah (715–687 BC) rebelled against the overwhelming power of Sennacherib, king of Assyria, during the ministries of Isaiah and Micah. The result was that the forces of Sennacherib pummeled every major stronghold of Judah except one. With those victories behind him, Sennacherib turned his armies toward Jerusalem. With destruction seemingly imminent, Isaiah prophesied that Sennacherib would not even shoot an arrow in Jerusalem, let alone conquer her (see 2 Kings 19:6–7, 32–33). Hezekiah fortified the city and trusted in Isaiah’s assurance from the Lord. Isaiah’s prophecy was fulfilled when the Lord miraculously saved Jerusalem by destroying the approaching Assyrian army (see 2 Kings 19:35–37). In the end, Jerusalem was preserved, but Assyria maintained control over Judah. Hezekiah’s daring bid for independence had failed (see 2 Kings 18–20).

While Assyria allowed Hezekiah to retain his throne, he died shortly thereafter and his young son Manasseh became king of Judah (see 2 Kings 21). During Manasseh’s reign (ca. 687–642 BC), Assyria reached her peak of power. Manasseh had no choice but to wholly submit to vassalage. Even so, he could have maintained Hezekiah’s religious reforms and reverential awe for Jehovah. Unfortunately, in this regard, Manasseh’s kingship was radically different from that of his father.

Manasseh was evil and murderous, and he reinstituted idolatry on a scale never before seen in Judah.

For he built up again the high places which Hezekiah . . . had destroyed; and he reared up altars for Baal, and made a grove, as did Ahab king of Israel; and worshipped all the host of heaven. . . . He built altars in the house of the Lord . . . He built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord. And he made his son to pass through the fire [human sacrifice], and observed times, and used enchantments, and dealt with familiar spirits and wizards . . . Moreover Manasseh shed innocent blood very much [possibly those who protested his idolatrous policies], till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another. (2 Kings 21:3–6, 16)

Finally, the author of Kings marks Manasseh as the man who “seduced [Judah] to do more evil than did the nations whom the Lord
destroyed before the children of Israel” (2 Kings 21:9; see also Leviticus 18).

For almost half a century, Manasseh’s wickedness shaped the milieu in Judah. The worship of Jehovah was merged so completely with idolatry that it was barely distinguishable from paganism. It was a spiritual crisis of enormous proportions. The Lord’s wrath was kindled, and He sent prophets to testify against this rapid spiritual devolution. While we do not have all of their names, these prophets boldly prophesied of imminent destruction: “I will wipe Jerusalem as a man wipeth a dish, wiping it, and turning it upside down” (2 Kings 21:13).

Conditions did not improve after the death of Manasseh in 642 BC. His son, Amon, assumed the throne and immersed Judah in more of his father’s wickedness. He was assassinated by conspirators after two years in power. Amon’s murderers were smoked out and executed while Josiah, Manasseh’s grandson and Amon’s son, became king (2 Kings 21:17–22:1). Judah was on the brink of internal destruction. Josiah seems destined to have come to power “for such a time as this” (Esther 4:14).

Josiah (640–609 BC) “did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, and walked in all the way of David his father, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left” (2 Kings 22:2). From 640–622 BC he initiated much-needed reforms intended to refocus Judah on Jehovah. As will be seen later, these reforms were accelerated between 622 BC and Josiah’s death in 609 BC. However, sometime during the earlier period of Josiah’s reign, the Lord raised up Zephaniah, whose teachings girded up Josiah’s initial reforms and challenged Judah to shun idolatry and worship Jehovah in truth and purity or suffer severe repercussions.¹⁷

Zephaniah. Zephaniah’s ministry is characterized by expediency. Manasseh and Amon planted seeds of apostasy that Zephaniah saw grow to full corruption. Not surprisingly, much of the field is worthy only of burning. Like Noah before the Flood and like latter-day prophets before the Second Coming, Zephaniah commands his people to repent post-haste or expect dire consequences.¹⁸ The prophet identifies how Judah has allowed herself to be overwhelmed by worldliness. For example, her people have turned their backs on God (see Zephaniah 1:6); they have embraced the strange clothing styles that fail to reflect the appearance of a covenant people (see Zephaniah 1:8); they lust after worldly wealth and acquire riches through corruption and plunder (see Zephaniah 1:9); and they are spiritually complacent (see Zephaniah 1:12).
Zephaniah also pronounces doom on the unbelieving nations to the north, south, east, and west of Judah. By bundling Judah together with these heathen peoples, Zephaniah suggests that God’s covenant people equal and surpass the wickedness of their neighbors (see Zephaniah 2:4–13). His final proclamation against Judah is that she is polluted, oppressive, unteachable, disobedient, and guilty of wresting the Torah (see Zephaniah 3:1–4). In response to wholesale wickedness, Zephaniah declares that “all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of [God’s] jealousy” (Zephaniah 3:8).

In the wake of this revelation of destruction, Zephaniah employs the phrases “in that day” and “at that time” to dually describe Judah (if they will repent) and covenant people in the latter days who remain unsullied by the influences of the world and witness the Second Coming of the Lord with its accompanying destruction of the wicked. Both are promised the presence of the Lord (see Zephaniah 3:3); an ability to worship God with a pure language (3:9); nontainted temple worship (3:11); trust (3:12); truth (3:13); nourishment (3:13); protection (3:15); and joy, rest, and love (3:17).

In a striking way, Zephaniah displays the fruits of evil and the fruits of righteousness. In three chapters he clearly depicts Judah’s choice in the seventh century BC and, at the same time, our choice in the latter days. If we turn to the Lord, His promises are sure. He will “make you a name and a praise among all people of the earth, when I turn back your captivity before your eyes, saith the Lord” (Zephaniah 3:20).

The Fall of Assyria: Nahum’s Condemnation of Nineveh

As previously mentioned, the prowess of Assyria peaked during the reign of Manasseh. They controlled the regions from Babylonia to Asia Minor, south through Israel and encompassed Egypt (see Bible Map 5). As it was with Jonah and Israel, the lion’s share of these vassal kingdoms deeply hated Assyria, in part because of the vicious and violent means the Assyrians employed to maintain control in their sprawling empire.

Through the second half of the seventh century, uprisings against Assyria were common and became increasingly difficult for the empire to put down. Then, in 626 BC, the Babylonians, under the command of Nabopolassar (lived 626–605 BC and was the father of Nebuchadnezzar), defeated Assyrian forces outside Babylon and declared their independence. Despite vigorous efforts to strike down this rebellion, Assyria never removed Nabopolassar.19 His success encouraged one rebellion after another, and the vastness of the empire made it next to impossible to control. The Assyrian empire began to unravel and even-
ultimately collapsed under its own weight. These events loosened Assyria’s
grip on Judah, making it possible for Josiah to institute even greater
reforms beginning in 622 BC.

Ultimately, the Medes joined the Babylonians and destroyed
Asshur (Assyria’s ancient capital) in 614 BC. Two years later they laid
siege to Nineveh (the then-current capital) for three months, after
which they entered the city and razed it to the ground. By 610 BC
Assyria had vanished as a nation and Babylon (Chaldea) rose as the
preeminent force in the region.30 Late in the seventh century BC, per-
haps shortly before the collapse of Assyria, Nahum prophesied of the
destruction of Nineveh and the greater Assyrian Empire.

Nahum. The book of Nahum may not seem very inspirational or
uplifting. Its tone is accusatory and vengeful, seemingly bereft of ethi-
cal and theological empathy. Nahum’s words almost burn with anxiety
to see judgments poured out on the barbarous Assyrians. Neverthe-
less, Nahum was called to pronounce the Lord’s condemnation on
the Ninevites. Nahum testified that though the Israelite nation was
militarily feeble and unthreatening, the God of Israel was still God of
all the earth, and He was about to unleash His fury and vengeance
on His adversaries. In Nahum’s words: “God is jealous, and the Lord
revengeth . . . and is furious; the Lord will take vengeance on his adver-
saries, and he reserveth wrath for his enemies” (Nahum 1:2). Nahum’s
description of Nineveh provides insight into how deeply Assyria had
offended the Lord. He notes:

“She is empty, and void, and waste. . . .
Woe to the bloody city! it is all full of lies and robbery. . . .
Behold, I am against thee, . . . and I will shew the nations thy
nakedness, and the kingdoms thy shame.
And I will cast abominable filth upon thee, and make thee vile,
and will set thee as a gazengstock. . . .
There is no healing of thy bruise; thy wound is grievous: all that
hear the [report] of thee shall clap the hands over thee: for upon whom
hath not thy wickedness passed continually?” (Nahum 2:10; 3:1, 5–
6, 19).

Nahum proceeds to break the usual pattern of doom followed by
hope. For Nineveh, there was no hope. Rather, Nahum invites Judah
to rejoice in the destruction of Assyria and claim the opportunity to
cleanse the temple and worship God freely through prescribed feasts
and vows. “Behold upon the mountains the feet of him that bringeth
good tidings, that publisheth peace! O Judah, keep thy solemn feasts,
perform thy vows: for the wicked shall no more pass through thee;
he is utterly cut off” (Nahum 1:15). Unlike Israel, Nineveh would never enjoy a restoration. Decade after decade, Nineveh was terminally pompous, immersed in worldly power, witchcraft, whoredoms, and the supposed merits of materialism (see Nahum 3:4, 16–17).

Under these conditions, God ruled that Nineveh had to be destroyed. And in her destruction Nineveh stands as a symbol of the hopeless condition of the wicked at the time of the Second Coming (see Nahum chapter 1 heading). In this light, the message of Nahum revolves around the question “Who can stand in the presence of the Lord?” The book of Nahum is a hard message to Nineveh but also to people living in the last days who fail to trust in God. Without repentance, their fate is as sure as that of Nineveh. “Who can stand before his indignation? . . . His fury is poured out like fire, and the rocks are thrown down by him. The Lord is good, a strong hold in the day of trouble; and he knoweth them that trust in him. But with an overrunning flood he will make an utter end. . . . And while they are drunken as drunkards, they shall be devoured as stubble fully dry” (Nahum 1:6–8, 10).

The Rise of Babylon and Destruction of Jerusalem: Habakkuk and Obadiah

We have already mentioned the initial reforms of King Josiah sometime after 640 BC (see 2 Kings 22–23). These reforms gained momentum rapidly when, during renovation work in the temple in 622 BC, Hilkiah (the high priest) discovered “the book of the law” (2 Kings 22:8). The book, which is commonly held to be some form of the book of Deuteronomy, provided an overview of the covenant nature of Israel’s relationship to God. It gave examples of how Jehovah honored His covenant with Israel even if miraculous intervention was necessary to do so. It also emphasized the absolute necessity of Israel’s loyalty to God through the covenant. Josiah was deeply moved by the contents of the book. He gathered his people to the temple (Jeremiah was most likely present, and possibly Lehi as well), read the book to them, and placed himself and all his followers under covenant to abide by the law found in the book and to honor their covenant relationship with Jehovah.

Unfortunately, Josiah was killed in battle by Egyptian forces led by Pharaoh Nechoh at Megiddo in 609 BC (see 2 Kings 23:29). Egypt annexed Israel into their domain in the wake of Assyria’s collapse, and four years later (605 BC), Babylon took Israel from Egypt. From Josiah’s death to the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC, Judah had
four kings: Jehoahaz (son of Josiah), Jehoiakim (son of Jehoahaz and first vassal of Babylon), Jehoiakin (son of Jehoiakim), and Zedekiah (brother of Jehoiakim and uncle of Jehoiakin). Without exception, each of these kings did evil in the sight of the Lord. Josiah’s reforms, the most sweeping in Judah’s history, were thoroughly overturned, and idolatry in all its forms was reintroduced throughout the land. Like her sister-state Israel, who just over a century earlier had mocked the Lord and was scattered, so Judah was on the brink of outright destruction at the hands of the Babylonians (also known as the Chaldeans) and her vassals such as Edom. These were the desperate days of the ministries of Habakkuk and, after Judah’s destruction, Obadiah.

_Habakkuk._ Habakkuk prophesied against Babylon in the same way that Isaiah prophesied against Assyria (see Isaiah 10). Babylon would be used as God’s arm to crush Judah. Then, like Assyria, Babylon would be destroyed for their idolatry, their trust in munitions, and their total disregard for social justice and human life. Even with Assyria as a precedent, Habakkuk is dismayed that the Lord would use such a vile and pagan nation to destroy God’s own people. In a prayer similar to Joseph Smith’s later plea, Habakkuk asks:

“O Lord, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save! . . .

“Therefore the law is slacked. . . . The wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth” (Habakkuk 1:2, 4; compare D&C 121:2).

In response, the Lord explained to the prophet that while Judah will suffer destruction at the hands of a bitter, hasty, terrible, and dreadful nation (see Habakkuk 1:6–7), Babylon will also fall. Babylon is guilty of at least two things: first, dealing treacherously with mankind (especially the righteous); and second, imputing power to their idolatrous gods (see Habakkuk 1:1–17).

To the first charge, the Lord explains:

“Woe to him that buildeth a town with blood, and stablisheth a city by iniquity! . . .

“Woe unto him that giveth his neighbour drink, that puttest thy bottle to him, and makest him drunken also, that thou mayest look on their nakedness!

“Thou art filled with shame for glory. . . . The cup of the Lord’s right hand shall be turned unto thee, and shameful spewing shall be on thy glory” (Habakkuk 2:12, 15–16).

To the charge of idolatry, the Lord admonishes:

“Woe unto him that saith to the wood, Awake; to the dumb stone,
Arise, it shall teach! Behold, it is laid over with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all in the midst of it.

“But the Lord is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him” (Habakkuk 2:19–20).

Taken together, the central message of Habakkuk is that God is in charge. Chapter 3 is a poetic song written to celebrate God’s majesty and dominion over all the forces of earth and hell. Everything in the telestial world is prone to collapse except the Lord (see Habakkuk 3:17). The phrase “the Lord is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him” is another way of saying, “Be still; I’m aware of your concerns; know that I am God.” The essential characteristic of those who survived spiritually in Habakkuk’s day and our own is captured in Habakkuk 2:4, which says, “The just shall live by his faith.” To these the Lord promises joy, strength, and the richness of walking in the high places of the Lord (see Habakkuk 3:18–19).

Obadiah. Obadiah prophesied sometime after the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the Jews to Babylon. He proclaimed a message of doom to Edom (Esau’s ancient land of inheritance and oft-time enemy of Israel). Obadiah’s accusation against Edom was threefold: first, they were guilty of deep-seated pride and arrogance (see Obadiah 1:3–4). Second, as the Babylonians ransacked Jerusalem and burnt the temple, Edom “wast as one of them” (Obadiah 1:11) and “rejoiced over the children of Judah in the day of their destruction” (Obadiah 1:12). Third, Edomites colluded with the Babylonians by blocking mountain passes through which Jews fled to escape the destruction of the city. Those fleeing were caught by Edomites and turned over to Babylonian forces (see Obadiah 1:14). These three crimes would lead to their ultimate destruction.

Beginning in verse 15, however, the prophet makes a sudden transition from immediate to ultimate things to tell us what shall happen to the wicked in the last days. “As thou hast done, it shall be done unto thee: thy reward shall return upon thine own head” (Obadiah 1:15). During this latter-day destruction of the wicked, there will be one special place of refuge: the temple (see Obadiah 1:17). Obadiah prophesied of a day when all in the world, who are willing, may gather together with latter-day Israelites. Descendants of Jacob (Israel) and Joseph will present a standard to the world that is likened to a fire and a flame. This fire of the gospel will give light to those who seek it and burn up the wicked, latter-day “Edomites” as if they were stubble (see Obadiah 1:18; see also D&C 1:36).

With the Lord’s destruction of the wicked comes a new order
wherein all things of import revolve around the Lord’s temple. “And saviours shall come up on mount Zion, . . . and the kingdom shall be the Lord’s” (Obadiah 1:21). Joseph Smith interpreted this verse: “But how are they to become saviors on Mount Zion? By building their temples, erecting their baptismal fonts, and going forth and receiving all the ordinances, baptisms, confirmations, washings, anointings, ordinations and sealing powers upon their heads, in behalf of all their progenitors who are dead, and redeem them that they may come forth in the first resurrection and be exalted.”

The clear message of Obadiah to us in the latter days is to avoid pride, not to rejoice in wickedness even from a distance, and finally, to refuse to follow the evil influences of the world. Our best course should include a focus on the mountain of the Lord. If the temple becomes our central ideal, we may stand above the sordid elements of the world and wave a flaming ensign for all to see and gather to on both sides of the veil. In this way we become the saviors that Obadiah saw over two millennia ago.

The Exile of the Jews and Their Restoration

The destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar’s armies in 586 BC, in concert with the exile of the Jews to Babylonia, should have marked the end of the Jewish nation. Miraculously it did not. The Babylonians deported the brightest cadre of spiritual, civic, and intellectual leaders, along with their families, from Judah to Babylon. Jeremiah records that those exiled numbered four thousand six hundred—a count probably limited to men only (see Jeremiah 52:28–30). While this group may seem large, many were left behind in Judah as a broken, leaderless people, forced to eke out a living and pay tribute from the fruits of an overrun land.

It is evident from the book of Ezekiel that the Jews in Babylon fared much better than the ten tribes. The Jews were kept in a unit and were not scattered, as were the ten tribes, who were taken into various places of captivity by the Assyrians. Both Daniel and Ezekiel functioned as prophets in captivity—Ezekiel among the people and Daniel in the royal court—but very little is told about their personal lives there. Jeremiah predicted that the Babylonian captivity would last seventy years (see Jeremiah 25:8–11; Daniel 9:2). Indeed, it did not take long for Babylonian power to begin to collapse, giving some exiles hope of an eventual return to Jerusalem.

Babylon’s greatest rival was the Medes to the northeast. While the two had been allies against Assyria, Media now waited for an opportu-
nity to increase their borders at Babylon’s expense. An uprising within Media led by a vassal king named Cyrus of Persia (east of Babylon) was likely a welcomed disruption. A brilliant military leader, Cyrus went on to overtake the entire Median empire by 550 BC. Given the size and military might of the new Persian empire, Babylon posed little threat. After enlarging Persian interests to the east, the forces of Cyrus eventually turned their attention to Babylon, taking her without a fight in 539 BC.

The policies of Cyrus toward peoples he conquered were markedly different from those of the Babylonians and the Assyrians. He instituted a policy of respect for the religious and cultural beliefs and practices of those living within his realm. In the first year of his reign over Babylon, Cyrus issued a royal decree ordering the restoration of the exiled Jews to Jerusalem. He also commissioned the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem to facilitate the worship of Jehovah (see Ezra 1). Finally, Cyrus appointed “Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah” (Ezra 1:8; presumably the same man of the kingly line that is called Shenazzar in 1 Chronicles 3:18, the son of King Jehoiachin) to lead the first group of exiles back to Jerusalem to begin rebuilding the temple.

It is likely that only the hardiest Jews and those most committed to rebuilding the temple traveled back to Jerusalem with Sheshbazzar in this initial group. Apparently, many Jews were by then very comfortable in Babylon and offered their resources to assist others but were not interested in returning themselves. Josephus reported that “the rulers of the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin, with the Levites and priests, went in haste to Jerusalem, yet did many of them stay at Babylon, as not willing to leave their possessions.”

Upon their arrival in Jerusalem, they found the mere shell of a city. Nevertheless, the small band began at once to rebuild the temple (see Ezra 5:16). Progress was slow, however, as a series of setbacks such as crop failures, drought, and the onset of extreme poverty hindered their efforts (see Haggai 1). It was during these early days that Sheshbazzar’s nephew, Zerubbabel, arrived in Jerusalem at the head of another group of returning exiles. He became the governor of Judah presumably at the death of his uncle and was the final Davidic descendant to govern in Judah. With him came lingering hopes of an eventual return to the ancient monarchy. As we shall see, these hopes would be extinguished at the death of Zerubbabel.

Furthermore, there were tensions between the inhabitants of the land and the returning exiles. The exiles looked upon the inhabitants as ritually unclean (see Haggai 2:12–14), and the exiles were looked upon
as encroachers upon land that was no longer theirs (see Ezekiel 33:24). Finally, political developments played a role in delayed temple construction. Cyrus died and was replaced by his son Cambyses (530–522 BC), and as the years passed the edict of Cyrus was eventually forgotten altogether (see Ezra 5:17–6:1). At the death of Cambyses, Darius (son of Hystaspes) took the throne and was securely in power by 520 BC. A decade and a half had passed, and work on the temple had not progressed beyond laying the foundation stones. Simply, the weight of poverty, political disruption, animosities, and a backbreaking need to survive brought the construction to a halt with no new beginning in sight. It was under these circumstances that the Lord raised up Haggai and Zechariah to spur on his beleaguered people. It is likely that Joel also prophesied at this time. In the final analysis, these prophets were successful. The second temple was completed in 515 BC, and against all odds, Israel survived as a distinct people.

**Haggai.** After nearly two decades of living near the destroyed temple complex, it apparently grew easier and easier for the returned exiles to be satisfied that, while there was no temple, they did enjoy daily sacrifice at the altar they had rebuilt (see Ezra 3:2–3). No doubt it took an immense amount of labor in the early days of their return just to clear rubble from the site to make these daily sacrifices possible. By the time of Haggai’s ministry in 520 BC the common sentiment of the Jews was that “the time is not come, the time that the Lord’s house should be built” (Haggai 1:2).

Haggai’s message from the Lord was just the opposite: “Consider your ways. Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith the Lord” (Haggai 1:7–8). Haggai went on to explain that Judah had not prospered and would not prosper until the Jews paid strict heed to their obligation to build the temple:

“Ye looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith the Lord of hosts. Because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house.

“Therefore the heaven over you is stayed from dew, and the earth is stayed from her fruit” (Haggai 1:9–10).

Haggai likened the returning exiles to ancient Israelites being led out of bondage from Egypt and prophesied similar deliverance as they worked to build the second temple and keep themselves separate from the pagan influences prominent among the long-term inhabitants of the land. The Lord promised through Haggai that “according to the
word that I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt, so my spirit remaineth among you: fear ye not” (Haggai 2:5).

As the Second Coming approaches, we, like the exiles of Haggai’s day, must gather, build temples, and live worthily to enter therein. For more than fifteen years, the Jews justified their inattention to the Lord’s will that they construct the temple. The result was predictable—they did not prosper. So it is today: if we fail to heed the revelations of our time we will be guilty of “a very grievous sin” and will be the recipients of sore chastisement from the Lord (D&C 95:3). However, if we do follow the direction of our prophets and focus on the temple, we will find that the peace and glory of this “latter house” shall be great (Haggai 2:9).

Zechariah. Zechariah’s revelation came about two months after Haggai’s (see Haggai 1:1 and Zechariah 1:1). A prominent theme in the book of Zechariah is the exploration of God’s feelings for the city of Jerusalem and her inhabitants in Zechariah’s day, in the meridian of time, and in the latter days. Many of Zechariah’s prophecies and doctrinal teachings are couched in this theme.

When Jerusalem was destroyed, Judah’s supposition that Jehovah would protect Jerusalem under all circumstances was shattered. The city lay in rubble. Without the temple and the faithful followers of Jehovah, Jerusalem was on the verge of being no different than any other pagan city in the region. The returning exiles needed to redefine their faith. Part of Zechariah’s message was that only a holy people could make Jerusalem holy again. Therefore, Zechariah invited the people to submit to Jehovah’s rule and to follow Joshua, the high priest, as he sloughs off the filth of the world, walks in the ways of the Lord, dons clean clothing, is crowned with a fair mitre, and walks among the angels of the Lord. Miraculously, such a change can transpire “in one day,” given the mighty power of Jehovah to cleanse and save (see Zechariah 3:1–7, 9).

Concerning Jerusalem in Zechariah’s day, the Lord proclaimed, “I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies: my house shall be built in it, saith the Lord of hosts” (Zechariah 1:16). In addition to this, Zechariah’s depiction of Jerusalem in the last days is stunning:

“Jerusalem shall be inhabited as towns without walls for the multitude of men and cattle therein:

“For I, saith the Lord, will be unto her a wall of fire round about, and will be the glory in the midst of her. . . .

“And the Lord shall inherit Judah his portion in the holy land, and shall choose Jerusalem again” (Zechariah 2:4–5, 12).
Both of these declarations would have supplied much needed encouragement to the downtrodden exiles working to rebuild the temple.

Zechariah made it clear that Jerusalem will play a key role in the ongoing ministry of the Messiah. He prophesied of the Savior’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem prior to His atoning sacrifice (see Zechariah 9:9), His betrayal (see Zechariah 11:12), as well as His triumphant appearance to the Jews on the Mount of Olives at His Second Coming (see Zechariah 12:10; 14:4). He also prophesied that Jerusalem will one day be a city of peace from which the Lord will govern. In that day, Jerusalem will be called a city of truth where children will play safely in the streets and grow to old age without war and turmoil. Simply, the prophecies of Zechariah give hope to the faithful in at least three time periods: to his contemporaries struggling to rebuild the temple in 520 BC, to the faithful in the meridian of time who were waiting for the Messiah to come, and to the Saints in the last days who are looking forward to the Second Coming of the Savior.

All three time periods share at least one piece of common ground in the writings of Zechariah. Faithful people, not buildings, make a place holy (see Zechariah 8:23). This is a timely message for Latter-day Saints. At a time when a new chapel is completed every day, multiple temples are built and dedicated each year, and grand buildings like the Conference Center mark the skyline of the Church headquarters complex, it may be tempting to think that our buildings mark our faith. While beautiful buildings are important to our worship, the only accurate indicator of our spiritual condition is the nature of our hearts. According to Zechariah, if our hearts are centered in God, we will triumph with Him and God will be to us “a wall of fire round about” that no wickedness can penetrate (Zechariah 2:5).

Joel. The dominant theme of the prophecy of Joel is “the day of the Lord” (Joel 1:15; see also 2:1, 11, 31; 3:14, 18). This phrase always refers to the Second Coming. The latter days are clearly the focus of his prophecy. In this light, Joel serves as an instruction manual for our time. His counsel could be summarized in two phrases: “turn to me” and “gather to the temple and pray.”

The destruction described by Joel is so horrific and all-encompassing that those without refuge will perish. The destruction is brought on, in part, because the people of the earth have abandoned their God. Superficial rites replace true worship rooted deep in the heart. The result of such behavior “in the day of the Lord” is the same as it was in the days of Amos, Hosea, or Zephaniah—God humbles the disobedient with the awe-inspiring forces at His disposal.
Joel describes his vision of wasted fields, rotten seed, broken and empty barns, starving animals, and the weak and broken inhabitants of the land on the verge of complete destruction. They are pursued by a disciplined and terribly ferocious army. On all sides, the people in Joel’s vision are consumed. “A fire devoureth before them; and behind them a flame burneth: the land is as the garden of Eden before them, and behind them a desolate wilderness; yea and nothing shall escape them” (Joel 2:3). At this moment of greatest alarm, the Lord provides the only solution when He commands:

“Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning:

“And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness” (Joel 2:12–13).

The second directive of Joel is to gather to the holy temple and pray for deliverance. Joel observed: “Sanctify ye a fast, call a solemn assembly, gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the Lord your God, and cry unto the Lord” (Joel 1:14). According to Joel, the temple is the only place of refuge from destruction in the day of the Lord. No interest or duty can safely be elevated above the temple. Consider the following:

“Gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children, and those that suck the breasts: let the bridegroom go forth of his chamber, and the bride out of her [wedding canopy].

“Let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar, and let them say, Spare thy people” (Joel 2:16–17).

If, on the day of the Lord, God’s people have turned to Him with all their hearts, have made the temple the focal point of their spiritual relationship with Him, and have become humble enough to cry out to the Lord for deliverance, they will receive great blessings. Joel prophesied that:

The Lord also shall roar out of Zion, and utter his voice from Jerusalem; and the heavens and the earth shall shake: but the Lord will be the hope of his people, and the strength of the children of Israel.

So shall ye know that I am the Lord your God dwelling in Zion, my holy mountain: then shall Jerusalem be holy, and there shall no strangers pass through her any more. . . .

But Judah shall dwell for ever, and Jerusalem from generation to generation.
For I will cleanse their blood that I have not cleansed: for the Lord dwelleth in Zion. (Joel 3:16–17, 20–21)

Simply put, for those who follow Joel’s counsel, the Second Coming of the Savior will not be terrible; rather, it will be great.

The Final Decades of Old Testament History

As a general rule, those living in and around Jerusalem in 520 BC were from one of two camps: first, returned exiles who hoped to rebuild the temple, restore the Davidic monarchy, and participate in true worship of Jehovah; or second, the native population who had not been taken away to Babylon seventy years earlier. This second group was thoroughly immersed in pagan practices, and their religion no longer resembled the pure truth of God. Concerning the first group, very little is known about their dealings over the seventy years that separate Haggai (520 BC) and Malachi (ca. 450 BC). One thing is certain, however: there was a marked rise in power of the high priest and his associates at the temple. Since Israelite culture revolved around the temple, in every facet of life, the high priest and his associates, in large measure, secured the maintenance, or collapse, of pure religion during these years. This rise became pronounced at the death of Zerubbabel, who was the last known Davidic-line ruler in Judah. Upon his death, hope for the immediate restoration of the Davidic throne vanished, and priests filled the ensuant vacuum. They, in turn, were kept in check by prophets.

Malachi. By 450 BC the priests and subsequently the people had corrupted the truth in almost every conceivable way. Malachi was charged by the Lord to correct the prevalent spiritual deviancy of Israel and invite the Israelites to return to the Lord. Without question, Malachi’s bold message provided encouragement and credibility to the reforms instituted by his contemporaries Nehemiah (the governor) and Ezra (the priest).

Considering that only seven decades or so had passed since the rebuilding of the temple, Malachi’s chronicle of wickedness is disheartening. He described Israel as having taken a wholesale turn to the half-baked religious practices so common among their forefathers. For example, the priests polluted the temple by offering blind, lame, and sick animals as sacrifices (see Malachi 1:8). Israelites withheld their male animals most suited for sacrifice and brought far less suitable livestock as offerings at the temple (see Malachi 1:14). The priests were guilty of corrupting the covenant by being partial in their applica-
tion of the law—the result being that they caused “many to stumble” (Malachi 2:8). Furthermore, every man broke his covenants and dealt treacherously against his brother (see Malachi 2:10), marriages outside the covenant became commonplace, and the incidence of divorce soared (see Malachi 2:11–16). Finally, Israel was guilty of sorcery, adultery, false swearing, oppressing widows and the economically displaced, and robbing God of tithes and offerings (see Malachi 3:5–9). Sadly, Malachi’s description is remarkably similar to the assessment of Israel offered by Amos and Hosea three centuries earlier. As with Amos, Malachi warned of pending justice that could be avoided only by repentance. And like Hosea, Malachi extended a hand of hope to God’s undeserving yet covenant people. Malachi concluded his writings with a prophecy regarding the Second Coming. We will address Malachi’s messages regarding justice, mercy, and the Second Coming in turn.

The Lord’s voice of justice was unmistakable. He declared to Israel: “I have no pleasure in you” (Malachi 1:10), you are “cursed” (Malachi 1:14), “I will curse your blessings. . . . I will corrupt your seed” (Malachi 2:2–3), “I will be a swift witness against [you]” (Malachi 3:5). From these expressions, Malachi made it clear that God’s mercy cannot rob justice. Israel had a temple in her midst and a prophet to guide her in the right way. To continue abandoning true worship practices while embracing paganism and behaviors that were unbecoming a covenant people would not be tolerated. Once again, Israel was on the brink of destruction at the hand of God.

The Lord’s voice of mercy is also unmistakable in Malachi’s message. Importantly, this message is grounded in covenants between God and His followers: “Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the Lord of hosts” (Malachi 3:7). In their gross iniquity and filthiness, the Lord offered a much-needed cleansing through repentance. In this process Jehovah is “like a refiner’s fire, and like fullers’ soap” (Malachi 3:2), which purges iniquity and sin, making it possible for the “offering of Judah and Jerusalem [to] be pleasant unto the Lord, as in the days of old, and as in former years” (Malachi 3:4). Without question, Malachi promoted a return to covenants through true worship and sacrifice at the house of the Lord.

Furthermore, Malachi explained that the Israelites must manifest a reverential awe and respect toward God if they were to please Him. Their loyalties must be sure. If they were, the Lord promised, “But unto you that fear my name, shall the Son of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth and grow up as calves of the
stall” (3 Nephi 25:2; compare Malachi 4:2). Speaking of those who possess this reverential awe, the Lord said, “And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them as a man spareth his own son that serveth him” (Malachi 3:17). Interestingly, the word *jewels* in this verse is a translation of the Hebrew *segulla*, which means “valued property or possession” or “royal treasure.” As justice cannot be averted for rebellious Israel, Malachi, like Hosea, makes a compelling case that God’s mercies were still sufficient for those willing to repent.

Finally, Malachi prophesied concerning the Second Coming of the Lord: “For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of Hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch” (Malachi 4:1). The Lord singles out one particular sin—pride—and lumps all the rest of the sins of humanity into the generic “all that do wickedly.” It is obvious that the Lord hates pride (see Proverbs 6:16–17). He knows how that one sin is the basis for, and can lead to, so many other sins. Pride is the great distracter and obstructer to all spiritual progress. Those infected by pride will be burned as stubble at the Second Coming, being left with “neither root nor branch” (3 Nephi 25:1) This means that they will have in the eternal worlds neither ancestry nor posterity—no eternal family connections.

Before this day of burning, however, Malachi prophesied:

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord:

“And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse” (Malachi 4:5–6).

This prophecy was fulfilled on April 3, 1836, when Elijah appeared to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery in the Kirtland Temple (see D&C 110). On that day, Elijah bestowed the keys of the sealing power on the Prophet, making it possible in this dispensation, through temple ordinances, for the faithful to enjoy all the blessings of the priesthood promised to our fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Malachi’s prophecy, then, is a call to God’s covenant people to avoid the calamities of the Second Coming by orienting their lives toward the holy temple and the eternal covenants and ordinances found therein. Receiving these covenants and ordinances will result in the receipt of the blessings promised to the ancient patriarchs. Rejecting them will result in a curse.

For Latter-day Saints, Malachi’s promises of mercy and justice are
in place today, especially as they pertain to preparing for the Second Coming. If we ignore God’s commands, become prideful, and entwine ourselves in the things of the world, we should expect measures of His justice—even burning. However, if we submissively turn to the Lord and enter into eternal covenants with Him in the temple, we will be protected, nourished, and sheltered. Furthermore, He will make of us His most precious possessions.

Conclusion

While the Church continues to grow in size and, in many ways, faithfulness, we are not beyond the spiritual ills that are so consistently addressed by the twelve prophets of the Old Testament. Casual temple attendance, idolatry, materialism, taking advantage of the weak and downtrodden, and worship in form but not true intent continue, in varying degrees, today as they did anciently. Hence the value of the writings of these twelve prophets. To ignore them or skirt them as unimportant is shortsighted indeed. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “We never inquire at the hand of God for special revelation only in case of their being no previous revelation to suit the case.”

For so many of our nagging personal, familial, ecclesiastical, and cultural problems, the answers already lie within the pages of the Book of the Twelve. By studying the words of these prophets, we will increase our capability of keeping the covenants we have entered into with our God.

Notes

1. The twelve prophets are Amos, Hosea, Jonah, Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Joel, and Malachi.
6. Bright, History of Israel, 257.
7. Amos was likely a sheep breeder and as such would have worked with other shepherds and commanded their respect. Furthermore, it is possible that the wool trade would have required Amos to travel the trade routes of Judah, Israel, and possibly as far as Syria and Egypt. Business conducted in Israel may, in part, account for Amos’s detailed understanding of the woeful spiritual condition of the northern kingdom. See Bright, History of Israel, 262–63; see also D. Kelly Ogden, “The Book of Amos,” in Studies in Scripture, Vol. 4: First Kings to Malachi, ed.
Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 53.


9. Some examples of Israel’s sins included in Amos are profaning the temple (Amos 2:8); stealing and violence (3:10); unrepentant attitudes (4:11); bribery (5:12); excess (6:3–7); corrupt business practices (8:4–6); and false doctrine (9:10).


15. Many chronologies mark the beginning of Manasseh’s reign in 697 BC while others employ the year 687 BC. This ten-year discrepancy may be due to a ten-year coregency with Hezekiah from 697–687 BC. See Carl D. Evans, “Manasseh, King of Judah,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 4:496–99).

16. During this time, Babylonians, Medes (western Iran), Cimmerians and Scythians (northwestern Iran), the kingdom of Midas (Asia Minor), and others were all kept in check through military excursions. Finally, in 671 BC Assyria crushed Egypt, making her domination complete.

Ironically, Assyria’s domination led, in part, to her demise. Her territories were so vast and her subjects generally despised her so deeply that it was a matter of time before the resources of the empire were spread too thin to control the rising ebb of rebellion that became generally present in her vassal kingdoms. See Bright, *History of Israel*, 313–16; Heschel, *The Prophets*, 184–92.

17. It seems apparent from the text of Zephaniah that he is prophesying prior to the major thrust of Josiah’s reforms beginning in 622 BC because he is addressing problems that were generally done away with by the later reforms of Josiah.


20. See Bright, *History of Israel*, 316.


24. This overview is summarized from the writings of Bright, Shanks, and Galbraith, Ogden, and Skinner.


27. There is no agreed upon date for the prophecy of Joel (see Bible Dictionary, 714). His ministry could reasonably be placed on the heels of Amos or as a contemporary of Haggai and Zechariah. We have elected to place Joel at a later date for two reasons: (1) the absence of any allusion to a king; (2) the presence of

28. See Bright, History of Israel, 368.
30. See Genesis 17:4–8; D&C 27:10; Smith, Teachings, 172, 337–38.
31. Smith, Teachings, 22.
Symbolism: A Divine Means of Instruction

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My academic training is in the field of instructional science and learning theory. I have always been fascinated by how individuals best acquire information. Every time instruction is given, it is packaged in some type of presentation or method. One sister in our stake began a lesson on improving family home evenings by displaying a beautiful cake she had made the night before and offering it to anyone who wanted a piece of it. Another sister in the room gladly came to the front of the class, and the instructor promptly stuck her hand in the cake, squishing it between her fingers, and plopped a chunk of it on a garbage bag. She then flipped the remaining goop onto the plate, licked her fingers, and gave the cake to this woman. This volunteer, after recovering from her surprise, declined the invitation to eat what had been given her. The teacher then presented another piece, nicely cut, on a china plate and with a silver fork to another participant in the room. Her point was the same as one President Boyd K. Packer made when he was serving as a mission president: “The lesson was obvious. It was the same cake in both cases, the same flavor, the same nourishment. The manner of serving either made it inviting, even enticing, or uninviting, even revolting. The cake, we reminded the missionaries, represented the gospel. How were they serving it?”

I believe that God is vitally interested in the way His gospel is presented. Often, the presentation or method of instruction makes all the difference not only in acceptance but also in understanding.

A number of years ago as I attended the Salt Lake Temple, I
noticed a written statement attached to one of the walls: “God teaches by symbols; it is his favorite method of teaching.” This short statement by Elder Orson F. Whitney ignited my curiosity. Knowing that our Heavenly Father is perfect in all things would lead to the obvious conclusion that He is a perfect teacher. Therefore, it follows that it might be wise to focus on the methods He employs to instruct—in addition to the doctrine or content of the instruction.

I find that symbolic teaching imprints visual images in my mind. I often have students draw symbols of themselves as a readiness activity for a lesson on scriptural symbolism. Doing this myself, I determined that perhaps a sketch of a bulldog would be the most appropriate symbol for me, as I somewhat resemble this animal and as it represents my personality very well. My wife even honored me with a lovely pencil drawing of a bulldog that now hangs in a prominent place in my office. The drawing inspires me to expend whatever energy is necessary to complete an assignment and refuse to quit when fatigue sets in.

Symbols Powerfully Illustrate Abstract Concepts or Principles

Biblical writers often employed visualization techniques to help dramatize the doctrine they wanted to teach. This type of literary magic expanded the writers’ mere use of words into a realm of visual images that are lasting, impressive, and illustrative of divine principles. Take, for instance, the doctrinal instruction about repentance and forgiveness provided by Isaiah. The Lord clearly teaches that we must become clean and admonishes His children to “put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil” (Isaiah 1:16). He then provides a powerful symbol that “though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (Isaiah 1:18; emphasis added). For me, I see in my mind’s eye something soaked in blood contrasted with a beautiful, crisp winter morning adorned with newly fallen snow, or I see something stained set against the clean, white wool of a recently shorn sheep. The teaching is complete: regardless of my sin, there is the possibility of complete forgiveness. We can see why God often chooses to instruct His children with symbols. Symbolic teaching helps the scripture student grasp abstract principles, like forgiveness, by providing a physical or tangible vehicle in which to convey them. I rather enjoy this poem written by Marguerite Stewart because it teaches repentance through a symbolic device:

When I went to the door, at the whisper of knocking,  
I saw Simeon Gantner’s daughter, Kathleen, standing  
There, in her shawl and her shame, sent to ask
“Forgiveness Flour” for her bread. “Forgiveness Flour,” We call it in our corner. If one has erred, one Is sent to ask for flour of his neighbors. If they loan it To him, that means he can stay, but if they refuse, he had Best take himself off. I looked at Kathleen . . . What a jewel of a daughter, though not much like her Father, more’s the pity. “I’ll give you flour,” I Said, and went to measure it. Measuring was the rub. If I gave too much, neighbors would think I made sin Easy, but if I gave too little, they would label me “Close.” While I stood measuring, Joel, my husband Came in from the mill, a great bag of flour on his Shoulder, and seeing her there, shrinking in the Doorway, he tossed the bag at her feet. “Here, take All of it.” And so she had flour enough for many loaves, While I stood measuring.

Flour is an excellent symbol for forgiveness in that it embodies the deeper symbol God often uses to describe what He gives so that we may live. When Jesus fed the five thousand, He did so by offering loaves of bread (see John 6:4–13). Later, He taught that He had been sent from His father to give “life unto the world” (John 6:33). He then connected the dots between what He had done earlier in feeding bread to the thousands to satiate their hunger and what His larger mission was in providing spiritual nourishment to satisfy mankind’s spiritual cravings: “I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger” (John 6:35).

The whole notion of physical and spiritual hunger had been dramatized earlier through the symbols of manna and shewbread. Jesus referred to manna as something familiar to His listeners when He attempted to expand their vision in seeing that He was the bread of life. “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven” (John 6:32). The table of shewbread was positioned in the tabernacle with twelve loaves of bread on it. The priests were instructed to change the bread each week on the Sabbath, at which time they were to eat it. The word shewbread literally means the bread of presence, as the bread was placed in the presence of the Lord. I can visualize the priests consuming every morsel of bread on a weekly basis. I like to think of these worthy men understanding what the bread represented and the need to completely, wholly take this nourishment into themselves.

I also see the same modern application as we are invited to the Lord’s table not to snack, but rather to feast. Nephi certainly invited us to a similar table: “Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting
upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life” (2 Nephi 31:20). We must also feast upon the right kind of food, which is this bread of life rather than spiritual junk food. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland provided a powerful metaphor when he questioned, “Are we really nurturing our youth and our new members in a way that will sustain them when the stresses of life appear? Or are we giving them a kind of theological Twinkie—spiritually empty calories?”

Most of us can remember the last time we ate a Twinkie; some of us can even taste it! At one time in my life, I believed Twinkies to be an essential part of my diet. It is not hard for me to understand the physical connection of this item in contrast to the abstract concept of needing constant spiritual nourishment that will build my soul. The ordinance of the sacrament becomes the critical link in the process of receiving this nourishment, to be filled with the Spirit of God (see 3 Nephi 18:9).

Symbols often represent the tangible evidence that teaches us about God and His laws. This is precisely the evidence Alma offered to Korihor (see Alma 30:43, 44). Korihor had demanded proof from Alma; Korihor wanted a sign to convince him that there is a God (see Alma 30:43). Alma declared that “all things denote there is a God; yea, even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also all the planets which move in their regular form do witness that there is a Supreme Creator” (Alma 30:44). Enoch taught the same truth, which the Lord had declared to Adam, saying, “And behold, all things have their likeness, and all things are created and made to bear record of me, both things which are temporal, and things which are spiritual” (Moses 6:63).

If a symbol is defined as some object that bears inner or spiritual meaning, then this earth is indeed a primary symbol bearing witness of its Creator. We know, by examining doctrine through the lens of the Restoration, that our earth is a grand symbol for everything that is required of us as mortals. It teaches the plan of salvation in the very steps it has gone through and will go through in the future. Daniel Ludlow wrote: “As a living entity, the earth itself is subject to laws, obedience to which will gain for the earth a celestial glory. The earth was baptized of water at the time of the flood; will be baptized of fire and the spirit; will die, be resurrected, and attain a physical celestial status as a fit dwelling place eternally for the celestial beings.”

One day as I was pondering this subject, listening to music while visiting a fairly distant unit in my CES assignment, one of the songs
caught my attention. I must have listened to it four or five times as it spoke with music and lyrics about this principle of the earth being a divine symbol of God’s love and concern for His children. The song is entitled “This Is My Father’s World,” by Amy Grant, a popular Christian singer.

This is my Father’s world.
And to my listening ears
All nature sings and round me rings
The music of the spheres
This is my Father’s world.
The birds their carols raise
The morning light, the lily white
Declare their maker’s praise

This is my Father’s world.
I rest me in the thought
Of rocks and trees, of skies and sea
His hands the wonders wrought

This is my Father’s world.
O’ let me ne’er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong
God is the ruler yet

This is my Father’s world.
Why should my heart be sad
The Lord is king, let the heavens ring
God reigns, let the earth be glad.
This is my Father’s world.

He shines in all that’s fair
In the rustling grass, I hear Him pass.
He speaks to me everywhere
In the rustling grass, I hear Him pass.
He speaks to me everywhere.

It should not surprise us that others of faith, although not of our faith, uncover and explain certain truths just as we would as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We know that the complete gospel was first given to Adam: “And thus the Gospel began to be preached, from the beginning, being declared by holy angels sent forth from the presence of God, and by his own voice, and by the gift of the Holy Ghost. And thus all things were confirmed unto Adam, by an holy ordinance, and the Gospel preached, and a decree sent forth, that it should be in the world, until the end thereof; and thus it was. Amen” (Moses 5:58–59).
President Joseph F. Smith averred:

Undoubtedly the knowledge of this law and other rites and ceremonies was carried by the posterity of Adam into all lands, and continued with them, more or less pure, to the flood, and through Noah, who was a “preacher of righteousness,” to those who succeeded him, spreading out into all nations and countries, Adam and Noah being the first of their dispensations to receive them from God. What wonder, then, that we should find relics of Christianity, so to speak, among the heathens and nations who know not Christ, and whose histories date back beyond the days of Moses, and even beyond the flood, independent of and apart from the records of the Bible.

I submit that often these relics are either minute or cosmic symbols that teach anyone with a believing heart about the majesty of God. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell has taught on several occasions, we are all part of a “witnessing universe.”

Over the past twenty-six years of teaching mostly abstract concepts or principles, I have found that some tangible object anchored my most memorable lessons. At least these symbolic objects caught my learners’ attention and provided a focal point of instruction. For example, I have regularly used salt, water, a light bulb, and a bit of electricity to demonstrate the critical issue of honoring our covenants with God. The bulb lights up when salt is stirred in the water where electricity is present. God uses these tangible, everyday objects of light and salt to help us better understand that we become a light to others when we make and keep covenants, which brings power into our lives (see Matthew 5:13–16; D&C 101:39).

One of President Packer’s well-known teaching examples also focuses on the notion of providing a physical symbol or object when he tried to talk about his testimony. Although his testimony was very real, he found it difficult to explain to a nonbeliever, especially someone who was quick to ridicule spiritual truths that do not lend themselves to empirical evaluation. His experience sounds hauntingly similar to Alma’s experience with Korihor. Elder Packer recounts:

I sat on a plane next to a professed atheist who ridiculed my belief in God. I bore my testimony to him: “There is a God. I know He lives!”

He said: “You don’t know. Nobody knows that. You can’t know it.” When I would not yield, the atheist posed perhaps the ultimate challenge to testimony. “All right,” he said in a sneering, condescending way, “you say you know.” Then, “Tell me how you know.”
I could not do it. I was helpless to communicate. When I used the words spirit and witness, the atheist responded, “I don’t know what you are talking about.” The words prayer, discernment, and faith also were meaningless to him.

“You see,” he said, “you don’t really know. If you did, you would be able to tell me how you know.”

Perhaps, I thought, I had borne my testimony to him unwisely, and I was at a loss as to what to do. Then came the experience. A thought, a revelation, came into my mind, and I said to the atheist: “Let me ask you a question. Do you know what salt tastes like?”

“Of course I do,” was his reply.

“When did you taste salt last?”

“I just had dinner on the plane.”

“You just think you know what salt tastes like,” I said.

He insisted, “I know what salt tastes like as well as I know anything.”

“If I gave you a cup of salt and a cup of sugar, could you tell the salt from the sugar if I let you taste them both?”

“Now you are getting juvenile,” he said. “Of course I could tell the difference. I know what salt tastes like. I know it as well as I know anything.”

“Then,” I said, “assuming that I have never tasted salt, explain to me just what it tastes like.”

After some thought, he ventured, “Well—I—uh, it is not sweet, and it is not sour.”

“You’ve told me what it isn’t, not what it is.”

After several attempts, of course he could not do it. He could not convey, in words alone, so ordinary an experience as tasting salt.

I bore testimony to him once again and said: “I know there is a God. You ridiculed that testimony and said that if I did know, I would be able to tell you exactly how I know. My friend, spiritually speaking, I have tasted salt. I am no more able to convey to you in words alone how this knowledge has come than you are able to tell me what salt tastes like. But I say to you again, there is a God! He lives! And just because you don’t know, don’t try to tell me that I don’t know, for I do!”

As we parted, I heard him mutter: “I don’t need your religion for a crutch. I don’t need it.”

10
Symbols Are Universal

A ring carries universal application as a symbol. It indicates, among other things, commitment, marriage, eternity, a covenant, love, and promises. Using a ring as his symbol, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught a bit about eternity: “The elements are eternal. That which has a beginning will surely have an end; take a ring, it is without beginning or end—cut it for a beginning place and at the same time you have an ending place.”

When I served a mission in Venezuela, I had little trouble adjusting to traffic laws in South America because the signs had familiar shapes, even though the words were in a different language. A stoplight conveys the same meaning regardless of its physical location. Colors invoke not only emotion but also meaning. In most cultures, white connotes the notion of purity and cleanliness, whereas black seems to represent darkness and evil. I find one of the most fascinating passages about symbolic color in the book of Revelation. John describes the celestial kingdom and, specifically, the throne of God (see Revelation 4:3). One of the gems in the throne is green. We associate the color green with eternity as the evergreen of the Christmas tree. John uses this association to convey the principle that the God we love and worship is everlasting and eternal. By extension, I have felt that John wants us to visualize the throne through his writing and realize that we too can become everlasting through our relationship with God as His children.

The caduceus is the universal symbol of medicine. You often see this icon on a doctor’s vehicle to identify the driver as a physician. This sign intertwines a rod with two snakes and wings at the top of the staff. Interestingly, this symbol of healing reflects the healing that took place for the children of Israel in the wilderness. All the Israelites needed to do was look at the serpent on the brass pole Moses had made in order to be cured (see Numbers 21:6–9). Alma used this Old Testament type in admonishing the Zoramites to look to Christ for their own salvation. He first reminded them that “a type was raised up in the wilderness, that whosoever would look upon it might live. And many did look and live” (Alma 33:19). He then taught them that this represented Christ and admonished them to “cast about your eyes and begin to believe in the Son of God, that he will come to redeem his people, and that he shall suffer and die to atone for their sins” (Alma 33:22).

Architecture both inspires and teaches with symbols. The Salt Lake Temple is a powerful architectural symbol of everything Latter-day Saints believe. The structure itself breathes lessons about constancy and
stability that come only through righteousness. The actual purpose of the building itself elevates desires beyond the plane of this existence and demands sacrifice in some equivalent manner to that which was given in the temple’s construction. Embedded in the granite are heavenly symbols teaching mortals that our God is the creator, organizer, and finisher of each nook and cranny of His infinite universe!

Certain animals or creatures represent powerful symbols for the truths they teach. The dragon is associated with Satan (see Revelation 12:3–4). “Dragons, as monsters, are autochthonous ‘masters of the ground,’ against which heroes, conquerors and creators must fight for mastery. . . . Killing the dragon is the conflict between light and darkness, the slaying of the destructive forces of evil.”

The Psalmist connected the dragon with “the shadow of death” (Psalm 44:19). Thus, we encounter in the pages of scripture Michael warring against the dragon long before this earth came into existence (see Revelation 12:7). Michael seems to have received the unenviable assignment of fighting this beast not only in heaven but now here on earth (see D&C 88:115). A dragon, especially one with seven heads and ten horns, as described by John the Revelator, provides a vivid and frightening sight (see Revelation 12:3). This dragon in Revelation has the ultimate goal of devouring its prey (see Revelation 12:4). In more literal terms, Satan has really only one purpose, which is the destruction of mankind (see D&C 10:27). This motif of a dragon has invested itself in the mythology of knights slaying fire-breathing dragons and saving damsels in distress. In a very real sense, there are knights today clothed in God’s armor battling daily against evil and providing spiritual safety for themselves and others for whom they are responsible (see Ephesians 6:11–17).

In contrast, the dove symbolically becomes the opposite of the dragon. It is closely tied to the Holy Ghost and things of goodness, usefulness, truth, and light. “The dove sits in the branches of the Tree of Life and appears with the fruit of the tree and vases of the waters of life.” Joseph Smith revealed that the dove was given to Abraham as a sign (see Abraham, facsimile 2, explanation of figure 7). The Bible Dictionary indicates that “we suppose that [the dove] has been similarly made known to other prophets on occasion since the time of Adam.” The dove brought back “an olive leaf pluckt off: so Noah knew that the waters were abated from off the earth” (Genesis 8:11). Interestingly, the heading to section 88 in the Doctrine and Covenants notes that the revelation was like an “olive leaf . . . plucked from the Tree of Para-
dis, the Lord’s message of peace to us.” A dove appeared as a sign of the Holy Ghost at the baptism of the Savior (see Matthew 3:16). The Prophet Joseph gave this explanation to its appearance at the baptism: “The sign of the dove was instituted before the creation of the world, a witness for the Holy Ghost, and the devil cannot come in the sign of a dove. The Holy Ghost is a personage, and is in the form of a personage. It does not confine itself to the form of the dove, but in sign of the dove. The Holy Ghost cannot be transformed into a dove; but the sign of a dove was given to John to signify the truth of the deed, as the dove is an emblem or token of truth and innocence.”

Although there are many other symbolic creatures, one of the most instructive is the ox. It was the emblem of the tribe of Ephraim. It is a powerful animal and congruent symbol for the responsibility laid upon the shoulders of Ephraim to assist in the latter-day gathering of believing Israel (see Deuteronomy 33:17). When I see the font in a temple baptistry, I am visually reminded of my responsibility as a member of this tribe to assist in the redemption of mankind by providing myself as proxy in the saving ordinances for my ancestors who have gone before me. At least a part of the burden rests squarely upon my back, just as the font rests on the back of those twelve oxen. I have also heard that we should be equally yoked in conjunction with marriage, with a priesthood leader, or with a coworker. Once I participated in a lesson where the teacher brought in a yoke from the farm and demonstrated its use by putting two volunteers on each side. He then made the point that in critical relationships, it is essential to pull together just as two equally matched oxen do. The benefit is in the result of more effectively and efficiently accomplishing the objective, just as strong oxen made their way slowly and steadily across pioneer trails more than a century ago.

Truly, “symbols are the timeless and universal language in which God, in his wisdom, has chosen to teach his gospel and bear witness of his Son.” For me, the symbolic images of scripture imprint doctrine into my long-term memory.

Additional Examples of Symbolism in Old Testament Times

The tabernacle erected in the stark wilderness provided constant visual instruction to the Israelites. It taught how Christ stands in the midst of this barren world, requiring that we simply turn and face Him. If we will turn to Him, He promises to guide us so that we will be like a watered garden (see Isaiah 58:11). When King Benjamin delivered his final sermon, the people congregated around the temple, being
instructed to position their tents with the doors facing the temple (see Mosiah 2:5–6).

The words that John used at the beginning of his gospel, “the Word. . . dwelt among us” (John 1:14; emphasis added), meant to tent or encamp, to reside. It could be said that John wrote that Christ chose to tabernacle with mortals. The tent or tabernacle provided shelter and a place to worship. The focus of protection and communion always resides within the power of the Savior. Isaiah taught this same principle when he encouraged the Church to “enlarge the place of thy tent, and let them stretch forth the curtains of thine inhabitants: spare not, lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes” (Isaiah 54:2). Individuals will find safety in today’s world only within the protective confines of committed Church membership and, more specifically, in covenant relationships with God and His Son. The charge is to lengthen our reach and provide a spiritual shield for the entire earth.

The high priest who officiated in the tabernacle was a constant reminder of the saving grace of Jesus Christ. The clothing he wore symbolically taught not only his role as a priest but more importantly the function of our Lord. He represented the Savior and bore the responsibility of all Israel upon his shoulders. An onyx stone upon each shoulder held his clothing in place, with the names of the sons of Israel engraved upon the stones. He wore a breastplate of fabric over his chest with a precious stone set in it for each of the sons of Israel. We know that the Savior loves us; we are His precious children; He bore our sins; and He keeps us close to His heart. Attached to the end of the priest’s robe were pomegranates. Their odor is pleasant and sweet—just as the Savior and His word are the most pleasant and sweetest of all things we can desire. There were also bells sewn to the bottom of the high priest’s clothing, which signaled the sounding of God’s word or revelation and which we must heed for our own salvation’s sake.

In a personal way, this means that I need to tune my ear and heart to the soundings of revelation, both customized revelation that comes privately and public revelation given by our presiding high priest, for his word represents the Savior’s words (see D&C 107:66; 1:37–38).

Leviticus 14 contains one of the most dramatic illustrations of the power of symbols to teach gospel principles. It describes a very detailed ritual that seems to have little relevance to us today. However, on closer examination, the principles of salvation are on full display.

All of us must come to the priest—Christ—to be cleansed and healed. Because of our sinful natures, He will come to us out of the camp. Elder Holland wrote that “Christ will run to [us], and is running
even now, if [we] will but receive the extended arm of His mercy.”

The angel taught Nephi that this act was the condescension of God (see 1 Nephi 11:16, 26–27). We understand this concept when we sing, “I marvel that he would descend from his throne divine.”

The act of killing one of the sacrificial birds is a metaphor for what we must do to be clean, in what Paul called being dead to sin, with the need to crucify our old self or destroy that wicked part of us (see Romans 6:2, 6). King Benjamin warned and counseled, “The natural man is an enemy to God . . . unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ” (Mosiah 3:19).

One of the most powerful images in the entire rite is the act of the leper—the sinner—shaving off all his hair, from his head to his toes. The visual image teaches that we must become like a newborn babe, totally clean and pure, to enter back into the presence of the Father; it is the process of being born again through the elements of blood, water, and spirit (see 3 Nephi 11:37–38; John 3:3–5; Moses 6:59).

Principles of Interpretation

One of the most important tools available to correctly understand the meaning of a particular symbol is to examine it within its scriptural context. For example, the element of blood has various meanings depending upon its context. In Genesis 9:4, blood equates with life; in Moses 6:60, blood now represents the Atonement and sanctification; and in 2 Nephi 9:44, blood becomes a symbol for sin and spiritual death.

It is always helpful to use the study aids available within our scriptures. Ezekiel 37:24 is an excellent example of how the chapter heading, in essence, helps in the interpretation of who “David my servant” is. The heading indicates, “The Messiah shall reign over them.” Thus, in this instance, the servant David represents the Savior. In Joel 1:4 we learn by examining the footnote that the various stages of the locust represent invading or conquering armies.

Often, the most helpful tool is to examine the symbol itself and determine what it represents or teaches. Jeremiah uses the symbols of fishers and hunters to represent those who will gather Israel back to God (see Jeremiah 16:16). But why did Jeremiah use two different symbols to illustrate the concept of sharing the gospel and reclaiming those with believing hearts? By the very nature of the symbols of fishing and hunting, I begin to see how these two methods of gathering will differ. The fishers will be successful in gathering great numbers with
their nets, whereas the hunters will have to seek out those willing to listen under rocks, in caves, behind bushes, or wherever they may be hiding. It reminds me of my own mission and of our young men and women serving missions today. As they go door to door sharing the message of the gospel, at times they find the one or two who are willing to listen and be baptized. I was a hunter, as are many missionaries today. On the other hand, we often read of experiences where the gospel was preached to large groups who joined en masse and even raced one another to see who would be baptized first. Wilford Woodruff and Heber C. Kimball were fishermen of such groups.

Conclusion

For teachers, the question resides in the realm of how best to present whatever content they want their students to learn. In a gospel setting, that learning extends beyond the mind and into the heart. God, the perfect teacher, chooses His methods with absolute precision, and symbolism is one of His most used and valued instructional tools. We, the learners, must struggle to understand the meaning of the symbol and then apply it to our particular time and circumstance. When we do this, the symbol, with its meaning and application, penetrates our minds and hearts. And this process of struggling to capture meaning, perchance, is at least as valuable as the product of complete understanding, which might not come in this life; yet we must struggle. I like the following statement by Joseph Fielding McConkie, as it challenges us as gospel scholars to focus our study more intently on symbols and how doctrine often flows through them: “To be fluent in the language of the Spirit one must be fluent in the language of symbolism.”

Notes

Because our lives consist primarily of numerous interactions with others, we should not be surprised that some of the Savior’s most challenging commandments focus on interpersonal relationships. Consider these soul-stretching declarations: “Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you” (Luke 6:27–28); “As you would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise” (Luke 6:31); “Love one another, as I have loved you” (John 15:12; emphasis added).

These teachings strike at the very core of what eternally matters most: our relationship to God and our dealings with other people. When asked which of all the commandments was the greatest, the Savior responded, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Matthew 22:37–39). The door leading to eternal life hangs on these “weightier matters” of the law (see Matthew 22:40; Romans 13:10). Love for others is how we fulfill the commandment to show love for God (see Mosiah 2:17).

The Prophet Joseph Smith was intimately familiar with the Savior’s declarations. Joseph understood that religion is primarily a matter of interpersonal relationships both horizontally (person to person) and vertically (man to God) (see James 1:27) and that positive relations are dependent upon such principles as love and respect. Joseph described our personal responsibility in this regard: “Let the Saints remember...
that great things depend on their individual exertion. . . . Let every selfish feeling not only be buried, but annihilated; and let love to God and man predominate, and reign triumphant in every mind.”

Knowing what is written, however, and being able to rise to the occasion to live the doctrine is another matter. Joseph Smith’s life and teachings reflect a deep commitment to following the Savior’s admonitions and example. The emotional costs were, at times, unimaginable. “On numerous occasions Joseph Smith practiced what he preached about forgiveness. Few, if any, in the history of the Church have been betrayed as frequently or as grievously as Joseph Smith. Yet, if an offender would sincerely repent, the Prophet would readily forgive—even when the offense had been severe.”

As Orson Spencer observed, Joseph was “remarkably cheerful for one who has seen well-tried friends martyred around him, and felt the inflictions of calumny—the vexations of lawsuits—the treachery of intimates—and multiplied violent attempts upon his person and life.”

The persecution Joseph experienced began at the time of the First Vision and intensified over time. He said, “When I went home and told the people that I had a revelation, and that all the churches were corrupt, they persecuted me, and they have persecuted me ever since.”

His brother William commented that their family was well respected in the community until Joseph announced he had seen God. After that, William reports, their family’s reputation was of the worst kind.

President Brigham Young later commented, “If a thousand hounds were on this Temple Block [Temple Square], let loose on one rabbit, it would not be a bad illustration of the situation at times of the Prophet Joseph. He was hunted unremittingly.”

President Young added, “Why was he hunted from neighborhood to neighborhood, from city to city, and from State to State, and at last suffered death? Because he received revelations from the Father, from the Son, and was ministered to by holy angels, and published to the world the direct will of the Lord concerning his children on the earth.” Such persecution has always been the lot of true prophets of God (see Mosiah 7:26–27; Helaman 13:26).

Even so, in the final hours of his life, while riding to Carthage, where he would be martyred, the Prophet Joseph declared, “I am calm as a summer’s morning; I have a conscience void of offense towards God, and towards all men” (D&C 135:4). He was at peace with himself, with others, and with God. Joseph’s personal example and counsel can teach us much about living “void of offense” toward others.
Dealing with Criticism and Contention

Some offenses we experience in relationships are real. Others are simply imagined. All of them cause anguish. Joseph encouraged the Saints to avoid the negative criticism that destroys relationships: “I do not dwell upon your faults, and you shall not upon mine. Charity, which is love, covereth a multitude of sins, and I have often covered up all the faults among you. . . . We should cultivate a meek, quiet and peaceable spirit.”

Joseph admonished the Saints to be willing to bear one another’s shortcomings because that is what “the Lord does with us.” “I charged the Saints,” he said, “not to follow the example of the adversary in accusing the brethren, and said, ‘If you do not accuse each other, God will not accuse you. If you have no accuser you will enter heaven, and if you will follow the revelations and instructions which God gives you through me, I will take you into heaven as my back load. If you will not accuse me, I will not accuse you. If you will throw a cloak of charity over my sins, I will over yours—for charity covereth a multitude of sins.’”

The Prophet Joseph noted the great need in our world for more reciprocal kindness toward each other: “Men often come to me with their troubles, and seek my will, crying, Oh, Brother Joseph, help me! Help me! But when I am in trouble, few of them sympathize with me, or extend to me relief. I believe in a principle of reciprocity.”

“Notwithstanding my weaknesses,” Joseph lamented, “I am under the necessity of bearing the infirmities of others, who, when they get into difficulty, hang on to me tenaciously to get them out, and wish me to cover their faults. On the other hand, the same characters, when they discover a weakness in Brother Joseph, endeavor to blast his reputation, and publish it to all the world, and thereby aid my enemies in destroying the Saints.”

On one occasion, when a man had made some critical remarks to Joseph about his wife, Emma, the Prophet responded not in anger or in retaliation but with an observation. The man had seen Joseph doing “women’s work” (as the man called it) in the Mansion House. He concluded that “mismanagement by Emma was the root of the domestic problems” and said to him, “‘Brother Joseph, my wife does much more hard work than does your wife.’ Brother Joseph replied that ‘if a man cannot learn in this life to appreciate a wife and do his duty by her, in properly taking care of her, he need not expect to be given one in the hereafter.’” The judgmental adviser meekly concluded: ‘His words shut my mouth as tight as a clam. I took them as a terrible
reproof. After that I tried to do better by the good wife I had and tried to lighten her labors.”

Forgiving Those Who Offend

Is anything more distressing in relationships than to be grossly misunderstood, to be quoted out of context, or to have negative things said about us? Joseph said, “There is no salvation in believing an evil report against our neighbor.”

Misrepresentations can wrench souls, put knots in stomachs, break hearts, and crush spirits. The Prophet Joseph was not immune to such pain, but he had a unique method for dealing with these personal injustices. His approach enabled him to rise above the negative effects rumor-mongering might otherwise have had. An acquaintance of the Prophet recorded this experience:

I went one day to the Prophet with a sister. She had a charge to make against one of the brethren for scandal. When her complaint had been heard the Prophet asked her if she was quite sure that what the brother had said of her was utterly untrue.

She was quite sure that it was.

He then told her to think no more about it, for it could not harm her. If untrue it could not live, but the truth will survive. Still she felt that she should have some redress.

Then he offered her his method of dealing with such cases for himself. When an enemy had told a scandalous story about him, which had often been done, before he rendered judgment he paused and let his mind run back to the time and place and setting of the story to see if he had not by some unguarded word or act laid the block on which the story was built. If he found that he had done so, he said that in his heart he then forgave his enemy, and felt thankful that he had received warning of a weakness that he had not known he possessed.

Then he said to the sister that he would have her to do the same: search her memory thoroughly and see if she had not herself unconsciously laid the foundation for the scandal that annoyed her.

The sister thought deeply for a few moments and then confessed that she believed she had.

Then the Prophet told her that in her heart she could forgive that brother who had risked his own good name and her friendship to give her this clearer view of herself.

The sister thanked her advisor and went away in peace.
This unique approach of dealing with personal offenses by looking into our own hearts first to determine whether we have inadvertently done something to cause others to say what they said, or to feel the way they do, requires courage and humility. But it is precisely this kind of humility that will help heal hearts, improve relations, and promote greater peace among family and friends. True humility is present when we do not think we are better than anyone else. The prophet Joseph thought, “Don’t be limited in your views with regard to your neighbor’s virtue, but beware of self-righteousness, and be limited in the estimate of your own virtues, and not think yourselves more righteous than others.”

All of us will be faced with the challenge of having to extend forgiveness. We can grow in our ability to love and forgive others. Joseph counseled, “As you increase in innocence and virtue, as you increase in goodness, let your hearts expand, let them be enlarged towards others; you must be long-suffering, and bear with the faults and errors of mankind.” Joseph also taught that “God does not look upon sin with allowance, but when men have sinned, there must be allowance made for them.”

**Showing More Kindness**

Joseph noted that kindness, rather than contention, motivates people to do good: “Nothing is so much calculated to lead people to forsake sin as to take them by the hand, and watch over them with tenderness. When persons manifest the least kindness and love to me, O what power it has over my mind, while the opposite course has a tendency to harrow up all the harsh feelings and depress the human mind.”

In his comments to the Relief Society, Joseph further described the positive impact kindness can have: “How precious are the souls of men. . . . When a man is borne down with trouble, when he is perplexed with care and difficulty, if he can meet a smile instead of an argument or a murmur—if he can meet with mildness, it will calm down his soul and soothe his feelings; when the mind is going to despair, it needs a solace of affection and kindness.”

**An Increase of Love**

At the time of the organization of the Relief Society, Joseph admonished the sisters to be more charitable to one another: “Suppose that Jesus Christ and holy angels should object to us on frivolous things, what would become of us? We must be merciful to one another, and overlook small things.” He also reproved narrow-mindedness and
observed that “what many people call sin is not sin.”

Joseph knew firsthand how difficult it was to show love to the undeserving. On March 24, 1832, a mob broke through the door of the John and Elsie Johnson home, where Joseph, Emma, and their adopted twins were living. One of these twins would die within days as a result of what happened that night. The enraged mob pulled Joseph from the home, severely beat him, split one of his front teeth while trying to get him to drink a bottle of poison, covered him with hot tar, stuffed the tar paddle in his mouth to suffocate him, and then left him to die in a snow-covered field. His family and friends spent the night scraping the tar from his body, which also took off much of his skin. The next morning was the Sabbath. As was his custom each Sunday, Joseph stepped out onto the large rock that served as the front porch of the Johnson home to deliver a sermon. He was wrapped in strips of cloth that covered his wounds. Several of those who had beaten him the night before were standing in the crowd to hear him speak! We can only imagine Joseph’s feelings as he looked out over the group. Still suffering greatly from the attack the night before, Joseph spoke from the heart. His sermon was not recorded, but he apparently spoke to them in kindness. Given the circumstances, Joseph’s choosing to speak that morning was a high example of charity itself. His sermon was delivered with such humility and spirituality that three people came forward and asked for baptism. Later that day, Joseph stepped into a nearby icy river and baptized them.

As Joseph grew in spiritual capacity, he came to intimately know and personally understand more about God’s love for all His children. Joseph’s teachings often reflected what he was learning: “There is a love from God that should be exercised toward those of our faith . . . which is peculiar to itself, but it is without prejudice; it also gives scope to the mind, which enables us to conduct ourselves with greater liberality towards all that are not of our faith.” He added that this principle of love “approximates nearer to the mind of God, because it is like God, or Godlike.”

He also taught, “It is a time-honored adage that love begets love. Let us pour forth love—show forth our kindness unto all mankind, and the Lord will reward us with everlasting increase.” Joseph pointed out to the Relief Society that God has planted “feelings of charity and benevolence” in our souls, and he promised, “If you live up to these principles, how great and glorious will be your reward in the celestial kingdom!”
Generosity in Forgiving Others

Joseph learned early in his ministry about the importance of mercifully forgiving others. He had experienced the joy of forgiveness during his First Vision, when he heard the Savior’s voice declare, “Joseph my son thy Sins are forgiven thee.”26 Joseph later expressed his sentiments with these words: “Ever keep in exercise the principle of mercy, and be ready to forgive our brother on the first intimations of repentance, and asking forgiveness; and should we forgive our brother, or even our enemy, before he repent or ask forgiveness, our heavenly Father would be equally as merciful unto us.”27

To the Saints, through the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Savior declared, “I, the Lord, will forgive whom I will forgive, but of you it is required to forgive all men” (D&C 64:10). He also warned that to not forgive can impact our own souls: “And ye shall also forgive one another your trespasses; for verily I say unto you, he that forgiveth not his neighbor’s trespasses when he says that he repents, the same hath brought himself under condemnation” (Mosiah 26:31). The Lord expects us to forgive those who repent because that is what He is willing to do (see Mosiah 26:29). “The nearer we get to our heavenly Father,” Joseph observed, “the more we are disposed to look with compassion on perishing souls; we feel that we want to take them upon our shoulders, and cast their sins behind our backs. . . . If you would have God have mercy on you, have mercy on one another.”28

Elder B. H. Roberts observed that Joseph was generous in his forgiveness of others: “One of the surest evidences of Joseph Smith’s greatness of mind and of the inspiration of God upon him is to be seen in his treatment of those who had fallen but were willing to and did repent of their sins. His capacity to forgive under these circumstances seemed boundless.”29

True enough, Joseph had often spoken about the need to forgive others, but his most powerful sermon was his personal example. Joseph had learned by experience the soul-expanding joy resulting from forgiving others. After the Prophet was taken by an armed mob at Far West and left to languish in Liberty Jail during the bitter winter of 1838–39, one of those who had betrayed Joseph Smith humbled himself and repented. This man stood in the highest circles of Church leadership at Far West. He ached for forgiveness but, recognizing the enormity of his offense, feared he could never obtain it. He humbled himself and traveled to Nauvoo to find the Prophet. He took a “present to the injured man of God [the Prophet] if, peradventure, he would forgive
and permit him to return to the fold as a private member. He felt that there was salvation nowhere else for him and if that was denied him all was lost as far as he was concerned.” He had underestimated the power of the Spirit in healing broken relationships. Not knowing how he would be received, if at all, “He started with a sorrowful heart and a downcast look. While on the way the Lord told Brother Joseph he was coming. The Prophet looked out of the window and saw him coming up the street. As soon as he turned to open the gate the Prophet sprang up from his chair and ran and met him in the yard, exclaiming ‘O Brother [Hyde], how glad I am to see you!’ He caught him around the neck and both wept like children.”

Joseph encouraged the Saints not only to forgive but also to pray for offenders: “One of the most pleasing scenes that can occur on earth, when a sin has been committed by one person against another, is, to forgive that sin; and then according to the sublime and perfect pattern of the Savior, pray to our Father in heaven to forgive him also.” Joseph taught that we must cultivate the love of others, even our enemies, by showing love to them. “Sectarian priests cry out concerning me, and ask, ‘Why is it this babbler gains so many followers, and retains them?’ I answer, It is because I possess the principle of love. All I can offer the world is a good heart and a good hand.”

Joseph demonstrated his willingness to frankly forgive those who offend. One evening, Joseph attended a debate at his brother William’s home. When things didn’t go as William had desired, William physically assaulted Joseph. Joseph was injured and could not, for a time, sit down or stand up by himself. Within a few days, a much calmer William wrote to apologize. The Prophet Joseph responded without hesitation, forgiving and praying for William: “In your letter you ask my forgiveness, which I readily grant. . . . I freely forgive you, and you know my unshaken and unchangeable disposition. . . . And now may God have mercy upon my father’s house; may God take away enmity from between me and thee; and may all blessings be restored, and the past forgotten forever.”

On another occasion, Joseph extended forgiveness to one who had betrayed his trust. The man had apostatized and signed an affidavit that was used to incarcerate Joseph in Liberty Jail. With great feelings of remorse for what he had done, the man earnestly desired to repent. Two members of the Quorum of the Twelve recommended this brother write Joseph a letter of apology and ask for forgiveness. He wrote: “I am as the prodigal son. . . . I have seen the folly of my way, and I tremble at the gulf I have passed. . . . I know my situation, you
know it, and God knows it, and I want to be saved if my friends will help me. . . . I have done wrong and I am sorry. The beam is in my own eye. . . . I ask forgiveness. . . . I want your fellowship; if you cannot grant that, grant me your peace and friendship, for we are brethren, and our communion used to be sweet.”

Joseph’s response is one of the most moving letters ever penned by the hand of man. It is filled with forgiveness and effused with hope for brighter future relations:

Dear Brother Phelps:—I must say that it is with no ordinary feelings I endeavor to write a few lines to you in answer to yours. . . . At the same time I am rejoiced at the privilege granted me. . . .

Inasmuch as long-suffering, patience, and mercy have ever characterized the dealings of our heavenly Father towards the humble and penitent, I feel disposed to copy the example, cherish the same principles, and by so doing be a savior of my fellow men.

It is true, that we have suffered much in consequence of your behavior—. . . One with whom we had oft taken sweet counsel together, and enjoyed many refreshing seasons from the Lord—“had it been an enemy, we could have borne it.” . . .

[Joseph described that he desired to follow the example of the Savior in helping others and then continued:] Believing your confession to be real, and your repentance genuine, I shall be happy once again to give you the right hand of fellowship, and rejoice over the returning prodigal.

Your letter was read to the Saints last Sunday, and an expression of their feeling was taken, when it was unanimously Resolved, That W. W. Phelps should be received into fellowship.

“Come on, dear brother, since the war is past,
For friends at first, are friends again at last.”

Yours as ever,

JOSEPH SMITH, JUN.

Not only is this frank forgiveness touching but the inspired expressions in this letter also demonstrate how forgiveness works in friendships a willingness to forgive, coupled with a desire to renew the friendship. Commenting on this incident, Elder B. H. Roberts noted, “When the great offense of Elder William W. Phelps is taken into account . . . this letter is remarkable. The Prophet’s frank forgiveness of his erring brother . . . exhibits a broad mindedness and generosity that can come only from a great soul.”
It is also interesting to note that the couplet the Prophet used to close his letter touched Brother Phelps, who was himself a gifted poet. Many of the hymns penned by Phelps are beloved favorites today, and one of them—“The Spirit of God”—is sung at the dedication of every temple.

Because Joseph forgave him, Brother Phelps rejoined the Saints at Nauvoo. Four years later, he was asked to deliver the eulogy in a memorial service in honor of his forgiving friend. Phelps recited a poem he had written as a tribute to Joseph, the martyred Prophet. The poem has since served as a lasting memorial to the greatness of the Prophet Joseph Smith: “Praise to the man who communed with Jehovah. Jesus anointed that Prophet and Seer.”

Appreciating Others More

True friendship, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught, is designed to “revolutionize and civilize the world, and cause wars and contentions to cease and men to become friends and brothers.” Joseph expressed sentiments that “the kindness of a man should never be forgotten. That person who never forsaketh his trust, should ever have the highest place of regard in our hearts, and our love should never fail, but increase more and more.”

To Joseph Smith, a true friend was a gift from God. “How good and glorious it has seemed unto me, to find pure and holy friends.” He was so grateful for the kindnesses occasionally shown to him that he resolved to be a greater friend to others: “I love friendship and truth. . . . I hope I shall see [my friends] again, that I may toil for them, and administer to their comfort also. They shall not want a friend while I live; my heart shall love those, and my hands shall toil for those, who love and toil for me, and shall ever be found faithful to my friends. Shall I be ungrateful? Verily no! God forbid!”

His feelings of affection for true friends were intensified while he suffered in prison: “Those who have not been enclosed in the walls of a prison without cause or provocation, can have but little idea how sweet the voice of a friend is; one token of friendship from any source whatever awakens and calls into action every sympathetic feeling . . . until finally all enmity, malice and hatred, and past differences, misunderstandings and mismanagements are slain victorious at the feet of hope.” Joseph later explained that friendship is like a blacksmith “welding iron to iron; it unites the human family with its happy influence.”

After his death, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught Brigham Young in a dream about the need to be patient with the Saints and bear with
their imperfections. Shortly after they had settled in the Salt Lake Valley, President Young became concerned about those few Saints who desired to leave the Salt Lake Valley for the gold fields of California. He wrestled with his feelings until he had a particular dream in which the Prophet Joseph Smith appeared to him, herding a “flock of sheep of all kinds, sizes, colors, and descriptions, from the largest, finest sheep I ever saw, down to the ugly decrepit dwarf. . . . I looked on the strange flock and . . . asked Joseph what in the world he was going to do with such a flock of sheep. . . . He looked up and smiled, as he did when he was living, and as though he was in reality with me, and said, ‘They are all good in their place.’” Joseph’s counsel helped President Young learn to better appreciate the contributions of every individual, whether great or small.

**Cultivating the Spirit of Forgiveness and Avoiding Self-Righteousness**

At the organization of the Relief Society, Joseph taught the importance of cultivating the spirit of forgiveness: “There is another error which opens a door for the adversary to enter. [Some are] subject to overmuch zeal, which [causes] them to be rigid in a religious capacity [when they] should be armed with mercy.” Then, speaking of forgiving those who have sinned against us, he continued, and with deep feeling added, “They are fellow mortals, we loved them once, shall we not encourage them to reformation? We have not yet forgiven them seventy times seven, as our Savior directed; perhaps we have not forgiven them once. . . . They who repent not should be cast out from this society; yet we should woo them to return to God. . . . We should act in all things on a proper medium to every immortal spirit. Notwithstanding the unworthy are among us, the virtuous should not, from self-importance, grieve and oppress needlessly, those unfortunate ones even these should be encouraged to hereafter live to be honored by this society. . . . Put a double watch over the tongue.”

Joseph consistently warned the Saints about self-righteousness and hypocrisy: “All the religious world is boasting of righteousness: it is the doctrine of the devil to retard the human mind and hinder our progress, by filling us with self-righteousness.” He noted that we could be more generous in our estimation of others: “Don’t be limited in your views with regard to your neighbor’s virtue, but beware of self-righteousness, and be limited in the estimate of your own virtues, and not think yourselves more righteous than others.”

He cautioned that backbiting and faultfinding are forms of pious-
ness: “The devil flatters us that we are very righteous, when we are feeding on the faults of others.”

He warned against hypocrisy: “I love that man better who swears a stream as long as my arm yet deals justice to his neighbors and mercifully deals his substance to the poor, than the long, smooth-faced hypocrite.”

As President George Q. Cannon explained, Joseph Smith “was a great hater of sham. He disliked long-faced hypocrisy, and numerous stories are told of his peculiar manner of rebuking it. He knew that much that people call sin is not sin, and he did many things to break down superstition. He would wrestle, play ball, and enjoy himself in physical exercises, and he knew that he was not committing sin to do so. The religion of heaven is not to make men sorrowful, to curtail their enjoyment and to make them groan and sigh and wear long faces, but to make them happy. This Joseph desired to teach the people, but in doing so, he, like our Savior, when he was on the earth, was a stumbling block to bigots and hypocrites. They could not understand him; he shocked their prejudices and traditions.”

Making Amends

An event in the lives of Joseph and Emma Smith that happened while the Book of Mormon was being translated illustrates Joseph’s efforts to make amends after an offense had occurred. David Whitmer, who witnessed the incident, recorded: “He [Joseph Smith] was a religious and straightforward man. . . . He had to trust in God. He could not translate unless he was humble and possessed the right feelings towards everyone. To illustrate so you can see: One morning when he was getting ready to continue the translation, something went wrong about the house and he was put out about it. Something that Emma, his wife, had done. Oliver and I went upstairs and Joseph came up soon after to continue the translation but he could not do anything. He could not translate a single syllable. He went downstairs, out into the orchard, and made supplication to the Lord; was gone about an hour—came back to the house, and asked Emma’s forgiveness and then came upstairs where we were and then the translation went on all right. He could do nothing save he was humble and faithful.”

Thus, Joseph learned early on that the Spirit can be readily discerned only when we are humble and possess right feelings toward others.

Securing a Positive Judgment

Through his translation of the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith learned that we obtain forgiveness of sin through personal repentance,
baptism, and the reception of the Holy Spirit (see 2 Nephi 31:13; Mosiah 4:22, 26) and that following our baptism we retain that remission of sin by continually loving and serving our fellow beings (see Mosiah 4:26; Alma 34:27–29). Joseph taught, “To be justified before God we must love one another: we must overcome evil; we must visit the fatherless and the widow in their affliction, and we must keep ourselves unspotted from the world.”

However, our “peaceable walk” with others (Moroni 7:3–4) can be disrupted by criticism, contention, backbiting, betrayal, or offenses (both real and imagined). Occasionally, we may all be haunted by feelings of frustration, anger, guilt, or regret in our dealings with others. As seen, Joseph Smith spoke often about forgiving others. The numerous offenses and personal injustices he was subjected to throughout his life qualified him to speak about forgiveness with the voice of experience. His sufferings in his dealings with others were not abstract or theoretical. They were real. He came to know, firsthand, about the humility, patience, forbearance, and meekness required in dealing with others.

When God the Eternal Father introduced His Beloved Son to the Prophet Joseph Smith in 1820, He said, “Hear Him.” Joseph listened to the Savior then and ever after—his life and teachings were filled with examples of how he tried to implement the two great commandments in the law to love God and to love others as ourselves. His teachings contain priceless counsel about these weightier matters and illustrate how applying the healing balm of forgiveness can mend and strengthen our interpersonal relationships.

Notes

7. Brigham Young, *Deseret News Weekly*, October 11, 1876, 582.
10. Smith, Teachings, 193.
15. Crosby, in Andrus and Andrus, They Knew the Prophet, 162–63.
16. Smith, Teachings, 228.
17. Smith, Teachings, 228.
20. Smith, Teachings, 228.
22. Smith, Teachings, 193.
23. Smith, Teachings, 147.
27. Smith, Teachings, 155.
30. Daniel Tyler, Juvenile Instructor 27 (1892): 491.
31. Smith, History of the Church, 6:245.
33. Smith, History of the Church, 2:342–43.
34. William W. Phelps, in Smith, History of the Church, 4:141–42.
37. “Praise to the Man,” Hymns (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 27.
38. Smith, Teachings, 316.
42. Smith, History of the Church, 3:293.
43. Smith, History of the Church, 5:517.
44. Brigham Young, in Journal of Discourses, 6:321; emphasis added.
45. Smith, Teachings, 238.
47. Smith, Teachings, 228.
49. Smith, History of the Church, 5:401.
of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1930), 1:131.

52. Smith, History of the Church, 2:229.
The author showing Neil Sorenson how to use the scriptures on computer

Photo by David M. Whitchurch
Computers are powerful tools. And while educational tools can enhance delivery, a well-prepared teacher is still at the heart of gospel learning. Understanding doctrine and teaching by the Spirit remain essential. But using the inspired advances in the technology we have been given is a way to act responsibly toward the bestowed blessings. Computers put many resources at our fingertips that previously required much more time, planning, materials, and effort. Scriptures, teacher manuals, student manuals, pictures, audio clips, videos, and other teaching objects can all be accessed in seconds.

How can a teacher begin to use the most powerful computer resources to teach the gospel and begin to help students this way? This short article provides a quick tour through the computerized scriptures, showing how to access these marvelous resources and offering useful tips for teachers and students alike.

A teacher with access to a computer projector, or even just a monitor for more intimate settings, can focus all students’ attention at once. Even students who seem to always sit with their scriptures closed will, at the very least, be looking at the verses on the screen. Just as bookworms are more likely to read the scriptures on paper, budding technophiles will find more interest in computer scriptures simply because of the medium being used. Some have asked, “Do your students still bring their scriptures to class?” The answer is yes. They bring them and mark them and spend more time in the scriptures than they used to.

Tips for Using the Scriptures on Computer

John P. Livingstone

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The ability to click on words with superscripts (indicating footnotes) and cross-references and immediately see the related footnotes pop up at the bottom of the screen makes searching the scriptures much faster. One developer said this new scripture-searching capacity can be compared to flying across the American plains as opposed to walking. You get to the same place in the end; it’s just faster this way. You have only so many fingers to keep track of verses you have found in the paper edition of the scriptures; but with the computer, you can go forward or backward through multiple screens and review the scriptures with significant economy of time (and fingers). And without losing your place you can click backward and forward through screens to find that scripture you looked at a few minutes ago. Teachers can read the scripture blocks and prepare their lessons by importing scripture verses, maps, or pictures into word processing or presentation software (like Microsoft PowerPoint) that can be saved on their computers or posted to a Web site that they or their students may view during class or afterward. Let us look at the two different computer scripture editions and benefits of each.

The Scriptures: Internet Version

The official Internet version of the scriptures comes up when you visit www.lds.org and click on the word “Scriptures.” You then see the title page, which looks like this:

Click the left mouse button on any of the titles to take you to the standard work selected. You may then click on the book and chapter and begin reading or copying the verses (a good way to prevent errors
Tips for Using the Scriptures on Computer

when preparing a talk or lesson). Or you may type a full or abbreviated reference (such as “1 Ne. 3:7”) directly into the “Search for” box in the top left-hand corner of any page, and a stand-alone copy of the verse will be displayed with its footnotes, like this:

Notice that each footnote comes with complete scripture verses rather than just the reference.

Notice that all the words in the verse that have tiny superscripts are hyperlinks. Clicking on any of those words will take you to another screen that will again show the verse standing alone, as above, with the associated footnote. There are over half a million hyperlinks in the Internet scriptures. Pointing and clicking on “Show Cross References” will show cross-references for that verse from the footnotes, Guide to the Scriptures, Topical Guide, Index to the triple combination, Bible Dictionary, photographs, and maps.

Reading scripture online, with the ability to quickly follow interesting links, is fast becoming a means for deep scripture study. And individuals who are using electronic scriptures are learning the terrific benefits of the study helps. It is possible to open multiple windows simultaneously. This way, anyone can view a map or another book of scripture in one window while reading a particular chapter in another, making comparative scripture study easy and quick.

Clicking on the bulleted reference at the upper left will show the verse highlighted in its full context within the chapter in which it is
Included in this version is the ability to download the standard works to a handheld device such as a Palm Pilot or HandSpring Visor. You have likely seen these in Church meetings as individuals gently poke their little screens with a pencil-like stylus while speakers and teachers quote scripture references. The speed of the computer scriptures is such that, with a little experience, you can usually bring up the scripture being cited in a meeting or class before it has been fully quoted. Many find this faster than turning pages in their bound scriptures. One limitation of the Internet scriptures at present is that you may mark only fifty scripture verses at a time, and then the marking is only temporary.

With more and more teachers and professors posting their class information on the Internet and with more and more resources for learning being added to the Web, students are becoming highly effective searchers and studiers in this medium. We can teach students to include scripture study in their surfing of the Web and to know where to go for gospel resources from Church-authorized sites. Even now, the Internet scriptures are fast becoming one of the most visited sites in the world, with a million hits recorded every three or four days.
The Scriptures: CD-ROM Version

There are two CD versions of these computerized scriptures: The Standard Edition 1.0 and the Resource Edition 1.0. The Resource Edition contains all that the Standard Edition does plus several additional languages (such as Greek and Hebrew) that may be viewed in parallel columns. It also has the capacity to mark any text with personal notes and a choice of colored highlighters. Additional dictionaries and concordances are included.

In order to access either of the CD-ROM scriptures, of course, one must have at least a 4X compact disc player in their computer, which is much more common today than even a few years ago. Windows 95 or newer is necessary and about 250 MB of hard disk space is required if you wish to load all data and programs. Only 50 MB is needed if one wishes to run the scriptures from the CD in the disc player rather than the hard drive. Multiple languages are available (English, French Italian, Portuguese and Spanish) in this version. Again, everything found in the bound scriptures is found in this version. Once loaded onto a computer, one simply clicks on the appropriate icon, and up come the scriptures. The opening screen looks like this:

Like the Internet version of the scriptures, this version also allows users to click on the book title to go directly to the text. You can set
software preferences to have footnotes appear simultaneously with scripture, as shown, or not. One significant advantage of the newest version of the CD scriptures is that you may mark verses, using a variety of color highlighters. You simply block the text and click on the highlighter icon, choose a color, and add a note if you would like. Clicking on the highlighter/note icon brings up a box that looks like this:

You can choose the color and add text to your note, as shown.

**Scriptural Help for Personal Problems**

Computer scriptures are a very powerful tool for helping solve personal problems. I have pointed out to students that the English Latter-day Saint scriptures have a Topical Guide containing words and phrases that can direct us to scriptures that offer solutions to problems that vex our lives. Translations of the scriptures in other languages include the Guide to the Scriptures in place of the Topical Guide. The computer scriptures in English have both.

Our modern pace of life has many people feeling particularly lonely and insecure. Perhaps just being mortal means that we yearn for the spiritual security and love we left behind at birth. Perhaps all of us have stood before an open refrigerator late in the evening feeling hungry, but nothing looked good. That hungry-and-not-satisfied feeling is what an addict wrestles with. In an attempt to satisfy this spiritual yearning or hunger, individuals often reach out to substances and events they hope can bring comfort and peace. Substances ranging from nicotine to heroin and activities ranging from spending to pornography, masturbation, and other sexual perversions are used in a vain attempt to find some kind of solace. Over time, nothing will do for one addicted to such things except to reach out for the very thing that makes them hate themselves afterward. They know they should not do it, but their
natural body and brain have come to the conclusion that it is the only thing that seems to work to deal with the hunger. The trouble is, it only works for a little while, and the guilt is cumulative, blocking the desired pleasure. Coarser and deeper addictive behavior results, “and then they are taken captive by the devil, and led by his will down to destruction. Now this is what is meant by the chains of hell” (Alma 12:11). Ironically, the hunger is not physical at all. It is spiritual. It is a yearning, a deep gnawing desire for comfort, peace, and spiritual security. When we feel the yearning cannot be satisfied, we are depressed. It is like the situation Isaiah described: “When an hungry man dreameth, and, behold, he eateth; but he awaketh, and his soul is empty: or as when a thirsty man dreameth, and, behold, he drinketh; but he awaketh, and, behold, he is faint, and his soul hath appetite” (Isaiah 29:8). Yet only spiritual food will satisfy a spiritual hunger.

I encourage students to look up in the Topical Guide or Guide to the Scriptures words and phrases that represent how they feel or things they are worried about. Searching for the opposites of these words and phrases can also be very instructive. For instance, those who are struggling with a habit or addiction that is impairing their lives would do well to go to “Bondage, Spiritual” and scroll down the scripture list looking for words and phrases that seem to stand out. I invite them to turn to their scriptures and read a few verses before as well as a few verses after the phrase cited in the Topical Guide. I also encourage them to watch for superscripts or hyperlinks that take them to related ideas and solutions in other locations in the scriptures.

Perhaps all of us have an addictive potential of some sort and can relate to some of the citations above. Using the Topical Guide in electronic scriptures to click through a search for answers to issues has helped many individuals not only to glean intellectual resources for problem solving but also to find soul-satisfying spiritual promptings. It seems that the very process of reading and searching scripture for solutions brings a deeply spiritual response that invites resolution on a basic level that may even be deeper and more productive than an otherwise intensely intimate conversation with a highly capable and sensitive therapist. Somehow, penetrating spiritual processes that convince and persuade beyond normal therapeutic capacity seem to follow. Helpful topics range from “Accountability” and “Anger” to “Zeal” and “Zion.” Those willing to give scripture a chance at helping them understand and overcome their difficulties will find thousands of scriptures listed under around twenty-five hundred topics in the Topical Guide. And the computer scriptures allow users to find helpful scriptures almost instantly.
The entry for “Bondage, Spiritual” looks like this:

I also tell students that there can be a certain boredom barrier that must be broken in order to read, study, or search scripture. Scripture is written in an older form of English and requires greater concentration than normal reading. The language difficulty can be further complicated by the fact that some scripture seems to be written almost in a code language that requires thoughtful deciphering. That is, we must read and ponder what is to come to understand the meaning of certain words and phrases as they are used in scripture. But diligent efforts to read and study scripture relative to personal problems really help. And computer scriptures can expedite the process.

One young man who was struggling with the effects of a long-term problem seemed to be greatly helped by his diligent effort to center his scripture study on this weakness that was sapping his spiritual strength. It became clear that his addictive problem was rooted in spiritual yearnings that he attempted to satisfy using carnal, sensual means. He came to the conclusion that scripture is spiritual food—good spiritual food. And he felt it was his mainstay in overcoming a major problem in his life.

Finally, I encourage students, counseling them to go to the Topical Guide and “try the virtue of the word of God” (Alma 31:5). I tell them to see if the Spirit will speak to them as they read and study—to see if the Spirit will show them a way out of their troubles. If certain scripture
phrases or references seem to jump out at them, maybe that is the Spirit trying to urge them into those verses.

Both students and teachers alike will be blessed as they read the word of the Lord, whether in the computerized scriptures or otherwise. As we do so, the “still small voice” will whisper to our souls as it did to Elijah and give direction to our lives and comfort to our spirits (see 1 Kings 19:12; 1 Nephi 17:45; D&C 85:6).
Nephi Writing the Golden Plates, painting by Paul Mann

© by Paul Mann
Nephi’s Literary Endeavor

Steven L. Olsen

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At the end of his ministry, Nephi, the first writer in the Book of Mormon, bore powerful witness of the eternal value of his sacred record. In fact, he declared that all mankind, willingly or reluctantly, will come to a knowledge of its truthfulness at the judgment bar of God:

And now, my beloved brethren, and also Jew, and all ye ends of the earth, hearken unto these words and believe in Christ; and if ye believe not in these words believe in Christ. And if ye shall believe in Christ ye will believe in these words, for they are the words of Christ, and he hath given them unto me; and they teach all men that they should do good.

And if ye are not the words of Christ, judge ye—for Christ will show unto you, with power and great glory, that they are his words, at the last day; and you and I shall stand face to face before his bar; and ye shall know that I have been commanded of him to write these things, notwithstanding my weakness. (2 Nephi 33:10–11)

Few of the sacred writings in the standard works make such strong claims of divine approval. Nevertheless, the contents of Nephi’s surviving record justify his perspective. How did Nephi come to a knowledge that his writings would play such a prominent role in the plan of salvation? What was Nephi’s understanding of the divine purpose of his record? A careful review of the books of 1 and 2 Nephi reveals the origins and importance of the literary burden that Nephi bore with considerable responsibility and great anxiety.
Origins of Nephi’s Records

Nephi made two accounts of his ministry, as he was commanded by God. The first was begun shortly after his extended family arrived in the promised land (see 1 Nephi 19:1); the second was begun some twenty years later (see 2 Nephi 5:28–30). Only the contents from Nephi’s second record appear in the present-day translation of the Book of Mormon. To understand the ultimate value of Nephi’s surviving record, let us examine what is known about the contents of Nephi’s first account in comparison to those of the second.

None of Nephi’s first record survives intact in the Book of Mormon. His first record was the initial portion of the large plates of Nephi, which Mormon abridged as part of his own prophetic calling (see Words of Mormon 1:3). This portion of Mormon’s abridgment was translated by Joseph Smith but was lost after having been entrusted to Martin Harris in the fall of 1828.¹ Therefore, we cannot compare the contents of Nephi’s two records directly. However, despite the tragedy of the lost manuscript, Nephi’s comments about his first record in the surviving record give a general indication of its contents so that we can draw conclusions about the respective spiritual value of both records.

When Nephi was initially commanded to make a record of his ministry, he did not know God would eventually command him to make a subsequent account (see 1 Nephi 19:2). Furthermore, he had already received significant spiritual and miraculous experiences under the leadership of his father, Lehi. Hence, his first record likely contained an account of many, if not most, of these marvelous experiences, particularly since Nephi declares that his purpose in writing was to record that which is pleasing to God (see 1 Nephi 6:4–5, 19:6). Confirming this point, Nephi mentions that his first record included “the record of my father” and accounts of “our journeyings in the wilderness, and the prophecies of my father; and also many of my own prophecies” (1 Nephi 19:1, see also 10:15; 2 Nephi 4:14). In addition to these manifestly spiritual contents, Nephi declares that his first record also contained a “full account” or the “more part” of the history, “reigns of the kings,” and “wars and contentions” of his people (1 Nephi 9:2, 4; 19:4; 2 Nephi 5:33).

Although the contents that Nephi lists first (prophecies, teachings, and so forth) identify similarities between his two records, the second list of contents (kingly reigns, wars, and so on) suggests ways in which the records might differ. In fact, Nephi’s surviving record is largely devoid of contents that could be classified as principally political, military, economic, or social.
This important difference between the two records can be explained, perhaps, by the chronology of their production. For at least his first twenty years in the promised land (ca. 589–569 BC), Nephi kept only one record. In it, he likely followed the spiritually significant literary tradition that had been preserved by his father, including prophecies, miraculous events, inspired teachings, and other sacred contents (see 1 Nephi 5:10–14). He also likely felt justified in including such contents as wars, migrations, reigns of kings, and other more empirical events similar to those in the historical portions of the “record of the Jews” (1 Nephi 5:12) found in our present-day Old Testament (for example, the book of Joshua through 2 Chronicles).

When Nephi began his second record, he obviously included the more spiritual contents of his first account—but perhaps with a grander or more refined perspective of their eternal value, which he likely had gained during the intervening decades.² Having begun the second account of his ministry, Nephi now had some degree of latitude to focus the contents of his respective records, though not to the extent of making one record primarily sacred and the other secular. An interest in preserving secular material is clearly contrary to Nephi’s character. For the last two or more decades of his life, two records of his ministry were kept simultaneously. During this period, Nephi’s first record could have preserved the “more part” of the empirical history of his people such as warfare and kingly reigns.

Nephi’s second record of this same period concentrated exclusively on spiritual issues: Jacob’s masterful discourse on the Atonement (see 2 Nephi 6–10), extended citations of Isaiah from the brass plates (see 2 Nephi 12–24), and Nephi’s final prophecy and testimony (see 2 Nephi 25–33). Consistent with this refined focus, Nephi’s second record contains no account of any empirical event from the last thirty years of this great prophet’s ministry or from the lives of his people.

Though it would be speculative at best to draw many specific conclusions of Nephi’s literary intent from the sketchy evidence of the contents of his first account, the following implications seem warranted: (1) Nephi’s prevailing purpose in writing was sacred. No contents of either record could be considered secular, trivial, or worldly. Every detail of his two accounts, even those that were empirical or descriptive, was essential to his divinely ordained literary endeavor as he understood it. (2) God’s purposes for commanding Nephi to write of his ministry were not completely accomplished in his first record (see 1 Nephi 9:3–5). Hence the need for a second.
Significance of Nephi’s Surviving Record

Is it possible to deduce what Nephi understood of the divine purpose for his second record from an examination of (1) how the second record clearly differs from the first and (2) the degree to which all portions of the second record fit together? The following analysis attempts to answer both parts of this question.

Defining and documenting the plan of salvation. Nephi’s vision (see 1 Nephi 11–14) is the event that provides his second record with its unity, and this vision is the key to understanding the ultimate purpose of Nephi’s writing. Nephi receives the vision in response to his desire to understand Lehi’s dream of the tree of life (see 1 Nephi 10:17). Lehi’s dream and Nephi’s subsequent vision are similar in that both are representations of the plan of salvation.

These spiritual experiences are different in that the dream is an allegorical representation, whereas the vision is both an explanation and a literal representation of future events. The elements of the dream—tree, rod of iron, great and spacious building, and so on—are symbolic: they stand for something else. Properly understanding the dream requires identifying the spiritual truths to which the symbols refer: the love of God, the word of God, the vanity of the world, and so on. The interpretive value of an allegory is that it can legitimately apply to a variety of actual events, personalities, and circumstances that are relevant to the spiritual truths to which the symbols refer. By contrast, the elements of Nephi’s vision refer to specific historical events, groups, and processes by which God’s plan of salvation will be literally realized within human, temporal, and spatial contexts. Properly understanding the vision requires documenting the empirical details and circumstances outlined in the vision.

A literal representation of the plan of salvation has great interpretive value because it identifies a specific set of historical events that are consistent with this compelling eternal drama. The redemptive drama outlined in Nephi’s vision contains four main acts, which, in general, can be summarized as (1) the mortal ministry of the Messiah in the Holy Land (see 1 Nephi 11), (2) the life of Lehi’s descendants in the promised land (see 1 Nephi 12), (3) the experience of the Gentiles in the promised land (see 1 Nephi 13), and (4) the ultimate triumph of good over evil (see 1 Nephi 14). This vision continues to the end of the earth.

The recurrent spiritual themes that pervade this vision—Christ as the Messiah, the scattering and gathering of Israel (including the role of the Gentiles), and the eventual salvation of the righteous in the king-
dom of God (Zion)—constitute the single-minded focus of Nephi’s second record. All details of the record—historical narrative, scriptural citation, doctrinal discourse, spiritual experience, and so on—address directly or indirectly one or more of these central themes. The abridgment of Lehi’s record (that is, 1 Nephi 1–10) introduces the major figures (the Messiah and Lehi’s extended family) and conditions (inheriting a land of promise, identifying with covenant Israel, and following priesthood authority and Christ’s gospel) within which this divine drama of salvation will be played out. The account of Nephi’s ministry (see, for example, 1 Nephi 11–2 Nephi 5) documents the initial fulfillment of the promised blessings of the plan of salvation and elaborates on their eternal value through prophecy, discourse, and scriptural citation. Jacob’s discourse further expands the central redemptive role of Christ’s Atonement in the plan of salvation (see 2 Nephi 6–11). The extended Isaiah passages from the brass plates provide authoritative antecedents of these key themes of the plan of salvation (see 2 Nephi 12–24). Nephi’s final prophecy and testimony recapitulate and expand the core themes of his vision, particularly as they relate to the last days (see 2 Nephi 25–30) and to the certainty of the promise of exaltation for all who are faithful to Christ’s gospel (see 2 Nephi 31–33).

From this perspective, the fundamental unity of Nephi’s second record and the reasons for his interrupting the historical narrative when he was commanded to create the second record become clear. Nephi’s literary mission was to define, outline, and document a partial fulfillment of the plan of salvation in sermons, spiritual experiences, scriptural citations, and historical events.

**Effecting the plan of salvation.** The sacred goal of describing the plan of salvation is sufficiently exalted by itself to qualify Nephi’s writings as among the most spiritually significant in all of scripture. There is, however, another purpose that renders his record all the more valuable. This additional purpose is also defined in Nephi’s vision and expanded in his subsequent prophecy.

Although Nephi’s vision reveals the general contours of the plan of salvation in material, temporal, and human contexts and although righteousness triumphs in the end, the details of this plan as revealed to Nephi contain much of tragedy. In fact, Nephi describes himself as weighed down in sorrow and greatly afflicted because of his knowledge of the events foretold in the vision (see, for example, 2 Nephi 26:7). Although he witnessed in the vision the “condescension of God” in the flesh, he also beheld Christ’s crucifixion and the subsequent scattering of the covenant people of God (1 Nephi 11:26; see also 11:33–36).
Although Nephi foretold the ministry of the resurrected Christ among the Nephites, he also witnessed their eventual downfall, destruction, and annihilation because of wickedness (see 1 Nephi 12). Even though the vision has the Gentiles bringing the “record of the Jews” to the remnant of Israel in the promised land, it also recognizes that this book of scripture had been flawed by the “great and abominable church” that distorted its meanings and removed many of its “plain and precious” truths. Furthermore, in the vision, the Gentiles in the promised land scourge Israel’s remnant because neither group possesses or understands Christ’s gospel in its purity and simplicity (see 1 Nephi 13:1–29). In short, although the vision holds out ultimate hope for the salvation of mankind, its proximate story is one of considerable destruction and despair.

What changes the transformation of this narrative from the bleak to beneficent? At the point in the vision of almost total hopelessness, the angel who guides Nephi through each scene gives him assurance of eventual redemption on three main points:

Wherefore, thou seest that the Lord God will not suffer that the Gentiles will utterly destroy the mixture of thy seed, which are among thy brethren.

Neither will he suffer that the Gentiles shall destroy the seed of thy brethren.

Neither will the Lord God suffer that the Gentiles shall forever remain in that awful state of blindness, which thou beholdest they are in, because of the plain and most precious parts of the gospel of the Lamb which have been kept back by that abominable church, whose formation thou hast seen (1 Nephi 13:30–32).

These promises provide a turning point of sorts for the vision. Though challenges to the full realization of the plan of salvation still exist, the progress toward complete fulfillment of the divine promises from this point on is steady and sure. The first step toward the redemption of mankind begins with the Gentiles: “Wherefore saith the Lamb of God: I will be merciful unto the Gentiles, unto the visiting of the remnant of Israel in great judgment . . . insomuch that I will bring forth unto them . . . much of my gospel, which shall be plain and precious” (1 Nephi 13:33–34). The key to this step is contained in the next verses: “For behold, saith the Lamb: I will manifest myself unto thy seed, that they shall write many things which I shall minister unto them, which shall be plain and precious; and after thy seed shall be destroyed, and dwindle in unbelief, and also the seed of
thy brethren, behold, these things shall be hid up, to come forth unto the Gentiles, by the gift and power of the Lamb. And in them shall be written my gospel, saith the Lamb, and my rock and my salvation” (1 Nephi 13:35–36).

In short, the blessings of salvation will be made available to mankind in the latter days by the sacred writings of Nephi and by those who are entrusted to complete the record after him. According to Nephi’s vision, his record will not only define and document the plan of salvation but also effect the realization of its blessings in the last days. Nephi’s sacred record is not only an account of the plan of salvation as revealed to an ancient prophet but also the agent of its eventual fulfillment. Thus, the angel declares, “And blessed are they who shall seek to bring forth my Zion at that day, for they shall have the gift and the power of the Holy Ghost; and if they endure unto the end they shall be lifted up at the last day, and shall be saved in the everlasting kingdom of the Lamb” (1 Nephi 13:37).

According to the vision of Nephi, the record of the Nephites combines with the record of the Jews and restores its plain and precious truths in order to unite both Jew and Gentile—for example, the entire human race—as the covenant people in the bonds of Christ’s gospel. Ultimately, Christ will overcome evil and establish His millennial reign on earth (see 1 Nephi 13:38–14:17).

Nephi’s final prophecy elaborates the role of his second record as principal agent of the plan of salvation in the last days. In fact, the expanded redemptive role of the Nephite record is the primary difference between the earlier vision (see 1 Nephi 11–14) and the later prophecy (see 2 Nephi 25–30). Both accounts address the same themes in much the same order and with similar emphasis: the mortal ministry of Christ and the scattering and gathering of the Jews (see 1 Nephi 11; 2 Nephi 25:1–20), the ministry of Christ to the Nephites and their eventual destruction (see 1 Nephi 12; 2 Nephi 26:1–11), the apostate conditions among both Jew and Gentile (see 1 Nephi 13:1–29; 2 Nephi 26:12–33; 28), and the restoration of Israel, redemption of the Gentiles, and destruction of the wicked at the end of time (see 1 Nephi 13:30–14:17; 2 Nephi 27, 29–30).

By contrast, though the role of Nephi’s record in the last days plays a relatively minor role in the vision, occupying only eight verses (see 1 Nephi 13:35–42), it is the subject of at least sixty-four verses in his later prophecy. The prophecy mentions that Nephi’s writings would restore Israel to her ancient covenants of salvation, correct false doctrines in the “record of the Jews,” redeem the Gentiles from their apostate tra-

In addition to describing the future role of his writings, Nephi’s final prophecy is also prescriptive. The prophecy informs subsequent writers of its divinely required contents and foretells of the conditions and circumstances of its coming forth in the last day. According to these instructions, subsequent writers on the plates of Nephi were charged to focus their writings on the divinity of Christ and the necessity of His gospel (see 2 Nephi 25:18–30), the eternal value of God’s ancient covenants with Abraham (see 2 Nephi 29:1–2), the plan of salvation as revealed by God “from the beginning of the world to the ending thereof” (2 Nephi 27:6–11), and other matters “of great worth unto the children of men” (2 Nephi 28:2).

To the man who “shall deliver the words of the book,” Nephi commands him (1) not to translate the sealed portion of the book; (2) to keep the plates hidden from the eyes of the world, except for “three witnesses” and a few others, “according to the will of God,” who will “bear testimony of his word unto the children of men”; (3) to deliver the words of the book to the learned who will refuse to read them because they are sealed; (4) to translate the record according to “the words which [God] shall give unto [him]”; and (5) to “seal up the book again and hide it unto [God]” once the translation is complete, in order to preserve the sealed portion to come forth at the end of time (2 Nephi 27:9–22).

By the end of his second record, Nephi accomplished the exalted and demanding literary mission that God had given him and created a record of his ministry that not only documented the “great things” that God had done in behalf of Lehi’s family and all mankind but also defined the responsibility for those who would complete the record after him: to document the empirical fulfillment of a portion of the plan of salvation contained in his vision, to make explicit the fulness of Christ’s gospel in precept and deed, to demonstrate the eternal value of God’s covenants with Abraham, and to assure the righteous of God’s power to save them in His kingdom in the last day. Nephi also commands those who will later receive his record to live according to its teachings and to assist God in realizing its lofty but certain vision of mankind’s literal salvation in the last days.
Notes


2. For additional insight regarding the production and value of Nephi’s two records, see John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne, eds., *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1999), 75–77.

3. The discussion that follows builds upon the insightful summaries of the significance of Nephi’s second record in Welch and Thorne, *Pressing Forward*, 78–83.

4. Welch and Thorne, *Pressing Forward*, 49–53, contains a detailed comparison of the contents of Lehi’s vision and Nephi’s dream, suggesting a complementary purpose for these two accounts in Nephi’s record.
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