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“All Things Denote There Is a God”: Seeing Christ in the Creation

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The scriptures are full of types and shadows that symbolize the Savior if we will open our eyes to see them. As Joseph Fielding McConkie wrote, “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.”¹ These symbols include “objects, places, personal names, titles, animals, events, feeling, foods, persons, words, rituals, and elements.”²

In the world of nature around us, the Creator has provided symbols such as rocks, water, and trees to help us “always remember him” (Moroni 4:3). As Alma testified, “All things denote there is a God; yea, even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it” (Alma 30:44). After Adam was baptized, the Lord taught him about these physical symbols: “All things are created and made to bear record of me, both things which are temporal, and things which are spiritual; things which are in the heavens above, and things which are on the earth, and things which are in the earth, and things which are under the earth, both above and beneath: all things bear record of me” (Moses 6:63). We conclude that the very order of the physical elements and the wonder, order, and complexity of living things bear witness of a Creator.

The Savior is identified with essential elements for life, including support and nourishment for growth. He is the “rock of [our] salvation” (2 Nephi 9:45), the “light and life of the world” (Mosiah 16:9), and the “living waters” (1 Nephi 11:25). As we found our lives on Him and as His influence grows in our lives, we grow up unto Him as trees of righteousness (see Helaman 3:21; Isaiah 61:3). Let us consider some

of these symbols in nature and note other symbols of Christ as we read the scriptures and observe the world around us.

The Rock of Our Redeemer

Rocks, mountains, and other topographical features represent spiritual phenomena. Prophets such as the brother of Jared, Moses, and Nephi sought the Lord on the tops of mountains, which are likened unto or associated with temples (see Isaiah 2:2–3; 56:7; 66:20; Micah 4:1–2). When we are in a valley, mountains cause us to look heavenward, just as when we see the spires of a temple. When we are on top of a mountain, just as when we are in a temple, we can see much more clearly “things as they really are” (Jacob 4:13), having a broader physical or spiritual perspective.

The tops of many mountains throughout the world are composed of some of the oldest and most resistant rock because the softer rocks once on top of them have eroded away. These rocks owe their resistance and strength to the fact that they were formed from softer rocks under tremendous pressure. So is the strength and endurance that comes from going to the “mountain of the Lord’s house” (Isaiah 2:2), or the temple, and building your life on “the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God . . . that when the devil shall send forth his mighty winds, yea, his shafts in the whirlwind, yea, when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon you, it shall have no power over you to drag you down to the gulf of misery and endless wo, because of the rock upon which ye are built, which is a sure foundation, a foundation whereon if men build they cannot fall” (Helaman 5:12). As the storms or trials of life come, those founded upon the Savior are refined and sustained by Him and become as precious jewels (see Malachi 3:17; D&C 60:4; 101:3) or gold (see Isaiah 13:12; Revelation 3:18).

The Savior declared Himself as the “stone of Israel” (D&C 50:44). Faith in Jesus Christ and His role in the plan of redemption is an “anchor to the souls of men, which would make them sure and steadfast” (Ether 12:4). The infinite expression of personal love of the Father and Son for us in the Atonement of Christ is a foundation from which one will not fall, when truly converted (see Romans 8:31–39). The Atonement is “infinite and eternal” (Alma 34:10, 14) and will not fail us. While obedience to His commandments is likened unto building upon this sure foundation, rejecting, disobeying, or following our own doctrine is likened unto building on a sandy foundation (see 2 Nephi 28:28; Matthew 7:24–27; 3 Nephi 11:40; 3 Nephi 18:12). To the disbelieving Jews whose hearts were more set on the honors of men than on God (see John 5:44), Christ became “a stone

of stumbling, and . . . a rock of offense" (2 Nephi 18:14). Eventually, all who are not built upon the true rock must fall, as did the great and spacious building, because it had no real foundation (see 1 Nephi 8:26; 1 Nephi 11:36).

As the chief cornerstone on which the kingdom of God is built, Christ is symbolized in the chief cornerstone of the temple (see Ephesians 2:19–21). President Hinckley has reminded us how anciently the cornerstones were set to provide a foundation and guide for the rest of the building.³ The chief cornerstone was set on the southeast corner where sunlight rising from the east first falls.⁴

The Light of the World

To Nicodemus, who came in the dark, Jesus taught that light had come into the world (see John 3:18–21). During the Feast of the Tabernacles on the temple mount near where the four large lampstands, or menorahs, were lighted,⁵ Jesus declared Himself the "light of the world" (John 8:12). As Jesus explained to Nicodemus, this light illuminates both truth and error, causing the wicked to hate it because it exposes them, while the righteous are drawn to it because their deeds are of God and are consistent with truth. As the sun rises every day, light divides the darkness. It is natural to consider the sun at the center of the solar system as representative of Christ, who should be at the center of our lives. He is referred to as "the Sun of righteousness" (Malachi 4:2), as well as the "Son of righteousness" (2 Nephi 26:9). He declared Himself to John as "the bright and morning star" (Revelation 22:16). He is associated with all physical and spiritual light and truth (see D&C 88:6–13).

A portion of this light is given to everyone who comes into the world (see John 1:9; D&C 93:2), but we are also told that "the Spirit enlighteneth every man through the world, that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit" (D&C 84:46). The coming of light into the world happens with the actual first and second comings of the Savior physically into the world. It also happens to individuals personally, and through the work of angels, prophets, priesthood, and the Holy Ghost to prepare the world for His physical coming. Therefore, Peter spoke of relying on the "more sure knowledge of the word of prophesy . . . as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts" (Joseph Smith Translation, 2 Peter 1:19).

The Restoration of the gospel brought a major increase of light into the world. This message is very evident in hymns of the Restoration, such as Parley P. Pratt's "The Morning Breaks" (Hymns no. 1), includ-

ing lines like “The dawning of a brighter day” and “The clouds of error disappear before the rays of truth divine.” The Prophet Joseph Smith prayed at the dedication of the Kirtland Temple that the “Church may come forth out of the wilderness of darkness, and shine forth fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners” (D&C 109:73). As the moon reflects the light of the sun to a dark world, so do the Church and its members reflect the light of Christ to a spiritually dark world. The Savior told the Nephites, “Therefore, hold up your light that it may shine unto the world. Behold I am the light which ye shall hold up—that which ye have seen me do” (3 Nephi 18:24). The actual phases of the moon and their depiction on our temples suggest the increase in this light for individual members and the Church as a whole: “That which is of God is light; and he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day” (D&C 50:24).

The dawning of a brighter day is also seen in the rising sun motif in and on our temples and is especially evident with the Nauvoo Temple. When the Lord appears, He will eclipse the light of both the sun and moon (see Isaiah 60:19, D&C 133:49) since His light and glory are far beyond what we commonly experience, indeed “above the brightness of the sun” as described by Paul (Acts 26:13) and Joseph Smith (Joseph Smith—History 1:16).

The Savior said those who follow Him would have the “light of life” (John 8:12), bringing to remembrance the children of Israel who followed the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night (see Exodus 13:21). The sun supplies the energy that powers the physical and biological processes that sustain life on the earth. Only a very small amount of the sun’s radiant energy is used in photosynthesis, the process by which carbohydrates are made from water and carbon dioxide. Yet virtually all life depends on this process for the basic food and chemical energy of life. The association of Christ with the light “which is in all things, which giveth life to all things” (D&C 88:13) makes it clear that we are dependent on Him for both the physical and spiritual sustenance of life (see D&C 93:9). The Savior strongly taught this concept by proclaiming Himself as the true manna or bread from heaven—the bread of life (see John 6:31–58). As the sun sustains life on this earth, so the Light of the World sustains life in mortality and finally eternally, through the Resurrection (see D&C 88:14–17; John 6:50, 51, 54, 58).

The earth’s orbit and angle relative to the sun create the seasons. The seasons can also represent phases in the history of mankind relative

to the plan of redemption. The autumn or fall can represent the fall of Adam and of mankind into a world of eventual death. The winter represents death and the spiritual darkness of the world. The spring represents a newness of life through redemption and resurrection, and the summer represents the harvest of souls (see Jeremiah 8:20; D&C 45:2; 56:16).

The energy from the sun flows through the earth's ecosystems and is the energy from which all life draws its support. Other important elements for life, such as water, nitrogen, carbon, and phosphorus, cycle through our systems at very small to global scales. Such cycles in nature, with the rounds of the sun, moon, and other celestial bodies, remind us that "the course of the Lord is one eternal round" (1 Nephi 10:19). As we become more aware of how the Creation works, it is obvious that God has a "pattern in all things" (D&C 52:14). He has told us of certain overriding patterns: "But remember that all my judgments are not given unto men; and as the words have gone forth out of my mouth even so shall they be fulfilled, that the first shall be last, and that the last shall be first in all things whatsoever I have created by the word of my power, which is the power of my Spirit" (D&C 29:30). The Lord created all things "first spiritual, secondly temporal, which is the beginning of my work; and again, first temporal, and secondly spiritual, which is the last of my work" (D&C 29:32). The pattern of the Lord in the Creation is also His pattern in creating us into beings of eternal life. First as spiritual children of God (see Hebrews 12:9), we then become temporal through the fall and the birth of our mortal bodies (see 2 Nephi 2:22–25). We become spiritual again in nature as we are born again through the "travail" (Isaiah 53:11) of the Savior's Atonement and our own repentance (see Mosiah 3:19, 4:2–3). As the earth was created spiritually, then temporally, then dies and is quickened to become eternal, so are we reborn through spiritual rebirth and quickened in the Resurrection (see D&C 88:25–32). In all the vast rounds and processes of the Lord's creative work, He preserves it all, for it is the workmanship of His hand (see D&C 29:23–25).

The Living Waters

Dozens of scriptures liken different aspects of water to the Savior and His word—including rain, snow, fountains, rivers, streams, springs, waves, seas, and rainbows. As an example, the constancy of peace that comes from obedience is likened to a flowing river, stream, or the waves of the sea (see Isaiah 48:18, 66:12; 1 Nephi 20:18). One of the Lord's most dramatic declarations was during the last great day of the Feast of the Tabernacles: "Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him

come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water” (John 7:37–38). Of this declaration John interpreted: “But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified” (John 7:39).

All life depends on water. In semiarid to arid lands, such as Israel and much of the Middle East, the coming of the rains and the capture of water in cisterns were essential to life and the development of civilization. The lack of rain constituted crop failure and a famine for the people.

The Lord likened his word unto these essential rains: “For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it” (Isaiah 55:10–11). When the people cherish the word, hearken, and obey, then as the rain, the word makes their lives bountiful. The peace, joy, and knowledge of the obedient in the last days and in the Millennium are associated with the abundance of water: “The desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose” (Isaiah 35:1). “Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation” (Isaiah 12:3). “He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass: as showers that water the earth” (Psalms 72:6). “They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9).

The righteous who keep the commandments from the heart, such as the law of the fast, are told: “And the Lord shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not” (Isaiah 58:11). On the other hand, those who hearkened not to the prophets during Jeremiah’s time were told: “For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water” (Jeremiah 2:13). When His people reject the word or living waters, the Lord may withhold rain from the earth, resulting in a famine (see Luke 4:25; Helaman 1; Ether 9:25). Then when the people turn again unto Him, the Lord sends the rains to break the famine (see 1 Kings 18:1–2; Helaman 11:13, 17). When the Lord withholds His word from man, it is also spoken of as a famine: “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing

the words of the Lord" (Amos 8:11).

Christ is the source of living waters as shown by the waters that issued forth out of the rock that Moses struck (see 1 Corinthians 10:4). He taught the woman at Jacob's well in Samaria: "But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (John 4:14). To spiritually reawaken the Nephites, Alma reminded them: "Behold, he sendeth an invitation unto all men, for the arms of mercy are extended towards them, and he saith: Repent, and I will receive you. Yea, he saith: Come unto me and ye shall partake of the fruit of the tree of life; yea, ye shall eat and drink of the bread and the waters of life freely" (Alma 5:33–34). This invitation has been extended through the Restoration in the latter days (see D&C 10:66). One can accept the invitation by being baptized in water (see Alma 5:62), which is symbolic of the cleansing power of the Atonement.

There are many other symbols of cleansing and purity associated with water and the blood of the Atonement. We are told that though our "sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isaiah 1:18). Under the direction of the Lord, Moses changed the water to blood (see Exodus 7:19) and divided the waters of the Red Sea to deliver Israel from bondage (see Exodus 14:16–30). Similarly, we are delivered from the bondage of sin by the blood of the Atonement and the waters of baptism (see 1 Corinthians 10:2). A major theme of the history of the covenant people is the spiritual bondage of sin that leads to physical bondage. Deliverance from both forms of bondage comes when the people turn to the Lord, have their hearts changed, and enter into a covenant with Him through baptism (see especially Alma 5). That which destroys sin in the sinner or destroys the sinner who will not repent also purifies and saves the repentant. Therefore, the eight souls of Noah's family are spoken of as being "saved by water" (1 Peter 3:20), which water also destroyed the wicked who "hearkened not" (Moses 8:20) to Noah.

After Moses brought the children of Israel across the Red Sea into the Sinai wilderness for three days, they found no water but the bitter or salty waters of Marah. The Lord told Moses to cut down a tree and cast it into the water, which made the water sweet to drink (see Exodus 23:25). Likewise, the Atonement of Christ, with His victory on the cross or tree (see Acts 5:30; 10:39), delivers us from sin and death and turns our mortal experience from bitter to sweet. We are tried in the wilderness of this life, where we have covenanted with Him, and are therefore in the world but not of the world. Yet if we will follow the

Lord, He will go with us as He did the Israelites and sustain us with the bread and waters of life, as He sustained them with manna and the water that came out of the rock.

God told Noah that the arch of a rainbow represented His remembrance of the everlasting covenant that He made with Enoch. When men look up to God as they look to the heavens to view a rainbow and then obey all His commandments, Enoch's Zion will be seen returning to the earth so that righteousness and truth from above will join with that from below (Joseph Smith Translation, Genesis 9:21–23; Psalm 85:11; Moses 7:62). The rainbow reminds us of much more than the promise to never destroy the earth by flood (see Genesis 9:11); it fills us with hope for the time when He will “come and rain righteousness” (Hosea 10:12) and “righteousness and truth will . . . sweep the earth as with a flood” (Moses 7:62).

Ezekiel had a vision in which waters issued forth from the altar in the temple and became “a river that I could not pass over: for the waters were risen, waters to swim in” (Ezekiel 47:5). These waters pass through the desert to heal the saline waters of the Dead Sea and cause trees with everlasting fruit to grow on the river banks (Ezekiel 47:12). John called this river “a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and the Lamb” (Revelation 22:1). He saw that the trees on the banks were “the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:2). Christ cleanses and heals a spiritually dead world while ending mortal death through the Resurrection.

In the Book of Mormon, the fountain of living waters that Nephi saw sprang from the tree of life and produced a river along which extended the iron rod (1 Nephi 11:25). The rod, or the word of God, led to both the tree of life and the living waters, which Nephi interpreted as representing the love of God. As we follow the word of God, we are led to Him in all His goodness, love, and purity. The knowledge, joy, and righteousness that come from the “fountain of all righteousness” (1 Nephi 2:9) become as a “well of living water, springing up unto everlasting life” (D&C 63:23).

The Planting of the Lord

One of the strongest symbols in the scriptures is that of the Savior nourishing us through His word so that we ourselves bear everlasting fruit. In the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus declared Himself as the Messiah by stating that He was the fulfillment of Isaiah 61, verses 1 and part

of 2. These verses refer strongly to His first coming to offer Himself in the Atonement. He stopped quoting Isaiah where the reference becomes relevant to the Second Coming and millennial era and which declares: "To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified" (Isaiah 61:3).

In the parable of the sower, the word of God is likened unto a seed, sown in hearts that receive and nourish it, such as on good ground, or is devoured by fowls or is withered as a seedling because it fell on shallow, stony, or weedy ground (see Matthew 13:3–23). Alma 32 describes the process of carefully nourishing the seed of testimony as it sprouts and becomes a tree, concluding: "But if ye will nourish the word, yea, nourish the tree as it beginneth to grow, by your faith with great diligence, and with patience, looking forward to the fruit thereof, it shall take root; and behold it shall be a tree springing up unto everlasting life. And because of your diligence and your faith and your patience with the word in nourishing it, that it may take root in you, behold, by and by ye shall pluck the fruit thereof, which is most precious, which is sweet above all that is sweet, and which is white above all that is white, yea, and pure above all that is pure; and ye shall feast upon this fruit even until ye are filled, that ye hunger not, neither shall ye thirst" (Alma 32:41–42.).

The house of Israel is considered as an olive tree within the world, or vineyard of the Lord (see Jacob 5). As the Lord and His servant tend the vineyard, some trees produce good fruit while others become corrupted and bring forth wild fruit. After so much care and labor, and in the face of corruption, the Lord asks the servant the most relevant question of the allegory: "Who is it that has corrupted my vineyard?" (Jacob 5:47). For us who live in the latter days, we need to know what caused the covenant people, throughout their history, to become corrupted and how to avoid a similar fate. The servant answered: "Is it not the loftiness of thy vineyard—have not the branches thereof overcome the roots which are good? And because the branches have overcome the roots thereof, behold they grew faster than the strength of the roots, taking strength unto themselves. Behold, I say, is not this the cause that the trees of thy vineyard have become corrupted?" (Jacob 5:48). Eventually, after much grafting, nourishing, and careful pruning, the vineyard brought forth good fruit. Both the allegory of the olive tree and the parable of the wheat and tares make it clear that the bad were allowed to grow with the good until the final harvest

(see Jacob 5:65–66; Matthew 13:28–30). We might consider what the strong roots are and how they allow the good to overcome the bad within individuals or within the kingdom of God.

The Lord plants us on the earth, as in a vineyard, that He might nourish and prune us to later “plant the heavens” (Isaiah 51:16). Obeying His commandments and doing the Father’s will, as He exemplified, is the way we continue in feeling His nourishing love and that of the Father (see John 15:10). This love flows into our lives, nourishing us through our good times and bad. The trials and tests become the pruning that cuts the weaknesses out of us as we turn to Him in humility. Then our weaknesses become strengths (see Ether 12:27). Our spiritual refinement and the godly character we may come to have are as fruit harvested from the nurturing and pruning of the Lord.

The Savior likened Himself to a seed when He said, “Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit” (John 12:24). Not only does the Savior make it possible for us to reap the fruit of eternal life through His Atonement and Resurrection but also it is He who provides our foundation or deep roots; it is He who helps us grow through His light and living water, which nourish us. As He willingly gave up His life to bring life, we must give up the natural man to gain eternal life (see Mosiah 3:19).

Conclusion

Whether living or in the form of art, symbols such as flowers, plants, trees, fruits, and seeds continually remind us of our potential to grow in faith and to become like the Creator. These types are simple yet profound. They show the ever-present care and sustaining support of the Lord for His children. They invite us to see the Lord as a part of all that we are and do in the world and to integrate ourselves fully into His plan for us. If we have eyes to see (see Revelation 3:18; Mosiah 27:22; D&C 76:12), not only will we see Him as the Rock of our Redeemer, the Light of the World, and the Living Waters, and ourselves as the Planting of the Lord but we also will view all things in the light of the gospel with Christ at its center. **RL**

Notes

1. Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Gospel Symbolism* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1985), 1.
2. McConkie, *Gospel Symbolism*, 2.

3. Gordon B. Hinckley, *Faith, the Essence of True Religion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 7–8.
4. "President Hinckley and the Nauvoo Temple," *Ensign*, July 2002, 25.
5. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and David R. Seely, *My Father's House: Temple Worship and Symbolism in the New Testament* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1994), 210.

