"As you stand atop any peak you have climbed, enjoy the moment of satisfaction in the present to look at the remarkable view and the progress you have made from the past."

The Journey of Lifelong Learning

Elder Robert D. Hales
ON THE COVER:
Climbing to new heights is symbolized by El Capitan in Yosemite National Park.

“As we contemplate the sacrifice and hard work that was required to achieve past goals, let us muster the confidence and determination needed to move on to greater heights.”

Elder Robert D. Hales

COVER PHOTO BY MIKE MURPHY
One of the expected outcomes or aims of a BYU education is to prepare a student to engage in lifelong learning. Elder Robert D. Hales challenges us all, not just BYU students, to begin a journey of lifelong learning in our lead article based on his talk delivered at Campus Education Week in August 2008.

We then turn our attention to another thoughtful essay by Elder Marlin K. Jensen regarding “Those Who Are Different.” Elder Jensen challenges us all to be more considerate and kind. In his typical personal and affable way, Elder Jensen convicts us of our past failings while challenging and encouraging us to do better as we meet our brothers and sisters along our busy journey through life.

The remaining articles include an interview with Clyde Williams regarding his efforts to collect President Packer’s teachings (published in Mine Errand from the Lord: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Boyd K. Packer [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008]); an examination of the Savior’s last week; the life and ministry of John the Baptist; a personal essay by former Religious Education dean David H. Yarn; a lively debate about the geography of the Book of Mormon by two thoughtful scholars, Andrew Hedges and Matthew Roper; and conversations about the Doctrine and Covenants and lessons from the scriptures.

Right in the middle we have three essays based on a panel discussion from a recent annual Mormon History Association meeting. Steve Harper and John Thomas, colleagues at BYU and BYU–Idaho, join our non-Latter-day Saint friend and colleague Mark Miller in an intriguing discussion that will cause us to ponder some rather important issues.

As we release another issue in the tenth volume of the Religious Educator, we hope these essays will provide you with a variety of experiences that will inspire you to worship, study, contemplate, and apply eternal principles that can enrich those who will take the time to consider them. We are grateful to our authors for providing us some food for thought.

Best wishes!

Richard Neitzel Holzapfel
Editor

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Photo by Mark Philbrick
This devotional address was given on August 19, 2008, during Campus Education Week.

Today in this devotional I am honored to be addressing those committed to lifelong learning.

Our quest for knowledge and our journey of eternal progression began long before our mortal existence. We are given a clear understanding that during the Council in Heaven we used our agency, choosing to come to earth and participate in mortality. In choosing to come to this earth, we were choosing the opportunity to progress, to grow, and to gain more knowledge. And in that process of learning and coming to earth, taking upon us a mortal body to gain knowledge and to experience mortality is an essential part of our eternal learning and progression.

The theme of lifelong learning is important because for Latter-day Saints the lifelong pursuit of knowledge is not only secular but spiritual. We understand that gaining knowledge is essential to gaining eternal salvation. Brigham Young said, “Should our lives be extended to a thousand years, still we may live and learn.”

For most worldly and temporal possessions, the old adage is true: You can’t take it with you. However, the intellectual treasures of knowledge and spiritual values hold a promise of eternal significance. We read in the Doctrine and Covenants, “Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resur-
rection. And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come” (D&C 130:18–19).

So while mortality is only a small moment in eternity, learning throughout our mortal lives is an essential part of our eternal education. Here on earth, as Brigham Young once observed, “we are in a great school.”

When we see our learning here as part of our eternal education, we raise our sights for learning. As children, we might have begun learning because our parents coaxed or cajoled us. They wanted us to acquire a formal education with college degrees or technical labor skills, knowing that at the end of our labors we would be rewarded by being self-sufficient, productive, and able to survive in the real world. Some of us studied hard as we became interested in the stiff competition for grades and honors.

While these motivations for learning played important roles at different times in our lives, if they are our only motivations, we will stop learning when our parents or teachers are gone and our degrees are earned. Lifelong learners are driven by more eternal motives. One of the giant steps in maturing and acquiring knowledge and experience is when we learn for the joy of being edified rather than for the pleasure of being entertained. The goal of the wisest lifelong learners is not so much to impress others but to improve themselves and to help others. Their desire is to learn and to change their behavior by following the sound counsel and example imparted from great teachers around them.

Sometimes our learning is limited if we think of it as only one course at a time or getting one degree. But as we look to the scriptures, they give us the curriculum of the lifetime learner: “Things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms” (D&C 88:79).

The first verse of the Book of Mormon reads, “I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father” (1 Nephi 1:1). Just as Nephi’s field of study was all that his father knew, lifelong learners know no disciplinary boundaries in their quest for greater knowledge.

Lifelong learners have an insatiable inner desire to acquire knowledge in a broad range of subjects and disciplines. Thus the reward for
lifelong learners is simply the joy of learning and acquiring knowledge in a wide spectrum of subjects that interest them.

Some may wonder whether it is possible to teach lifelong learning or if it is simply a genetic gift. Just as some are born with greater speed, some of us may naturally have a greater desire for learning. Yet just as wise coaches can improve anyone willing to pay the price, in like manner Heavenly Father is eager to bless us with the drive and determination to become lifelong learners if we are willing to pay the price.

Oftentimes it takes a great teacher to motivate us and to instill that desire in us. How can we improve our desire and increase the desire of others to gain more knowledge over a lifetime of learning experiences?

Attributes of Lifelong Learners

It is important to consider the attributes that one must acquire to become a lifelong learner. A few of the basic attributes needed to become a lifelong learner are courage, faithful desire, humility, patience, curiosity, and a willingness to communicate and share the knowledge that we gain. Let’s take a moment to pause and reflect in more depth how each of these attributes may contribute to our becoming a lifelong learner. And the other side of the coin would be to consider how we may be able to instill lifelong learning in those around us, especially our children.

_Courage_. “Be of good courage, and he shall strengthen your heart, all ye that hope in the Lord” (Psalm 31:24).

Lifelong learners have the courage to overcome the fear of leaving the outer limits of their educational comfort zone and entering into the unknown and the unfamiliar. The scriptures say, “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind” (2 Timothy 1:7).

Too often we dwell in the comfort of our educational strengths and avoid overcoming our educational weaknesses. Thus our greatest strengths can become our greatest weaknesses. We may dwell in the security of the past, unwilling to venture into the future because of the fear of ignorance or the lack of knowledge about a subject we desire to study or to research. We need the courage to take a long step of faith into a fearful darkness, not knowing how deep the educational cave is that we are about to enter.

Fear is only dispelled by the amount of intellectual light we are willing to shine on the dark educational abyss that is a void in our understanding. We must find the courage to go forward—to press on. We read in the Doctrine and Covenants, “There were fears in your
hearts, and verily this is the reason that ye did not receive” (D&C 67:3). Despite our fears, courage in acquiring new learning is essential for lifelong learners.

**Faithful desire.** “Seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118).

Next is faithful desire. Lifelong learners have an insatiable, unselfish inner desire to acquire a wide spectrum of knowledge across many disciplines for the mere joy of attaining and sharing the increased knowledge without any recognition or rewards. Oftentimes the motivation and desire for learning is stimulated by a perceived need to help others. For example, a concerned mother who feels there is a lack of a medical diagnosis concerning a family physical or mental health problem researches medical books and journals to assist in the solution.

A lifelong learner may have a desire for self-improvement to have a happier or more benevolent life. Lifelong learners have a desire for knowledge that will help them to be better helpmeets, better mothers, better fathers, better citizens, and better servants in the Lord’s kingdom so “that [they] may learn and glorify the name of [their] God” (2 Nephi 6:4).

**Humility.** “Let him that is ignorant learn wisdom by humbling himself and calling upon the Lord his God, that his eyes may be opened that he may see, and his ears opened that he may hear” (D&C 136:32).

Next is the quality of humility. Lifelong learners recognize the source of all knowledge is a gift from God. “He that truly humbleth himself . . . , the same shall be blessed” (Alma 32:15).

Because lifelong learners recognize that intelligence is a gift of God, they do not dwell on it or become prideful about their personal intelligence quotient or accomplishments. Each new discovery of knowledge is metered out from on high in the Lord’s time and in the Lord’s way “line upon line, precept upon precept” (2 Nephi 28:30).

When we are truly humble, we remember that knowledge and wisdom are given to us by the Lord and that we are to use that knowledge and wisdom in lifting and strengthening others: “To every man is given a gift by the Spirit of God. To some is given one, and to some is given another, that all may be profited thereby” (D&C 46:11–12). We gain knowledge to better serve.

**Patience.** “Add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness” (2 Peter 1:5–6).
Lifelong learners acquire an inordinate degree of patience in their quest for learning. They understand through their diligent search for learning that it takes a great deal of energy and a great deal of time to find pure knowledge.

What a feeling! Have you ever sought for something—searched, pondered, and prayed—until finally there it was, right before you? Sometimes what we learn today may not seem valuable until months or even years into the future. We not only learn but we ponder that knowledge so that in the right place, at the right time, we can put it to the best use.

_Curiosity_. “I applied mine heart to know, and to search, and to seek out wisdom, and the reason of things” (Ecclesiastes 7:25).

The next quality is curiosity. My sister used to say to me, “Curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction brought him back.”

Lifelong learners are curious at heart. As children, our curiosity is instinctive, but our formal education is more confining and systematic. Lifelong learners develop personalized learning techniques that surpass what is taught in school. The key learning element is that they never lose their God-given inherent curiosity. They are simply detectives or sleuths in the image of Sherlock Holmes, solving a case by putting together the facts that they have gathered. They do it by asking the question “why” and then finding the answers. The thrill of investigating and researching a new concept or discovering the answer to something previously unknown to us is an exhilarating moment of joy and satisfaction.

Lifelong learners learn “line upon line” and “precept upon precept” but also have personal “aha” moments when they see all at once the larger picture. The lifelong learner does not give up. Thomas Edison was a lifelong learner. He was attributed as saying, “I have not failed, I’ve just found ten thousand ways that won’t work.”

_Communication_. “Wherefore, he that preacheth and he that receiveth, understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together” (D&C 50:22).

Lifelong learners are teachers at heart, reveling in the communication of learning and knowledge. They find joy when those whom they teach by sharing their knowledge are uplifted and strengthened. They communicate with God through prayer for guidance and knowledge. They communicate with God to give thanks and gratitude for the knowledge they have received. They communicate with other lifelong learners, listening intensively in a two-way exchange of learning that is mutually beneficial to all.
Great teachers are not only great communicators but also great listeners. When we are communicating, we can learn something from every individual we meet.

Great teachers produce lifelong learners. Great teachers do not provide all the answers to their students. They lead them to the fountain of knowledge and instill in them a desire to drink. Great teachers motivate students to seek knowledge.

One educator was in a meeting with President Packer in a question-and-answer period. President Packer was asked about his teachings on the Atonement. What did he teach? They wanted a testimony and a full dissertation from him on the Atonement. That’s what they expected from this great teacher. His answer taught everyone there about lifelong learning. President Packer replied, “Read the Book of Mormon a few times, searching for teachings about the Atonement. Then write a one-page summary of what you have learned. Then, my dear brother, you will have your answer.”

**Scripture Study and Lifelong Learning**

Scripture study is a lifelong learning experience. Perhaps nowhere can we see the need for lifelong learning more clearly than with scripture study. No matter how many times we may read the scriptures, through the power and inspiration of the Holy Ghost we learn new truths and gain valuable counsel and insights to meet life’s challenges. President Ezra Taft Benson taught, “Yesterday’s meal is not enough to sustain today’s needs. So also an infrequent reading of [the Book of Mormon,] ‘the most correct of any book on earth,’ as Joseph Smith called it, is not enough.”

The primary purposes of scripture study are to gain gospel understanding and to strengthen us spiritually. One reason we need to continually feast on the words of Christ is that, like all learning, gospel understanding and spiritual insights come one precept at a time.

Scripture study is a unique form of learning. It requires literacy—the ability to read. King Mosiah taught his sons “in all the language of his fathers, that thereby they might become men of understanding; and that they might know concerning the prophecies which had been spoken by the mouths of their fathers, which were delivered them by the hand of the Lord” (Mosiah 1:2).

Mosiah wasn’t just teaching his sons how to read so they could get ahead in the world; he was teaching them to read so they could immerse themselves in the scriptures and become spiritually wise.
The brass plates were preserved and taken to the promised land so that Lehi’s family and his posterity would not forget who they were, “a chosen people,” and would be reminded how they were to live as children of God. It is for the same purpose that the scriptures have been preserved for us in this day and at this time.

But gaining knowledge through scripture study requires some attributes and actions that most formal educational endeavors do not: sincere desire, unwavering faith, prayer, and the will and obedience to follow the Spirit’s promptings. Virtually all humans upon earth, no matter what their mental capacity, can experience the joy and rewards of lifetime gospel study.

Scripture study does not require years of formal education to gain an understanding of essential gospel principles. This is illustrated by Peter and John in the book of Acts. The Jewish rulers were surprised. They assumed that gospel knowledge required some exhaustive, formal course of training. The scriptures tell us: “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13).

Unlearned and ignorant in the eyes of the world, Peter and John had gained great gospel knowledge from listening and hearkening to the words of our Savior. The same can be true for each of us and for every member of our family. In gospel study, a master’s degree in theology is far less valuable than the degree of knowledge we can all obtain from the Master Himself.

A critical component in gaining knowledge from the Savior is acting upon the principles He taught. In order to gain the greatest insights the scriptures have to offer, our study will focus not so much on places and names as on principles and doctrines. It is not simply book knowledge we are after but insights that will change the way we live and that will actually make a difference in our lives. We must see the scriptures for what they are: an instruction manual for becoming like our Savior.

Lifelong scripture study is an unending quest for spiritual insights and understanding and for the growth that results when we apply such insights in our lives. As Latter-day Saints, we understand that acquiring spiritual knowledge, having spiritual experiences, and developing our gifts and aptitudes are important to our mortal growth. In addition, we must develop our spiritual dispositions in relation to God, our Father, and His Son, Jesus Christ, and cultivate the qualities of faith and obedience that will invite the Holy Ghost into our lives. We also grow in
spirit as we serve and care for our neighbors and the world around us. All of these elements of lifelong learning have eternal consequences, and their rewards are the essence of our mortal goal to obtain spiritual qualities and achievements. The results of our most important lifelong learning are not reflected in grades or degrees or honors but in who we become. Our aim is to develop eternal character values such as knowledge, hope, faith, charity, and love. This is the most important quest we have in learning.

Studying the scriptures helps us develop and progress as individuals. The scriptures are uniquely suited for lifelong study.

As we increase our spiritual, emotional, and mental capacity through the years, we qualify to gain new insights from the scriptures. How many times have you paused and pondered on a passage of scripture that you have read and passed over many times before and then, in a revelatory moment, have a new awareness, a new understanding, brought to your heart and mind granting additional insight—and that added insight solves a question, a problem, or one of life’s challenges? That, my brothers and sisters, is the sweet mystery of lifelong learning—a sweet instant in a blessed moment in time when you experience a leap of faith and understanding.

It is for this reason that we have prayer before and after scripture study. The prayer before scripture study is to prepare us spiritually to receive the revelatory moments and a spiritual uplift. The prayer after scripture study is to give thanks and gratitude for that which has been given us.

The knowledge of the truths of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ is the most valuable knowledge we will ever possess. That knowledge is found in the word of God in the scriptures, through living prophets, and in the temple. The endowment is the eternal curriculum. In it we are taught where we came from and why we are here on earth, and we are even given the promise of achieving life eternal in the celestial kingdom if we obey the commandments and covenants we’ve taken upon ourselves.

Lifelong Learning—Past, Present, and Future

In addition to all the attributes we have talked about, lifelong learners see the connection between what we have learned in the past, what we are learning now, and what we can learn in the future. Lifelong learners are cumulative learners. They put together all that they have learned to help them. They will never dwell in the past because they are eager to explore the future. They will always be open to new
concepts, being blessed with inquisitive minds that seek new knowledge on a daily basis.

Lifelong learners spend their lives doing better than their best! Sometimes our best is not good enough. Being challenged to do better than our best may seem unreasonable or defy intuitive logic, but personal progress is just simply that! The reality is that sometimes our best of today is not good enough to succeed in tomorrow’s world.

For example, in the 2004 Olympics, American swimmer Michael Phelps, who we’ve heard a lot about lately, won the bronze medal in the men’s 200-meter freestyle with a time of one minute forty-five seconds. Four years ago that was his best. But he knew that to win the gold medal in that event in 2008 he would have to do better than his best, so he set about training to meet that goal. Millions have had the opportunity to watch the Olympic saga that has unfolded as he did better than his previous best, setting a new world record of one minute forty-two seconds and winning a gold medal. In Beijing he shattered his own previous world record by a full second and improved upon Mark Spitz’s winning time of 1972 by ten seconds. Think how fast that is! In fact, he shaved off over a full minute from the gold medal winning time in 1904 of two minutes forty-four seconds. Just imagine, today in just a minute they swim two laps of the pool! That’s how far he would have finished ahead of the winner in 1904. It is remarkable that of Michael Phelps’s 2008 gold medals, seven of his times beat world records; they were not only his own records but world records. The other, his eighth medal, set an Olympic record. Can you imagine being able to do that, and doing better than your best? What an example for us!

The reality is that if we do not improve our efforts and our achievements each day, our best in yesterday’s past will not meet the demands of tomorrow’s future. This principle of doing better than our best each day applies to both spiritual and temporal demands in our mortal lifetime of learning as we prepare, covenant, and meet the requirements of eternal salvation.

Sometimes the magnificent vista of learning is not limited by the capacity of our mind but rather by the artificial limitations we place upon ourselves and our ability to learn. We must expand the capacity of our mind. Just think of what our learning limitations were before the computer became a universal tool for research, learning, and Internet communication. It is hard for our grandchildren to imagine how we were educated without computers. (Or, for that matter, how we lived without a cell phone or survived without pizza as a diet staple. The list is endless.)
I would like to share with you a unique personal learning experience spanning over thirty years that relates to the emerging computer technology benefits in family history research. In the 1970s I observed Elder Theodore H. Burton presenting the future concept of computers being used for family records and research. He was even bold enough to teach and proclaim that the computer technology was given to man for use to hasten the day of family history, genealogy, and temple work.

Elder Burton’s initial computer proclamation was met with understandable reservations: “Computers will always be too big and too expensive for personal use.” “There will never be enough Church members with computers.” “So few of the members are able to operate computers.” “The detail and explanation required and the examination required to make personal research compatible with temple records are too complex.” All seemed reasonable reservations for their time, but what of the future computer developments?

Today we are embarking on a new era of family history computer technology. With the upcoming release of the new system—already available in half of the temple districts around the world—we will be able to prepare and submit names of our ancestors for temple work from our homes using a new Internet-based system. This new system will help you readily see which ancestors need proxy temple ordinances and make it possible to print a summary page with a bar code that when scanned in the temple will print out a card for use in temple sessions. After an ordinance is completed, a record of the completed ordinance is typically available on this secure Web site within twenty-four hours.

Now, why do I tell this story to you as lifelong learners? I have a simple message. Never dwell on the past or attempt to protect your comfort zone against the inevitable changes required to meet the future advancements that will be needed. When Jesus said “It is finished” (John 19:30) as He died on the cross, it was the end of only one mission—the Atonement. He then went on to see those in eternity to shore them up and to give them hope (see D&C 138). We read in 3 Nephi that in yet another mission experience He also visited the faithful at the temple in the New World as a resurrected being, blessing them for their faithfulness. In our lives, as in the Savior’s example, our endings only usher in new beginnings. The ending of one era ushers in a new era. Lifelong learners do not dwell on the past.

Past learning creates a valuable foundation of experience upon which to build, not a comfortable place to dwell for a lifetime.

Sometimes when we reach a milestone we viewed as an ultimate goal, we may find ourselves once the elation has passed almost
depressed—for example, when you finish a mission or when the hone-
yymoon is over. There is a moment of shocking, stark reality when you
ask yourself, “What next? What do I do now?” At such times, remem-
ber the end is only the dawn of a new beginning.

As you stand atop any peak you have climbed, enjoy the moment
of satisfaction in the present to look at the remarkable view and the
progress you have made from the past. But then turn around to see
what new peaks are now in sight and set a course to climb higher into
the future. When you do this, the achievement of one goal set in the
past will eventually pave the way to a higher goal of achievement in the
future. As we contemplate the sacrifice and hard work that was required
to achieve past goals, let us muster the confidence and determination
needed to move on to greater heights.

Let me pause once again and talk to you from the depths of my
heart about one of the unique experiences of learning. The real mean-
ing of lifelong learning takes shape in the circle of past, present, and
future—progressing as time moves on in its swift, inevitable pace. Time
stops for no man. In fact, one of the few common possessions we all
share is time. What we do with our time will determine the degree of
lifelong learning and spiritual values we take to the eternities following
our mortal test.

Also, let me spend a moment or two talking about a unique life-
long learning experience for a woman—motherhood.

**Motherhood: The Ideal Opportunity for Lifelong Learning**

Motherhood is the ideal opportunity for lifelong learning. A mother’s
learning grows as she nurtures the child in his or her development years.
They are both learning and maturing together at a remarkable pace. It’s
exponential, not linear. Just think of the learning process of a mother
throughout the lifetime of her children. Each child brings an added dimen-
sion to her learning because their needs are so varied and far-reaching.

For example, in the process of rearing her children, a mother stud-
ies such topics as child development; nutrition; health care; physiology;
psychology; nursing with medical research and care; and educational
tutoring in many diverse fields such as math, science, geography, litera-
ture, English, and foreign languages. She develops gifts such as music,
athletics, dance, and public speaking. The learning examples could
continue endlessly. Just think of the spiritual learning that is required
as a mother teaches about gospel principles and prepares for teaching
family home evening and auxiliary lessons in Primary, Relief Society,
Young Women, and Sunday School.
My point is, my dear sisters—as well as for the brethren, who I hope are listening carefully—a mother’s opportunity for lifelong learning and teaching is universal in nature. My dear sisters, don’t ever sell yourself short as a woman or as a mother.

It never ceases to amaze me that the world would state that a woman is in a form of servitude that does not allow her to develop her gifts and talents. Nothing, absolutely nothing, could be further from the truth. Do not let the world define, denigrate, or limit your feelings of lifelong learning and the values of motherhood in the home—both here mortally and in the eternal learning and benefits you give to your children and to your companion.

Lifelong learning is essential to the vitality of the human mind, body, and soul. It enhances self-worth and self-actuation. Lifelong learning is invigorating mentally and is a great defense against aging, depression, and self-doubt. When we stand still in seeking new knowledge, our forward learning progress ceases and mental stagnation begins.

Progress and improvement are the essence of lifelong learning. You will not be surprised to know that there is only one ultimate goal: living a faithful life and enduring to the end worthy of eternal salvation and glory. All other goals and achievements are corollary to faithfully enduring to the end. Indeed, it is the plan of life set forth in the scriptures for our eternal benefit.

The learning process taught by Solomon in the Holy Bible in the book of Proverbs is helpful to aid us in understanding the nature of lifelong learning. “Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding” (Proverbs 3:13).

To further explain, we start with basic intelligence, or an IQ, which is God-given as one of the gifts bestowed on mankind. “The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth” (D&C 93:36). To basic intelligence we add knowledge, which comes to us through learning and experience. The sum of basic intelligence plus knowledge and experience equals wisdom. “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding” (Proverbs 4:7).

The world stops at wisdom’s level of learning, but the scriptures teach “The Lord by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding hath he established the heavens” (Proverbs 3:19; emphasis added).

Wisdom plus the gifts of the Holy Ghost provide an understanding in our hearts. When we truly have an understanding and our hearts are softened, we will “no more desire to do evil” (Alma 19:33).
We will have “an eye single to the glory of God” (D&C 82:19) and desire to return with honor into the presence of our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ.

Here is a lifetime homework assignment for you! Ponder and seek to acquire the remarkable attributes of a lifelong learner: courage, faithful desire, curiosity, humility, patience, and willingness to communicate. These are desirable character qualities. Ponder and ask yourself these questions: “What is the meaning and value of each of these qualities to me?” “How do these qualities apply to me?” “How am I going to have each of these qualities be part of my life?” Then for a few minutes ponder these qualities and ask yourself what you can do to enhance them in your character and in your life. Even if you only take one of the qualities and seek to improve yourself, it will make a difference. The reward will be great in your future for you and for those around you.

I hope you can see the value of reviewing your ultimate goals with an eye to lifelong learning perspectives and to life’s cycle of past, present, and future. May your life be one of learning—growing in knowledge, intelligence, and wisdom while seeking spiritual values and characteristics that will bless you with the rewards of eternal life.

Seek to Know That God Lives

I give you my testimony that God lives and that we can learn not just to believe but to know that God lives. Seek that knowledge. It will be granted to you. Seek to know and to have those around you know, through your testimony, that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God and that in this last dispensation of the fulness of time we have had restored to us all that has ever been restored to mankind. Learn all that you can within our temples and our scriptures. Learn and conduct your life in such a way that you may return to the presence of our Father and His Son. I pray that our desires and goals will be to become lifelong learners to accomplish that end, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Notes

Those Who Are Different

_Elder Marlin K. Jensen_

_Elder Marlin K. Jensen_ is a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy.

This address was given at a Utah County Stake Conference Broadcast on September 7, 2008.

Two years before I was born in 1942, my mother gave birth to my older brother, Gary. My brother Gary is a very special person. When he was born, his brain was damaged by a lack of oxygen. His mind never grew above the level of a six- or seven-year-old. For over sixty years I watched my parents take care of Gary. They helped brush his teeth, comb his hair, and tie his tie on Sunday. Because he loved horses and cowboys, they took him to rodeos and Western movies and performed countless acts of love and kindness for him.

Unfortunately, people aren’t always so kind to those who are different. I’m sorry to say that some children—even children from active Latter-day Saint families—were unkind to my brother, Gary. They shut him out of games, called him ugly names, and teased him unmercifully. Once when he was eating an ice-cream cone, a boy guided him over to a dog and let the dog lick the ice cream. Everyone laughed when Gary went back to licking the cone himself!

Gary was a childlike person who was always quick to forgive. He loved and accepted everybody. I think that aside from my parents, this special brother did more during my childhood to shape my outlook on life than anyone else. I sometimes think how it will be after the Resurrection when, as Alma describes, “all things shall be restored to their proper and perfect frame” (Alma 40:23). Then we’ll know the
real Gary for the first time, and I think we’ll be very grateful for all the good things we’ve done for him and very sad about those times when we might have been more loving and understanding of his special circumstances.

There are many other people like Gary in our world. Even within the Church there are certain of our brothers and sisters who might be considered “different,” and who especially need our love and understanding. Their need for this love and understanding stems in part from the culture that has developed as we strive to live life according to God’s plan for us. Like all cultures, the culture arising from our efforts to live according to the gospel of Jesus Christ includes certain expectations and mores, or morally binding customs. Marriage and family are highly valued, for instance, and fathers and mothers have divinely appointed roles to fulfill. Children and youth are encouraged to live by certain standards and walk prescribed paths to achieve certain educational and spiritual goals.

The desired outcomes of a gospel-centered life are held up as ideals for which we are all encouraged to strive. Although such ideals are doctrinally based and represent desirable objectives in our quest for eternal life, they can sometimes become sources of disappointment and pain for those whose lives may vary from the ideal.

Discomfort and unfulfilled expectations may exist, for example, for a divorced Church member, for a person still single though of marriageable age, for a person struggling with bouts of depression or an eating disorder, or for the parents of a wayward child. Other Church members who may feel culturally conspicuous are those in a racial minority, those struggling with feelings of same-gender attraction, or young men who for whatever reason chose not to serve a mission at the usual age. Members who repent and whose transgressions require formal and thus more public Church discipline also often find their social interaction in the Church to be quite awkward.

Even when worthy, members whose lives don’t fit the ideal and thus are considered different often feel inferior and guilty. These feelings are heightened when we as their brothers and sisters fail to be as thoughtful and sensitive toward them as we ought to be. Consider, for instance, even the unintended impact on a couple married for some years who remain childless when a mother of three who has just had a new baby, arises in fast and testimony meeting and innocently thanks God for trusting her with one more of His precious children.

In resolving the challenging situations I have described, it is important to recognize that the solution isn’t to eliminate or even lower the
level of the ideal. Prophets and apostles have always had the duty to teach and encourage us to strive for the ideal. It was what the Savior did. His injunction was “Be ye therefore perfect” (Matthew 5:48), not just “Have a good day.”

A helpful insight on this question came to me several years ago when I was reading the Savior’s teachings about the man who had one hundred sheep and one went astray. The Savior asks, “Doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray?” (Matthew 18:12). As one who has been a priesthood leader for many years, I had always thought of myself as the shepherd—the one out searching for the lost sheep. But in a moment of reflection it came to me that in some way or another we are all the one lost sheep. We all have our failings, and our lives vary in some ways from the ideal. We are all different! This is a humbling but helpful recognition.

It is also helpful to remember that in teaching the ideal, the Savior recognized that it isn’t always immediately attainable. In speaking of spiritual gifts—those wonderful endowments of the Holy Ghost—the Savior said, “They are given for the benefit of those who love me and keep all my commandments.” Requiring us to keep all the commandments to enjoy spiritual gifts seems an impossibly high standard, but thankfully the Savior adds that spiritual gifts are also given for the benefit of “him that seeketh so to do” (D&C 46:9, emphasis added). Seeking to keep all the commandments—even if we sometimes fall short of the ideal—is something within the power of each of us and is acceptable to our Heavenly Father.

Since at baptism we all covenanted to “mourn with those that mourn and comfort those that stand in need of comfort” (Mosiah 18:9), being compassionate and sensitive to those in special circumstances—those who are different—is an important aspect of our efforts to be Christ’s disciples. Of Jesus, Nephi wrote, “He doeth not anything save it be for the benefit of the world” (2 Nephi 26:24). It is inconceivable that the Savior would do or say anything that would injure or intensify the pains of any of God’s children. In fact, Alma taught that as a part of the Atonement, Christ voluntarily experienced our pains, sicknesses, and infirmities so “that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people” (Alma 7:12).

We can take great comfort in Christ’s ability to relate to our own experiences in life, a trait known as empathy. An old Jewish saying describes empathy as “feeling your pain in my heart.” The record of
Christ’s ministry is replete with displays of His empathy and kindness to those who were different.

When the current Primary *Children’s Songbook* was compiled in 1987, a song was needed to speak to children (and thus to all of us) about those, who because they are different, have special need of our love and understanding. Carol Lynn Pearson wrote the words and Reid Nibley the music for “I’ll Walk with You,” 140–41, a simple song that beautifully summarizes how our love and understanding can be shown. I conclude with its inspiring message:

If you don’t walk as most people do,
Some people walk away from you,
But I won’t! I won’t!

If you don’t talk as most people do,
Some people talk and laugh at you,
But I won’t! I won’t!

I’ll walk with you. I’ll talk with you.
That’s how I’ll show my love for you.

Jesus walked away from none.
He gave his love to ev’ryone.
So I will! I will!

Jesus blessed all he could see,
Then turned and said, “Come, follow me.”
And I will! I will!
I will! I will!

I’ll walk with you. I’ll talk with you.
That’s how I’ll show my love for you.

May God bless us to realize that an important measure of our progress in coming unto Christ is to be found in how well we treat others, especially those who are different. And may we remember that we are all different in some ways is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen. RE

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The Religious Educator held the following interview to acquaint readers with a new resource for students of the restored gospel called Mine Errand from the Lord: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Boyd K. Packer (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008).

RE: This is now your fourth compilation of the teachings of prophets and apostles. What led you to pursue such ambitious projects?

Williams: As a young seminary teacher, I had come to prize and value next to the scriptures the teachings of the living prophets. I remember in the late 1970s wondering why no one had compiled the teachings of President Lorenzo Snow. After some investigation, I decided no one had made such a compilation because President Snow had served such a short time as Church President and there were not as many of his full discourses preserved. Because I wanted his teachings on my library shelf, I began the task of selecting and compiling his teachings for a potential book. This was before the days of home computers and search engines, so it was a little slower in coming about than the others I did.

The Teachings of Harold B. Lee had also not been done because he served only a short time as President of the Church. I had always loved President Lee and often turned to his teachings for help in my teaching and Church administration. My colleague Reed Benson kept urging me to put together a book of President Lee’s teachings. Finally, I agreed to call Brent Goates, who was married to President Lee’s oldest
daughter, and ask if there were plans or desires for a teachings book to be done. He indicated that at one time he had intended to undertake such a project but felt he was no longer able to do so and would be delighted to have it done. And so that project began.

A similar thing occurred in the case of Howard W. Hunter. President Hunter served as Church President for such a short period, and when I learned that Deseret Book did not intend to do a teachings book, that was my cue to pursue one.

RE: Did you need any permissions or clearances to work on these teachings books?

Williams: That is a very important question, and I am glad you asked. In each case the projects were cleared through the First Presidency’s office, and the manuscript was sent for a review under their direction before it went to the publisher. I would never have presumed to compile or write about the Brethren without their approval.

RE: How about President Packer’s book? Why did you choose to focus on President Packer?

Williams: As a young seminary student, I remember hearing and watching President Packer’s presentation entitled “The Very Key” on the importance of staying morally clean. Ever since then, I have been impressed repeatedly by President Packer’s forthright messages on important spiritual and doctrinal issues. Because of his background in seminaries and institutes, he always seemed to have a real interest in those of us who were teachers in the Church Educational System, and thus I have had a particular interest in his teachings for many years. When I completed The Teachings of Harold B. Lee in 1995, I told one of my colleagues that if I could do one more teachings book I would love to do the teachings of Boyd K. Packer.

After finishing The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter, I periodically thought about asking President Packer if he would be willing to allow me to compile his teachings. I was a bit concerned because I know such books were usually done for the Presidents of the Church. But I was aware of George Q. Cannon’s teachings, Gospel Truth; Joseph Fielding Smith’s teachings, Doctrines of Salvation, published while he was an Apostle; and The Neal A. Maxwell Quote Book. These all helped me to finally decide to ask. On September 15, 1999, I wrote to President Packer requesting the opportunity to work on a teachings or a quote book from his talks and writings. Two weeks later he responded that such a project was under way and had been for a while.
RE: So you were turned down the first time?

Williams: Yes. After that letter I mentioned I laid the idea aside and went on with my life. A few years later I put together my own collection of as many of President Packer’s talks as I could find and made a Folio file so I could search his teachings for quotes and stories I wanted to use. I gathered over two hundred written talks and many of his recorded talks. I listened to them as I exercised each morning and when I traveled long distances. They were and are a great blessing in my life.

After seven years had passed, I woke up one morning with some impressions about doing a book of President Packer’s teachings. I thought to myself, “This is strange. Why would I have these feelings?” The idea had not been on my mind for years. I pondered what to do. I did not want to appear foolish or presumptive, and I certainly did not want to pester President Packer. I sat on that idea for about a week and kept thinking about it. I got out the old letter I had received and reread it. I finally decided that if I wrote another letter all President Packer would need to do was say thanks but no thanks. I really had nothing to lose, so I wrote to President Packer indicating I had written seven years earlier about the possibility of doing a compilation of his teachings. I indicated that I felt such a book would be most helpful to so many. I apologized for taking his time but asked if there were a change that I was still willing to work on the project. This was mid-November 2006.

This time a letter came inviting me to come and visit with President Packer about the book. Of course, I was thrilled. I called his office, and his secretary had me speak with President Packer. After a few questions about my interest in the project, President Packer arranged to meet with me just after the holidays. He asked if I could send him a copy of the three other teachings books I had compiled.

When we met early in January 2007 for the first time, on his desk was the copy of The Teachings of Harold B. Lee. He reminded me that President Lee had been his mentor. President Packer was very personable and friendly, yet you don’t go into such visits without feeling like your spiritual pulse is being checked. He was very interested in the project but made no commitment that day. I told President Packer that I sought no financial gain. I merely wanted the opportunity to help strengthen the kingdom, which I felt this book would do. I am sure he wanted time to ponder and reflect and let the Spirit work on him to decide if this was the thing to do. He asked me to call Cory Maxwell at
Deseret Book, and then about two weeks later President Packer gave me the green light to proceed.

He indicated that his secretary had been putting together a Folio file of all of his talks and that she would get a copy of the file to me once the restricted talks (temple presidents’ seminars, General Authority training meetings, etc.) were removed.

**RE: What was it like to work with him personally?**

**Williams:** I had met President Packer on a couple of occasions when he had come to our stake conference and I was in the stake presidency. So he recognized my face, but I really did not have a personal acquaintance with him. As I indicated before, President Packer was personable and very willing to have the project proceed. However, as President of the Twelve, his schedule is generally filled to overflowing. I realized that I would not be able to spend much time with him personally on the book. He had done his part by researching, studying, pondering, writing, and delivering the talks and writing the books. His secretary was a great resource and could get materials to him when he had time to work them into his busy schedule. The only time I can think of that anything was really held up was after the first draft of the manuscript was done and President Packer came down with a serious bout of the flu. We had to wait a few weeks to get him the manuscript at that point. President Packer exhibited a great deal of trust and confidence in allowing me to select, compile, and organize the selections from his teachings and writings. I told him that this carried a much higher level of pressure for me since the authors of the previous three books I had done were already deceased. I never once felt pressured or limited by President Packer. Any pressure or limitations were self-imposed as I tried to consider what would be wise to put in the book and at the same time be pleasing to him.

Once the manuscript was done, there were a few occasions where I was able to meet with President Packer and others whom he had read the manuscript. These occasions were very encouraging and upbeat. I could tell that they collectively were pleased with the manuscript. Their suggestions were minimal but most helpful.

**RE: How has the process of compiling these books affected your own teaching?**

**Williams:** Each of the teachings books I have done has affected my life profoundly. Consider spending years studying and searching the teachings of living prophets. My bus rides, my evenings, and my weekends were filled with searching the teachings of living prophets, and this, of course, was on top of preparing for and teaching all of my
scripture courses each year. How could one go wrong doing this on a regular basis? There have been important statements from each of those I have studied that have become key principles or insights that I use to this day in my teaching. My testimony and desire to follow the Savior have been profoundly affected by these experiences.

**RE:** How did you come up with the organization of the quotes and teachings in the book?

**Williams:** The use of computers made the process of putting the book together much easier for the last three of the books I did. In President Packer’s case, the process was a little easier in that his secretary provided us with a full Folio version of all of President Packer’s talks. We then made a hard copy on paper of every talk that was read and marked, so we had a clear paper trail. Each talk was given a number consisting of a year and the talk within that year. In some cases we checked multiple published versions of the same talk. In the first reading of each talk, I tried to select anything that I thought might be worthy of including in the book. This was hard because so much was worthy. I did not worry about duplication or length during this reading because I knew we could search out the best accounts when we were finished. We selected tentative topics and chapters to put the statements into and altered and adjusted these depending on what we found in President Packer’s talks. Over the many months of selecting and compiling this book, I was blessed to work with five wonderful student research assistants. They were all very qualified and helped in so many ways. This book could never have been completed in the time frame it was without their expert help. I sought for and used the input of my research assistants to help in making decisions on how to break down and organize the chapters. While much of this work is somewhat subjective, it was great to have a couple of other opinions or views to consider for what should be done.

One of the challenges I faced with President Packer’s talks was that so very often he introduced his theme with a story or illustration and then later, as he taught the doctrine or principle, he would hearken back to the story. This would sometimes make it very difficult to select the shorter thoughts for inclusion in the book.

After searching well over four hundred of his talks and his three books—*Teach Ye Diligently, The Holy Temple,* and *Our Father’s Plan*—my selections had all been placed in a searchable Folio file that made it possible for us to go through the manuscript looking for duplicate quotes, stories, and so forth. The best or most concise versions were retained. The others were eliminated. Sometimes the same idea was
taught, but additional insights were shared or a different approach was used, so we decided to retain both statements. An example of this is a quote that I had personally heard President Packer use more than once on the two occasions he attended the stake conference where I live. However, I did not have a published source for the statement. I found two versions among his talks and because of the additional insights I retained both statements. They are as follows:

1. “You cannot make a major mistake without having been warned. I will make a promise to you, and you can test it. I have no hesitancy in making this promise in your young life. As you move forward in life, you cannot make a major mistake, any mistake that will have any lasting consequence in your life, without having been warned and told not to do it. It cannot be done in this Church. It doesn’t work that way. You try to do something that is wrong, and the Spirit will say no. Now you may plug your ears—you don’t plug your ears, you plug your feelings, and you let your desires or some other thing get hold of you. But you cannot make a mistake that is going to have any consequence without knowing about it” (*Mine Errand from the Lord*, 130–31).

2. “You will be warned of danger. . . . You cannot make a major mistake in your life without being warned” (*Mine Errand from the Lord*, 131).

We decided to keep both statements because one is a nice concise one or two liner and the other gives a more in-depth explanation. You will note that the quotes are preceded by a bolded statement. I felt that the bold statement would help draw the reader into the book. Most are not likely to sit down and read this book from cover to cover, though it would be a very rewarding experience. However, as readers come to a topic or doctrine, the titles for the quotations help them know what the longer quotation contains as its main emphasis and will often draw them in to learn more about what the quotation says. Each quotation in the book is followed by a four-digit number in parentheses. This enabled us to avoid cluttering the text of the quotes with long and repeated source references. The first number is the year in which the talk was given, and the second number is the order in which that talk was given during that year. I saw this method used years ago in *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* and felt it was the best way to reference the talks. At the end of the book these numbers refer you to a complete bibliography of the talks cited and lists multiple sources for the talks where applicable.
RE: Were you the only one who read all the talks and did the selecting of quotes?

Williams: I did have my research assistants help, as we had time, to read some of the talks that I felt would benefit from a second reader, and one of them read through the book *Teach Ye Diligently*. However, to get the viewpoint of others who had read President Packer’s talks we used the search engines available and checked every Church teaching manual, all Church magazines, all CES student and teacher manuals, and GospeLink for any quotations by President Packer. Once our initial draft was completed, my assistants compared all of these quotations with what we had in the book manuscript to see if we had missed anything. Those quotes that they could not find in the book were turned over to me, and I searched again. Then if we did not have the quote, I made the decision whether to use it. We added another forty or so quotes to the book in this way.

RE: Is there much new material in this book that is not already in his other books?

Williams: The simple answer is yes. *Mine Errand from the Lord* differs from the other books in at least two ways. The first is that all of the other books were a collection of complete talks or a book written on a single theme. In this book we have tried to select out some of the most concise and profound teachings on virtually every topic that President Packer had addressed over his forty-seven years as a General Authority. Secondly, there were many talks and addresses which we had access to that have never been published before. While some of these required minor editing because they were sometimes transcriptions from recordings, nevertheless many important statements found in the book have come from these unpublished manuscripts.

RE: Could you share some of the most inspiring messages from this book? What are a few of the significant themes in his ministry?

Williams: President Packer has focused very well on a wide range of gospel and doctrinal themes. This is part of what has made the research for this book so meaningful and worthwhile for me personally. He has profound insights about the plan of happiness, the use of our agency, and the power there is in ordinances and covenants. He has given significant insight to our understanding of revelation and what leads to effective gospel teaching. His love of the scriptures resonates clearly in his addresses as does his understanding of the supreme importance of marriage and the family. Temple and missionary work are also significant themes that President Packer has provided us with important perspectives. There is not time in an interview such as this to go into
extensive detail on these and other themes. However, a few examples here may give our readers a feel for some of the powerful messages in the book; in the challenges that we are facing in the world today these two statements regarding our need for inspiration are certainly pertinent to us: “During unsettled times . . . the most important thing we can teach to members of the Church worldwide is how to receive revealed instruction, prompting, guidance, direction, warning, and to learn to trust it” (Mine Errand from the Lord, 125). Then related to this statement, he said, “One thing I have said more times than a few, is that we live far below our privileges. Members of the Church live far below their privileges as far as inspiration is concerned” (Mine Errand from the Lord, 133). Certainly, this is the day when the need for personal revelation is as great as it has ever been.

On another occasion, President Packer spoke about a serious concern for those who suffer the tragedy of divorce. His counsel is sobering and yet very profound and insightful.

To the young divorcee, with perhaps three little children, whose husband has gone away, a reprobate, I say: Careful, careful.

You may have been used and abused; all the criticism and evil that you might say about your husband might well be true. At least you might feel it is true. But I say to you, don’t ever say those things to your little ones.

When that poignant moment comes when they say, “Mamma, why doesn’t daddy come home anymore? Doesn’t daddy love us anymore?” Bite your tongue, dear sister. Don’t say, “Your daddy is a liar,” (or a cheat, or an adulterer, or an evil man). Just say, “Sweetheart, we don’t understand everything and maybe one day we’ll learn. There are lots of things in life that we must wait to know.” Just pass it off. Careful dear girl lest you unwittingly teach your children that they are the offspring of a reprobate. That gets fixed into their minds and when the teenage challenges come they let down the bars and say, “I can’t help myself, it was born into me.” Be the perfect Christian. (Mine Errand from the Lord, 268)

Another great insight that President Packer gave on more than one occasion was to emphasize the most important purpose for which the Word of Wisdom was given. He said, “Living this way is essential to keep members of the Church open to spiritual communication. It is defined as ‘a principle with promise, adapted to the capacity of the weak and the weakest of all saints, who are or can be called saints’ (D&C 89:3; emphasis added). Keeping the Word of Wisdom (and we must keep it) will protect us from the destructive addictions which shackle
us and interrupt our communication with our Heavenly Father” (Mine Errand from the Lord, 206).

Perhaps one more example in this area will have to suffice. The world in which we live is growing increasingly noisy. It is hard sometimes to find a quiet place to reflect. Speaking of this challenge, President Packer counseled: “You have to learn to be alone in a crowd. You have to have such control. That is so important. We spend so much time in airports and in other noisy places. But I do not go there. I might be standing there physically, but I am not there spiritually, because I am thinking things and doing things in my mind. If you will learn to do that, then the Spirit will teach you” (Mine Errand from the Lord, 132).

**RE:** Besides the many great stories and classic statements on doctrine that President Packer is known for, are there any others things you have added to the book?

**Williams:** At the head of each chapter and then scattered throughout are some very interesting and significant one- or two-line statements that can carry a punch and can cause you to stop and think. These little gems are well worth watching for. Here are four examples that have a lot of depth in their message.

“Never make the same mistake once” (Mine Errand from the Lord, 65).

“The doctrines of the gospel are revealed through the Spirit to prophets, not through the intellect to scholars” (Mine Errand from the Lord, 309).

“If all you know is what you see with your natural eyes and hear with your natural ears, then you will not know very much” (Mine Errand from the Lord, 339).

“We are floating along on a quiet stream and all is calm. But if you listen closely, you can hear the sound of rapids ahead” (Mine Errand from the Lord, 402).

**RE:** Could you tell us how the title was selected?

**Williams:** I had realized that President Packer would make the decision as to what the title would be. However, I felt that I should make a few suggestions. I felt because President Packer was not the President of the Church that we could not simply title the book The Teachings of Boyd K. Packer. I felt if we had a different main title we might be able to subtitle it with the above. After we had been working on the book for several months, I began to think of potential titles. The first one that came to my mind was from Jacob 1:17. President Packer had used this verse often in his teaching, and I felt that he
may have some personal affinity for its message. In this verse, Jacob makes it very clear that before he went to teach and warn his people, he “obtained mine errand from the Lord.” It seemed to me that this was exactly what President Packer and all of the Brethren endeavor to do so as they prepare to teach the Saints. I continued to think of other potential titles and asked my research assistants to do the same. We came up with a short list of titles that I took with me when I presented the manuscript to President Packer. I assumed he would take the matter under consideration and then maybe even come up with a title on his own. Much to my surprise, when President Packer looked over the list for about thirty seconds he said, “This is the title,” pointing to “Mine Errand from the Lord.” He had his secretary call Cory Maxwell right away and reserve the title while I was there. I was overwhelmed at how decisive he was at that moment. It was for me a very humbling moment as I felt confirmation that this was what the book should be titled. We were later instructed that the subtitle needed to be other than the “teachings of” as this title was reserved for the teachings of the Presidents of the Church, so the subtitle became “Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Boyd K. Packer.”

**RE:** Could you give us a feel for the impact his teachings have had on your life and your chosen profession?

**Williams:** President Packer’s teachings have impacted my teaching in so many ways. I have been enlightened, inspired, and motivated by his words. My love and appreciation for the scriptures has increased. I might just share a couple of statements that I have come to use often in my teaching. On one occasion as he spoke to religious educators, he said, “Teach your students to see with the eyes they possessed before they had a mortal body; teach them to hear with ears they possessed before they were born; teach them to push back the curtains of mortality and see into the eternities” (*Mine Errand from the Lord*, 313).

I try to use this statement each fall semester as my students come to class the first day. I want them to look at the scriptures and the gospel with a different perspective, a divine or eternal perspective. If they will do this, I know they will make wiser choices.

Another statement I often use has such relevance as we see wickedness around us on every side and at times wonder where can we find security or safety. This statement to me is so very profound: “There are dangers all around. Some of you may say, ‘If things get really tough, we will move here, or we will move back there, and then we will be safe; everything will be all right there.’ If you do not fix it so that you are safe and in good company when you are alone, or when you are
with your own husband or your own wife and your own children, you will not be safe or find happiness anywhere. There is no such thing as geographical security” (Mine Errand from the Lord, 402).

**RE:** What advice would you offer gospel students to get the most from his teachings? What advice would you offer teachers?

**Williams:** The best way to get the most out of these teachings, I believe, is to study them and then do all in our power to live them and teach them. It was President Harold B. Lee who taught, “If you want to be an effective teacher of the gospel, you have to live the principles that you propose to teach. The more perfectly you live the gospel, the more perfectly you will be able to teach the gospel” (Teachings of Harold B. Lee, 459). When I teach and then live a principle, it becomes a part of me. I am, in a sense, converted to that principle. This above process will then lead one to desire, in the words of President David O. McKay, to help students to see what I see, to know what I know, and to feel what I feel (see Improvement Era, August 1956, 557).

**RE:** Are there any additional thoughts you would like to share about this book?

**Williams:** On one occasion speaking at BYU–Hawaii, he made this most profound observation about those of us who teach at Church schools:

Brigham Young University is unique among universities. It is a private school established for a special spiritual purpose.

One time I heard the president of a great eastern university describe his school in these words, “We can best serve as a neutral territory—a kind of arbiter where people can come to reason.”

This could not be said of this school. This school is not neutral; it is committed; it is one-sided; it is prejudiced, if you will, in favor of good, of decency, of integrity, of virtue, and of reverence; in a word, in favor of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This school is not a playing field where good and evil are invited to joust with one another to see which one may win. Evil will find no invitation to contest here. This is a training ground for a single team.

Here the students are coached and given signals preparatory for the game of life. The scouts and the coaches of the opposing team are not welcome here. (Mine Errand from the Lord, 357–58)

This is so important for us to remember regardless of what college we teach in or what courses we are teaching.

One additional point that comes to mind was President Packer’s feelings about the scriptures. He said: “I love the revelations. I love the scriptures. They are always new. You would think now that after all these years in the leadership of the Church being dependent upon
the scriptures, there would come a time when one would grow weary of them. Oh, no! They are so fresh and so wonderful and so powerful. What a privilege it is to go back to them when challenges arise. Challenges will come to all of us, because that is what life is about” (*Mine Errand from the Lord*, 152).

Then, just recently, he added this powerful confirmation of his love for the Book of Mormon: “I love the Book of Mormon. It is a part of my being. Over the years, as I have grown from a young man to what I call ‘upper middle age,’ I find in the Book of Mormon an ever new and refreshing fountain of information and blessings. If you were to ask me what parts of the Book of Mormon were my favorite or what parts impressed me most, I can answer that very quickly: All of it” (*Mine Errand from the Lord*, 157).

As one who has had his entire professional career in Church education, I can add my own witness to what President Packer has said about the scriptures. I have come to love them and find the answers to life’s questions in them. They have become such an integral part of my life.

**RE:** If you were to summarize President Packer’s desire concerning his teachings, what would you say?

**Williams:** Of course, I would never presume to speak for President Packer, but after reading and studying in depth so much of what he has taught, perhaps this statement is a good summary: “In the course of my efforts to teach His gospel, I have come to know Him, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only Begotten of the Father. I stand in reverence before Him with deep regard for what He taught, and with deep regard for how He taught. It is not untoward for any of us to aspire to teach as He taught. It is not untoward for any of us to aspire to be like Him. He was not just a teacher, He was the master teacher” (*Mine Errand from the Lord*, 337).

From my personal experience, President Packer’s teachings have increased my capacity to discern pure doctrine and my ability to teach and influence others has been enhanced. I would personally affirm that from my witness of the Spirit on so many occasions, I know he has obtained his “errand from the Lord.” **RE**
As the Master Teacher, Christ set the example for those aspiring to teach his gospel. His gift to educate and uplift is evident in the recorded testimonies of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. During the last week of the Savior’s mortal ministry, he was frequently questioned by those who came to him. His responses to those questions are timeless teachings. Christ also taught powerfully by asking poignant questions.1 An analysis of Christ’s use of questions during the last week of his mortal ministry provides a teaching model for those endeavoring to teach more like the Master.

Years ago I read the Gospels with a focus on how Christ used questions in his teachings and how he responded to questions asked of him.2 It was an excellent study experience that changed the way I taught, especially in relationship to asking better questions and listening to and answering questions asked of me. I recognized that asking and answering questions is really an art and a skill that can be strengthened and developed. After analyzing the questions used in the Gospels, I was more able to recognize my own weakness in this area, which enabled me to improve.

Although asking and answering questions in an appropriate and Christlike manner can be a difficult skill to master, it is possible to make a marked improvement. If this skill is developed, it can dramatically improve teaching. President Boyd K. Packer taught the value of questions in teaching: “The simplest way to learn something is to ask a
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question about it. Questions and answers are essential to any teaching method.”

The last week of Christ’s mortal life truly was a hostile teaching environment. Most gospel teachers do not experience such fierce opposition while teaching, although some called to teach may have felt as if all were against them. Perhaps the most valuable finding from this analysis is Christ’s ability to use questions to his advantage while teaching. Good questions can defuse arguments, placate a dissident student, and even capture the interest of the otherwise uninvolved. Christ was the Master Teacher, and his teaching examples are impressive for those who choose to follow him in that regard.

To Jerusalem for the Passover

Many may have wondered if Jesus would come to Jerusalem for his final Passover since the Jewish leaders were seeking his death. The Gospel of John contains a question asked of Jesus just before his going to Jerusalem. The question comes from his disciple, Judas Iscariot, after he judges Mary Magdalene’s adoration of Christ as unbridled and unnecessary devotion. “Then took Mary a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment. Then saith one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, which should betray him, Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor?” (John 12:3–5). Jesus chooses to respond to Judas’s question by teaching his disciples and preparing them for the significant events to come, saying, “Let her alone: against the day of my burying hath she kept this. For the poor always ye have with you; but me ye have not always” (John 12:7–8).

Mary Magdalene’s act of worship and reverence for the Savior by anointing him with such an abundance of costly spikenard gave Jesus the opportunity to respond to a question which proved to be hypocritical by the week’s end. Answers to common Christian questions of what to do with abundant monetary means, appropriate allocation of financial support for the poor, and the recognition of special opportunities or events all may be interpreted from this interaction. Jesus had clearly established during his ministry the need to care for the poor, and this teaching moment was not a contradiction but a clarification for those who had assumed that the priority was always to care for the poor. Christ’s brief yet powerful response released Mary Magdalene from the judgments of Judas and the others—but, more importantly, reminded them of his pending death. Judas’s lack of recognition of the impor-
tant events to come was manifest in his zeal to correct the behavior of another while conspiring in his heart to betray the Lord.

Teachers and students would do well to learn from this teaching moment of Christ’s. Knowing what he knew, Christ could have chosen this opportunity to condemn Judas for what he was preparing to do. Instead, Christ chose to teach those who had ears to hear. This must have been a significant teaching moment for the rest of his disciples, who carried the responsibility of bearing the burden of the kingdom following Jesus’s death. Christ’s informative response also protected Mary Magdalene. Christlike teachers instruct those who will hear and protect those like Mary Magdalene who are under their charge. It is important for a teacher to provide a safe environment for those who choose to respond to questions as well as those asking the questions. It is the responsibility of gospel teachers to honor the agency of others and teach truth, thereby enabling them to choose right without compulsion.4

Triumphal Entry

The last week of Christ’s mortal ministry began with his triumphal entry into the Holy City of Jerusalem during Passover. After a brief three-year ministry, opposition toward Christ culminated during the last week of the Savior’s mortal life, intensifying his teaching opportunities. From the Gospel of John we read, “On the next day much people that were come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, took branches of palm trees, and went forth to meet him, and cried, Hosanna: Blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord” (John 12:12–13). Matthew’s record contains a question about the significance of this prophesied event: “And when he was come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, Who is this? And the multitude said, This is Jesus the prophet of Nazareth of Galilee” (Matthew 21:10–11).

The Pharisees, who had already counseled together on how to destroy Christ (see Matthew 12:14), perceived their lack of power against the excitement of the people as he entered the city. The Gospel of John contains their questioning concern marked by their realization of his popularity with the common people. “The Pharisees therefore said among themselves, Perceive ye how ye prevail nothing? behold, the world is gone after him” (John 12:19). Although this question is not answered by Christ, it helps to explain the controversy which surrounded his Triumphal Entry, which inspired so many questions and
provided the unprecedented public forum for his teachings amid such intense opposition.

Money Changers

The polarizing effect of Christ’s miracles and seemingly radical ideas set the stage for a spiritual standoff at the sacred temple in Jerusalem. The Gospel of Matthew describes the questions posed to Christ and his responses during the heated exchange between the Lord of the temple and those who had made it their place of business:

And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the money-changers, and the seats of them that sold doves,

And said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.

And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple; and he healed them.

And when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying in the temple, and saying, Hosanna to the Son of David; they were sore displeased,

And said unto him, Hearest thou what these say? And Jesus saith unto them, Yea; have ye never read, Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise? (Matthew 21:12–16)

In their zeal to find fault with Christ, the chief priests and scribes cried foul at the people’s praise of Jesus. Those unrighteous rulers wanted Christ to acknowledge the people’s foolish blasphemy, yet instead, Christ quoted scripture regarding the prophetic potential of children. In this instance we see a common response of Christ to an unrighteous question. Christ chooses to respond to their prideful question with a question of his own. His question addressed the scribes’ supposed knowledge of the scriptures. Christ again protects the innocent who openly acknowledged him and uses the scriptures to counter the false accusations of the scribes against those who had cried hosanna to his name.

Mark’s account of the cleansing of the temple is slightly different in that it contains a question proposed by Jesus. It is a rhetorical question directed toward those that were buying and selling in the temple: “Is it not written, My house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer? but ye have made it a den of thieves. And the scribes and chief priests heard it, and sought how they might destroy him: for they feared him, because all the people was astonished at his doctrine” (Mark 11:17–18). Christ’s direct manner of focusing on the spiritual instead of the
temporal had an astonishing effect on the people and acted as a fan on the flame of opposition that burned against him. While Luke 19 adds a third witness to the cleansing of the temple, it does not contain a question. The Gospel of John is silent on this event.

The famous cleansing of the temple is occasionally portrayed by teachers and speakers to show the human side of Christ and that he too may have been angry sometimes, in an attempt to justify a mortal in righteous indignation. However, focusing on the question that Christ asked draws attention to another possibility for his intent. It is highly probable that the cleansing of the temple was a premeditated act and not an angry outburst by Jesus. He clearly uses the event to teach those present of the sacred nature of the temple and the impropriety of allowing the things of the world to take center stage there. His teachings astonish the people and anger the leaders who feel the laity is being drawn to these new doctrines.

As an exemplary teacher, Christ here demonstrates the powerful impact of using an appropriate object lesson. His object not only temporarily distracted or entertained those he was attempting to teach but also prepared them to be taught. The setting, coupled with the right question, provided the teaching moment that had such a tremendous effect on those present at the temple. Gospel teachers aspiring to impact the hearts and minds of their students would do well to follow Christ’s example of how to use available objects and situations when teaching.

**Priests Challenge Christ’s Authority**

After cleansing the temple of money changers, Christ taught daily therein. In his Father’s house, Christ was approached by those with supposed authority, who questioned by what authority he taught and performed miracles. The synoptic Gospels are nearly identical in their accounts of these events. Christ again chooses to answer accusations posed as questions with questions of his own. From the Gospels we read:

It came to pass, that on one of those days, as he taught the people in the temple, and preached the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes came upon him with the elders,

And spake unto him, saying, Tell us, by what authority doest thou these things? or who is he that gave thee this authority?

And he answered and said unto them, I will also ask you one thing; and answer me:

The baptism of John, was it from heaven, or of men?
And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say, Why then believed ye him not?
But and if we say, Of men; all the people will stone us: for they be persuaded that John was a prophet.
And they answered, that they could not tell whence it was.
And Jesus said unto them, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things. (Luke 20:1–8; see also Matthew 21:23–27; Mark 11:27–33)

Christ exemplified responding to insincere questioning with disarming questions of his own. This design gives insight to teachers on how to deal with problematic questions in public settings. The inability of the frustrated religious leaders to counter the questions and responses of the relatively youthful Jesus was evidence of their focus on the things of this world and their unwillingness to be taught by the Son of God. At some point most teachers of the gospel of Jesus Christ will have students who publicly ask leading or inappropriate questions. Following Christ’s example of asking good questions can diffuse the potentially volatile situation, while teaching volumes to those present with listening ears.

Christ’s public countering of the religious authorities fueled their animosity toward him. In spite of their growing hatred, he continued to teach, offering salvation for all who would heed his words. Christ’s peaceful means of disarming his enemies through his powerful questions and masterful responses teach us today on how to deal with opposition to our teaching the gospel of salvation. Certain people wanted to hear but not hearken to Christ’s teachings in the temple during the last week of his life. It is not entirely different than today when we celebrate the Easter season without acknowledging the sacred import of that holiday nor the events and teachings it is built upon.

Christ taught as one who not only seemed to have authority but truly did. Yet he did not waste effort trying to convince those that were decidedly against him and his Father. Christ’s refusal to cast pearls towards those that would not believe followed the pattern of his own teachings from the Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew 7:6). He turned his attention and his teachings to those who hungered and thirsted after righteousness. Christ focused on his responsibilities and the tasks ahead and allowed those that sought to destroy him to be about their business of evil. There is a time to reason with, and even resist, those with evil designs and intentions. But teaching by the Spirit also permits turning the other cheek and not reviling against those with the intent to harm. Some are not ready to hear or embrace truth, and it
has a stumbling effect rather than converting power. This may be one reason Jesus taught in parables. With parables Christ was able to both reveal and conceal truths depending on the listener. Christ often used questions to set the stage for these parables.

Questions and Parables

After refuting those questioning his authority, Jesus poses a question in preparation to teach a parable: “A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to day in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not. Whether of them twain did the will of his father?” (Matthew 21:28–31). Jesus implies in the first question that another question is coming, which it indeed does, with a condemning connotation.

On this occasion those questioned by Jesus were not left speechless. Instead, they chose to boldly give the correct answer, selecting the repentant son who ultimately complied—though he was unwilling at first. Their correct response proved self-condemning, and so Jesus compared them to the second son who said he would, but did not. “They [chief priests and those with them] say unto him [Jesus], The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him” (Matthew 21:31–32).

Christ’s direct comparison of the first son to the publicans and the harlots—who were despised and considered unclean by the chief priests—made these accusations especially poignant, thus further igniting their hatred for Jesus and the truths he taught. Christ’s open declaration that known sinners would go to heaven before the leaders of the Jews challenged their abuse of authority. This teaching corresponds well with what we learn in the Doctrine and Covenants: “For of him unto whom much is given much is required; and he who sins against the greater light shall receive the greater condemnation” (D&C 82:3). Although many that questioned Jesus truly had been given much, they seemed more concerned with rights and positions than with their responsibility to act. The British political philosopher Edmund Burke commented, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”
In the parable of two sons, Christ taught that sins of omission can also be condemning. President Spencer W. Kimball said, “Declining to serve when called may constitute a sin of omission as well as one of commission. Certainly it is a sin of omission to accept responsibility, to covenant with the Lord, and then fail to do the work as well as possible. . . . One breaks the priesthood covenant by transgressing commandments—but also by leaving undone his duties. Accordingly, to break this covenant one needs only to do nothing.” The accusations that Christ leveled at those in authority have special significance for any who have duties or responsibilities in the kingdom of God. Leaders and gospel teachers are entrusted to tread carefully on the sacred minds of those they teach. They should not take lightly their responsibility to strengthen faith, and they should not sow seeds of doubt. President Gordon B. Hinckley taught, “Effective teaching is the very essence of leadership in the Church. Eternal life . . . will come only as men and women are taught with such effectiveness that they change and discipline their lives.”

In the parable of the wicked husbandmen, Christ continued his condemnation of those who had questioned his authority while abusing their own authority. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all address the parable of the wicked husbandmen with some variation. In Matthew this parable immediately follows the parable of the two sons. The parable of the wicked husbandmen does not begin with a question but ends with one. Christ again uses his question to point out the neglect of those who had been entrusted with the care of God’s vineyard:

Hear another parable: There was a certain householder, which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country:

And when the time of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the husbandmen, that they might receive the fruits of it.

And the husbandmen took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another.

Again, he sent other servants more than the first: and they did unto them likewise.

But last of all he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son.

But when the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance.

And they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard, and slew him.
When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen? (Matthew 21:33–40; see also Mark 12:1–9)

Again those which answer the question of the parable correctly do so to their own condemnation: “He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons” (Matthew 21:41). President John Taylor wrote, “If you do not magnify your callings, God will hold you responsible for those whom you might have saved had you done your duty.”

The Savior again answers his own question with another piercing question of personal accountability, “Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes?” (Matthew 21:42). Christ’s declaration in this parable is a warning to nations who have the truth and squander it: “Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder” (Matthew 21:43–44). This time the accusations were apparent, and the chief priests recognized that the parable condemned them: “And when the chief priests and Pharisees had heard his parables, they perceived that he spake of them. But when they sought to lay hands on him, they feared the multitude, because they took him for a prophet” (Matthew 21:45–46; see also Mark 12:10–12).

The insights gained from the Gospel of Luke help us understand why the chief priests took Christ’s accusations so seriously. Luke’s account portrays a slightly different element, with the lord of the vineyard saying that he would send his beloved son. “Then said the lord of the vineyard, What shall I do? I will send my beloved son: it may be they will reverence him when they see him” (Luke 20:13). The chief priests had acknowledged the grievous nature of the behavior of the wicked husbandmen; thus for Christ to indicate that they were guilty of this behavior was inexcusable by the interpretation of their laws. They also recognized that Christ was telling them that he was the son in the parable and that their secret desire was to destroy the Son of God (see Luke 20:14–20).

While studying the Savior’s use of questions in parables, the reader may be wondering if Jesus purposefully provoked the Jewish leaders to bring about his own death. Robert J. Matthews wrote, “The
withholding of information [in parables] may also have been done for the protection of the disciples, so as to shield them from the envy of the Jewish leaders and from the consequent persecution that plainer speech might have provoked at that stage of the ministry. Had Jesus spoken plainer the wicked might have figured out what strong doctrine he was teaching and sought to kill him earlier than they did.”

It is entirely possible that Christ, knowing the end result of this tumultuous week, set about to teach the truth with brazenness, inviting all who would listen to come and knowing full well what would happen.

Christ’s aggressive use of condemning questions elicited additional concentrated attacks and efforts to turn the hearts of the masses against him. Those with religious position were wise enough to recognize that they needed to turn the voice of the people against this Jesus of Nazareth, who was rising daily in popularity. Thus, they attempted to trap Christ with the law. Christ knew the thoughts and intents of their hearts, yet he consented to their invitation to eat bread with the Pharisees that he might teach them, even if it was against their will.

Christ shows how to maintain control of a teaching situation through the use of good questions. The Gospel of Luke describes the setting for two of these powerful questions: “it came to pass, as he went into the house of one of the chief Pharisees to eat bread on the sabbath day, that they watched him. And, behold, there was a certain man before him which had the dropsy. And Jesus answering spake unto the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath day? And they held their peace. And he took him, and healed him, and let him go; and answered them, saying, Which of you shall have an ass or an ox fallen into a pit, and will not straightway pull him out on the sabbath day?” (Luke 14:1–5).

The combination of this miraculous healing on the Sabbath and Christ’s subsequent questions attracts the Jewish leaders’ angered attention. Elder Bruce R. McConkie said this was apparently a deliberate attempt to keep Christ’s name in the headlines. This was clearly not an occasion of self-aggrandizement but an attempt to increase opportunities to teach the truths of salvation and invite all to come unto his Father by believing that he was indeed the Son of God. In Luke’s record, the Sabbath healing and the questions Christ posed set the stage for his masterful teaching in the parable of the wedding guests (see Luke 14:7–14). In this parable, Christ combines familiar customs of his day with esteemed wisdom from the past to teach a moral principle so powerfully that it has since become a Christian proverb.
While Elder McConkie does not specifically connect the parable of the wedding guests to the parable of the wedding of a king’s son (Matthew 22:1–14), others do. In Matthew’s account there is a thought-provoking question embedded in the parable of the wedding of a king’s son, “And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment?” (Matthew 22:12). This may appear as a contradictory question to some, or overtly harsh to others, for the king throws the man out saying, “Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen” (vv. 13–14). In the parable the angry king turns his back on those invited guests that spurned his son’s wedding, and he has his servants fill the wedding with guests gathered from all places. This they do, only to turn and cast one man out from among them because he is not wearing an appropriate wedding garment. This is an effective question and teaching moment for those present with Jesus, for they understood the wedding imagery and were also familiar with Christ’s reference to Zephaniah’s Old Testament prophecies of the Second Coming. Not all invited to come unto Christ will choose to do so, and those that come unprepared will be turned away. Jesus teaches difficult doctrine in this parable that those with the “all accepting” or “saved by claiming only” belief may struggle to accept.

For the honestly seeking teacher or student, Christ used parables to teach what kind of questions the humbly righteous might ask. In the parable of the sheep and goats, Jesus taught that at his Second Coming he will separate out the righteous and the wicked from all nations (see Matthew 25:31–46). In the midst of the parable, Christ teaches that the righteous will respond to their being chosen with a series of sincere questions: “Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?” (Matthew 25:37–39). Having had their faith strengthened by being gathered with the righteous, they ask how they earned such a reward. In answer to the honest of heart, Christ teaches in the parable a now famous Christian verse, “And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40). This parable and the embedded questions have taught millions of Christians that the way of salvation is treating the needy the way we would treat Christ.
Response to Entrapment

Three of the Gospels similarly address the controversial question posed to Christ by the Pharisees and the Herodians. The politically oppressed Jews anguished over their lack of freedom and occupation by the Romans. Seeking to destroy Christ, the Pharisees attempted to trap Christ on the issue of Roman taxation (see Matthew 22:15–22; Mark 12:13–17; Luke 20:20–26). Those with ill intent questioned, “Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?” (Matthew 22:17). Christ questioned their intent with the skillful use of an object lesson. His refute of their dichotomous question was so masterful that it disarmed his would-be assailants, and they left him, marveling at his wisdom and their inability to trap him. Their use of flattery followed by a trick question was no match for the honesty and truth of the Master Teacher. It is a comforting thought to those seeking righteousness and a frightful thought for those who do harm that Christ knows the thoughts and intents of all hearts. For one teaching by the Spirit, it is possible to receive inspiration and greater understanding of the questions and intentions of those being taught.

The Sadducees sought to condemn Christ with the law of Moses by posing a question concerning marriage that they believed would reveal that his teachings were contradictory to their laws. The Gospels read:

Then come unto him the Sadducees, which say there is no resurrection; and they asked him, saying,

Master, Moses wrote unto us, If a man’s brother die, and leave his wife behind him, and leave no children, that his brother should take his wife, and raise up seed unto his brother.

Now there were seven brethren: and the first took a wife, and dying left no seed.

And the second took her, and died, neither left he any seed: and the third likewise.

And the seven had her, and left no seed: last of all the woman died also.

In the resurrection therefore, when they shall rise, whose wife shall she be of them? for the seven had her to wife.

And Jesus answering said unto them, Do ye not therefore err, because ye know not the scriptures, neither the power of God?

For when they shall rise from the dead, they neither marry, nor are given in marriage; but are as the angels which are in heaven.

And as touching the dead, that they rise: have ye not read in the book of Moses, how in the bush God spake unto him, saying,

I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?
He is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living: ye therefore do greatly err. (Mark 12:18–27; see also Luke 20:27–36; Matthew 22:23–33)

Christ’s response to the Sadducees’ question does not contain a question, but an in-depth doctrinal look at the Resurrection, which the Sadducees did not believe in. Their trap was foiled, and their exposure put them at odds with those who did believe in the Resurrection. They too left Jesus, not daring to ask any more questions (see Luke 20:39–40).

The Sadducees’ attempt to deceive Jesus exposed their lack of knowledge of the scriptures and their disbelief in doctrine that was the core of their question. Elder McConkie explained, “[Jesus] is not denying but limiting the prevailing concept that there will be marrying and giving in marriage in heaven. He is saying that as far as ‘they’ (the Sadducees) are concerned, that as far as ‘they’ (‘the children of the world’) are concerned, the family unit does not and will not continue in the resurrection. . . . There is marrying and giving of marriage in heaven only for those who live the fulness of gospel law.” If the Sadducees’ question was of sincere interest, backed by faith, Christ surely could have taught the fullness of his gospel in this situation; but their faithless ill intent left the issue unaddressed. Some doctrinal critics of the Latter-day Saints erroneously use this same passage to malign Latter-day Saint belief in eternal marriage. Like the Sadducees, they err by not understanding the scriptures and the doctrine. From a teaching perspective, Christ’s effective confounding of the leaders provided more time for those who were desirous to ask sincere questions and learn from the truths that he taught. To effectively teach or share the gospel of Jesus Christ, one must be conscious of the time one has.

Hearing of Christ silencing the Sadducees, the Pharisees again gather and enlist a confident lawyer to ask a question. “Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, Master, which is the great commandment in the law?” (Matthew 22:35–36). Christ’s response to the question is clear and direct and establishes a bulwark of Christian practice: “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. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (vv. 37–40; see also Mark 12:28–31). This is a telling response to this proposed expert of the law, as he was clearly attempting to entrap Christ, his present neighbor.
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The Gospel of Luke records a slight difference in the exchange of questions that leads to the piercing parable of the good Samaritan: “And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? He [Christ] said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou? And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself. And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live. But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour?” (Luke 10:25–29). The lawyer attempts to justify mistreatment of one with whom he is not acquainted.

And Jesus answering said, A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.

And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side.

But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him,

And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee.

Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves?

And he said, He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise. (Luke 10:30–37)

To patiently teach is to practice the principles taught in this story. “Good Samaritanism is contagious. Providing in the Lord’s way humbles the rich, exalts the poor, and sanctifies both. . . . Good Samaritanism starts in the home as parents teach children by example and precept. . . . May we be generous with our time and liberal in our contributions for the care of those who suffer. May we commit to the principles of Good Samaritanism and be ever mindful of the need to ‘go, and do thou likewise.’”

For many teachers it is difficult to teach the especially needy. Students who dominate classtime or the teacher’s attention can be difficult to handle, but the good Samaritan story reminds us all of our obligation to help those in need of our assistance. President Thomas
S. Monson taught, “We have a responsibility to prove to our Heavenly Father, by the things we do, that we love him. . . . Though we may not necessarily forfeit our lives in service to our God, we can certainly demonstrate our love for him by how well we serve him. . . . Each of us has opportunities for Church assignments. This opportunity of serving in the Church enables us to demonstrate a love of God and a love of our neighbor. . . . There is no finer way to demonstrate love of God than by serving him in the positions to which we may be called.”\(^2\) We must not only love our neighbor, but be willing to teach them the truths of the gospel as well.

Conclusion

Gratefully, those in our day called to teach their neighbors the gospel of Jesus Christ have resources available to assist them in their difficult task of preparation. The Church publication *Teaching, No Greater Call* offers helpful suggestions on effectively teaching with questions: “Church-produced lesson manuals suggest many questions that you can use in lessons. Read them carefully to decide which will be most helpful for those you teach. You may also prepare your own questions. As you consider questions to use in a lesson, ask yourself, ‘Will they help those I teach understand the main ideas of the lesson? Will these questions help those I teach apply the gospel principles being taught?’”\(^2\) Prayerfully preparing lessons, including the preparation of questions and preparing for potential questions from students, facilitates teaching more like Christ. As noted in the beginning of this article, although asking and answering questions in an appropriate and Christlike manner can be a difficult skill to master, it is possible to make a marked improvement no matter how skilled a teacher currently is. As President Packer taught, “The simplest way to learn something is to ask a question about it. Questions and answers are essential to any teaching method.”\(^2\) Teaching like the Master must include some preparation and consideration of how to ask and answer questions in a Christlike manner.

Notes

2. While much has been said and written pertaining to the last week of the Savior’s life, I am aware of only one paper which addressed the questions Jesus asked. See Brian L. Smith, “The Questions Jesus Asked,” in *The Eighth Annual


5. See Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, April 1994, 94. President Hinckley said, “Today [Easter morning] is observed as the anniversary of the greatest miracle [the Resurrection] in human history.”


9. The parable of the two sons is only found in Matthew.


18. See Ogden, *Verse by Verse*, 484–86.


Jesus testified that “among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist” (Luke 7:28; see also Matthew 11:11). In fact, the Savior called John “more than a prophet” (Matthew 11:9). What was the source of John’s greatness? It was not an upbringing and education in the Jerusalem schools. It was not the number of his baptisms or disciples. It was not the performance of miracles. Yet Jesus saw greatness in ways the world could not detect. Miraculous events accompanied John’s premortal, mortal, and post-mortal life, giving credence to the Savior’s supreme tribute.

Miraculous Premortality

Ancient prophets such as Isaiah, Lehi, Nephi, and Malachi foretold John’s mission, revealing that he would be a messenger for the Lord who would cry from the wilderness to prepare the way before the coming of Jesus, and who would baptize Him (see Isaiah 40:3; Malachi 3:1; 1 Nephi 10:7–8; 11:27; 2 Nephi 31:4). John was not the only faithful member of the house of Israel in his day; however, he was the singular individual with the prophesied responsibility to “make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isaiah 40:3), a metaphor alluding to “a runner who immediately precedes the horse or chariot of high officials in order to clear the way or make a proclamation.” Although an earthly king might summon fifty men to run before his chariots and horsemen preparing the way for the royal entourage (see 1 Kings
1:5), only one man, John, was called an Elias\(^2\) and sent to prepare the way for the King of mankind. Our current Bibles lack clarity concerning Elias and do not use the term to mean forerunner. Joseph Smith, however, restored the ancient concept by clarifying that the term Elias has existed “from the first ages of the world.”\(^3\) He stated further, “The Spirit of Elias is to prepare the way for a greater revelation of God. . . . When God sends a man into the world to prepare for a greater work, holding the keys of the power of Elias, it was called the doctrine of Elias, even from the early ages of the world.”\(^4\) This usage of Elias predates the prophet Elijah.

Because John had to come forth at a particular time and to a particular lineage to fulfill his mission, not only his parents but also his whole genealogy were affected by his foreordained responsibility. John’s parents, Zacharias and Elisabeth, were of the tribe of Levi and were also descendants of the family of Aaron (see Luke 1:5). Although Zacharias described himself as “an old man” and Elisabeth as “well stricken in years” (Luke 1:18), they had not ceased praying for a child despite their age and Elisabeth’s apparent barrenness (see Luke 1:7, 13).

Zacharias, while fulfilling his Aaronic Priesthood responsibilities in caring for the altar of incense at the temple, was visited by an angel heralding the glad tidings of a future son (see Luke 1:8–13). God sent Gabriel\(^5\) to announce the coming of an extraordinary son whose name, holy status, and title were assigned by heaven itself (see Luke 1:13–17; D&C 27:7). Rather than receiving a family name, his name was revealed as John (see Luke 1:13, 59–63), meaning “Jehovah is gracious,”\(^6\) pointing to his miraculous birth to aged parents and the joy and rejoicing he would bring them and many others (see Luke 1:14). Gabriel instructed Zacharias that John “shall drink neither wine nor strong drink” (Luke 1:15), one aspect of a Nazarite’s vow. A Nazarite was separated from the masses and consecrated for service to the Lord and forbidden to eat grapes of any kind, foods made from vines, or the kernels from husks. Additionally, a Nazarite could not cut his hair or become unclean by associating with dead bodies—even close family members (see Numbers 6:3–7). The instructions of Gabriel implied that John may have been consecrated to God with a Nazarite’s vow from his birth. Because John would follow those vows faithfully Zacharias was promised that his son “shall be great in the sight of the Lord” (Luke 1:15) and blessed with an outpouring of the Holy Ghost, the “spirit and power of Elias,” enabling him to “turn” many and prepare them for Jesus’s mission (Luke 1:17). This clearly alludes to the prophecy in Malachi 4:5–6. Zacharias and Elisabeth provided the essential
inheritance for their soon-to-be-born son: the correct lineage and a righteous family (see Luke 1:6), while John brought a faithful and willing spirit. The coming of an angel of God; the pregnancy of a barren, older woman; and the promise of a special son all attest to God’s hand in the lives of Zacharias, Elisabeth, and John.

Even before birth, John and Jesus must have been kindred spirits. When Mary visited her cousin Elisabeth, John “leaped in her womb” for joy at the sound of Mary’s voice (Luke 1:41), fulfilling Gabriel’s prophecy—that he would be “filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother’s womb” (Luke 1:15). John’s Spirit-filled response engendered the promptings of the Holy Ghost in Elisabeth. She blessed Mary, her unborn child, and proclaimed humbly that her young cousin was to be “the mother of my Lord” (Luke 1:43). This was a miraculous outpouring of the Spirit between unborn cousins, an aged woman, and a young virgin.

Miraculous Mortality

Soon after John’s birth, miraculous events surrounded the newborn. Zacharias’s voice was dramatically restored, allowing him to pronounce the Benedictus, a prophetic blessing upon his son. Filled with the Holy Ghost, Zacharias prophesied the intertwining of his son’s and Jesus’s missions (see Luke 1:67–79). John would be “the prophet of the Highest” (Luke 1:76) called to go before him to prepare the way by teaching salvation through baptism for the remission of sins (see Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 1:76). At this time, John also was “ordained” by an angel, presumably Gabriel, to his mission “to overthrow the kingdom of the Jews, and to make straight the way of the Lord before the face of his people, to prepare them for the coming of the Lord, in whose hand is given all power” (D&C 84:28). This was not, however, an ordination to the priesthood because the Levitical Priesthood came as a birthright with responsibilities beginning at the age of twenty-five or thirty (see Numbers 4:3; 8:23–26). Elder Bruce R. McConkie noted that John yet needed baptism and other preparations. President Joseph Fielding Smith declared that the ordination came from an angel because “John received certain keys of authority which his father Zacharias did not possess.” No one else in Judea at that time held these keys or had recorded an outpouring of blessings under such miraculous circumstances.

Few details are recorded of John’s upbringing. Herod the Great’s death decree possibly could have threatened his life as it had the baby Jesus (see Matthew 2:16). Gabriel’s instructions to Zacharias that John
“shall drink neither wine nor strong drink” (Luke 1:15); his description of John’s clothing and food, a “RAment of camel’s hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey” (Matthew 3:4); and that he “grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel” (Luke 1:80) indicate that John was separated from others his age, perhaps keeping the vows of a Nazarite, and living a simple life in the desert so that his upbringing would be at the hand of God and he could be protected from a designing king (see Luke 1:80).10

John’s preaching demonstrates that although he was raised in the wilderness away from the teachings of the rabbis, he had been well schooled by his parents and God in fundamental doctrines. For example, John taught repentance from sin, the proximity of the kingdom of God, and the importance of baptism and confession of sin (see Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 3:27–32); Jesus’s premortal existence and creation responsibilities, divine sonship, mission to baptize with fire, mission to give immortality and eternal life to his believers (see Joseph Smith Translation, John 1:1–18),11 and mission to take away sin, bring salvation to heathen nations, gather the house of Israel, prepare for preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, bring to pass the resurrection from the dead, return to his Father and resume his place at God’s right hand, and administer a righteous judgment (see Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 3:5–9).12 Having been born into the sterile spiritual environment of Judea amidst apostate Sadducees, Pharisees, and scribes, John’s grasp of true doctrine and his understanding of his own divinely designated role testifies of a miraculous upbringing by faithful parents and divine tutors.

Although John’s ministry was not characterized by the same type of miraculous demonstrations of priesthood power as Jesus’s ministry, he was nevertheless a participant in and a witness to the great signs and events surrounding Jesus’s baptism. The brief accounts about John in each of the Gospels act as literary forerunners to the ministry of Jesus.13 Matthew, Mark, and Luke emphasize John’s role as a preparer before baptizing Jesus. The Gospel of John complements the synoptic Gospels, focusing on John the Baptist’s ministry after baptizing Jesus.

Similar to Jesus, John probably began his ministry at age thirty (see Luke 3:23), announcing, “I am he who was spoken of by the prophet Esaias [Isaiah] (Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 3:3).”14 Many from Jerusalem and surrounding areas came to hear him preach and to be baptized in the Jordan River at Bethabara (see 1 Nephi 10:9; Matthew 3:5–6; Mark 1:4–5; Luke 3:3). The Prophet Joseph Smith declared that
“the kingdom of God for a season seemed to rest with John alone”\(^{15}\) with this reasoning: John was “a legal administrator, . . . the laws and oracles of God were there; therefore the kingdom of God was there.”\(^{16}\) Further, the Prophet Joseph explained, “It is evident the kingdom of God was on the earth, and John prepared subjects for the kingdom by preaching the Gospel to them and baptizing them.”\(^{17}\) As the last legal administrator and prophet of the old dispensation and the first legal administrator and prophet of the new dispensation,\(^ {18}\) Jesus “submitted to that authority Himself.”\(^ {19}\) Because John was both the last of the prophets under the law of Moses (see D&C 84:27) and the first of the prophets in the new dispensation, he held the priesthood keys of authority to which the mortal Jesus presented himself for baptism.

Despite his protestations that he needed to be baptized of Jesus, John was entrusted with the honor and privilege of baptizing Jesus, hearing the voice of God speaking from the heavens identifying Jesus as his Beloved Son, and seeing the Holy Ghost descending “like a dove” as witnesses to the ordinance (John 1:32; see also Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 3:43–46). Joseph Smith explained that “the sign of the dove was instituted before the creation of the world, a witness for the Holy Ghost . . . and given to John to signify the truth of the deed, as the dove is an emblem or token of truth and innocence.”\(^ {20}\) It does not appear that John knew Jesus personally prior to this time, although at age twelve both would likely have been in Jerusalem and at the temple on holy days such as Passover—one grew up in the wilderness, and the other was taken to Egypt for a few years and then raised in Nazareth. God gave John a prearranged sign so that he could identify Jesus as the Messiah (see John 1:31–33; Joseph Smith Translation, John 1:31–32).\(^ {21}\)

Because John was so successful in the wilderness preaching and baptizing, the Pharisees in Jerusalem sent a delegation of priests and Levites to examine him. In response to their question, “Who art thou?” John confessed he was Elias but said, “I am not the Christ,” explaining that he was not “that Elias who was to restore all things” (Joseph Smith Translation, John 1:20–22; see also Acts 13:25). Elder McConkie pointed out that “John’s questioners were familiar with some ancient Messianic prophecy unknown to us, which foretold the coming of Elias to perform a mighty work of restoration.”\(^ {22}\)

When they continued to question him, John declared, “There standeth one among you, whom ye know not,” speaking of Jesus (John 1:26). He then explained, “He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me” (John 1:27). When Jesus returned to Bethabara
after his baptism and forty days of communing with God and the Holy Spirit in the wilderness, John testified to those with him, undoubtedly gesturing toward Jesus, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). John knew this was the Messiah because “when he was baptized of me, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him” (Joseph Smith Translation, John 1:31). John, as a priest in the Aaronic order—one who by his qualifications and performance of rituals prefigured and typified the Messiah—pointed to Jesus as the fulfillment of the law of Moses and as one for whom the designated sign had been given. John bore prophetic witness that Jesus is the unblemished Lamb whose blood will atone for mankind.

Although John was six months older than Jesus, he told his disciples that Jesus is “preferred before me: for he was before me,” emphasizing Jesus’s premortal Godhood (John 1:30). John testified that “he that cometh after me is mightier than I,” (Matthew 3:11) recognizing that “He held the keys of the Melchizedek Priesthood and kingdom of God, and had before revealed the priesthood of Moses.”

John’s confession that he was unworthy to carry or loosen Jesus’s sandals (see Matthew 3:11; John 1:27; Acts 13:25) was the testimony of a humble man kneeling before the Savior and proclaiming the Master. Further accentuating Jesus’s elevated status, John pointed out the preparatory nature of his mission to baptize with water in contrast to Jesus’s mission to baptize not only with water but also fire (see Matthew 3:11; Joseph Smith Translation, Mark 1:6; John 1:33). John understood Jesus’s mission then—what Jesus’s close Apostles would not know until after his death. John humbly and loyally identified himself not as the Christ but as a witness to him, not as the bridegroom but as a friend of the bridegroom. As John’s mission drew to a close, he willingly stepped aside with these words, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). Although a lesser man might have been enamored with ancient prophecies, his own miraculous birth, or having the honor of baptizing the Savior of the world, John never transcended the bounds of his priesthood, demonstrating that he was a true Elias.

John was the legal administrator of the kingdom of heaven until Jesus was baptized. At that point Jesus became “the legal administrator, and ordained his Apostles.”

John also testified of Jesus Christ to two of his disciples, pointing him out and again calling him the “Lamb of God” (John 1:36). Andrew, one of these, in turn found his brother Peter, who also was seeking the Messiah (see John 1:41–42). After the death of Judas
and the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus, the Apostles gathered to select a twelfth member. The criteria set forth for the new Apostle was that he “companied with us . . . from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he [Jesus] was taken up from us” (Acts 1:21–23). Clearly, John, Andrew, Peter, Philip, and Nathanael also fit this criteria and perhaps more if not all the apostles (see John 1:40–48).

John was taken to a prison called Machaerus on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea for his bold assertion of righteous principles to Herod Antipas and probably also the Pharisees. Although Mark and Matthew’s accounts indicate he was “cast into prison” (Matthew 4:12; see also Mark 6:17–19; Luke 3:19–20) because he denounced Herod Antipas’s marriage to Herodias, his niece and formerly his brother Philip’s wife, Josephus wrote that Herod Antipas feared that John’s popularity and influence with the people might foment rebellion. The Pharisees were as unhappy with John’s popularity as Herod Antipas was because it diminished their power and authority over the people also. They openly opposed him and denied the legitimacy of his authority to baptize (see Matthew 21:23–27; Luke 7:30, 33). An examination of the Greek word paradidomi, translated in the King James Version in this instance as “cast into” (prison) is more often translated elsewhere as “deliver up” or “betray,” providing support for political maneuvering in John’s arrest. Taken together, the information suggests a conspiracy between Herod Antipas’s supporters and the Pharisees. Jesus knew of John’s imprisonment and sent angels to comfort him, a miraculous attestation of Jesus’s great compassion and love for his forerunner (see Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 4:11).

John bore testimony of the Messiah, that Jesus was the Christ, and that his disciples should leave him and follow Jesus. While John was imprisoned, Jesus began to be well known—having yet more disciples than John (see Joseph Smith Translation, John 4:1). Some even said, “A great prophet is risen up among us,” and his fame extended to all of Judea and the surrounding area (Luke 7:16). Two of John’s disciples came to visit him at Machaerus, and he sent them to Jesus with a two-part question, “Art thou he of whom it is written in the prophets that should come, or do we look for another?” It appears that John had difficulty persuading at least these disciples to leave him and follow Jesus. John had already borne testimony of Jesus as the Lamb of God and told his disciples that his own mission must decrease while Jesus’s mission must increase. It was not John’s testimony that was in question but the testimony of these two disciples. After observing Jesus’s preaching
and miraculous healings, they returned to report to John, undoubtedly bearing their own new witness (Matthew 11:4–5).

John’s life would soon end, and Jesus honored him by testifying of this faithful disciple and calling him “blessed” to the multitudes now following him. Jesus asked his listeners, “What went ye out for to see?” (Matthew 11:8). He contrasted John’s wilderness abode, his unwavering prophetic testimony, and his simple apparel with those who wore soft and beautiful clothing, lived in ease, and associated with nobles in the king’s court. Jesus announced that John was more than a prophet—he was the first fulfillment of Isaiah’s and Malachi’s prophecies about an Elias or preparer, and then Jesus declared, “Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater [one] than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Matthew 11:11; see also Luke 7:28). Jesus declared that John “received not his testimony of man, but of God” (Joseph Smith Translation, John 5:35) and described him as “a burning and a shining light,” one who was a brilliant and true witness of him for the duration of his short earthly ministry (John 5:35). Although wicked men—Herod the Great and his son Antipas—attempted to thwart both Jesus and John from their foreordained missions, Jesus prophesied in conjunction with his testimony of John that “the days will come, when the violent shall have no power” (Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 11:13).

At the temple just before his own death, Jesus responded to the question of the chief priests, scribes, and elders: “By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority to do these things?” by asking his own question: “The baptism of John, was it from heaven, or of men?” (Mark 11:28, 30). Because these Jewish leaders could not answer without offending the people or admitting their hypocrisy, they refused to answer his question, and therefore Jesus refused to answer theirs. John did not have to wait until he stood in judgment after this life to have the great Advocate claim him as his own. John had authority from heaven, and Jesus proclaimed that he had faithfully fulfilled his mission. Joseph Smith gave three reasons why Jesus called John great:

First. He was entrusted with a divine mission of preparing the way before the face of the Lord. Whoever had such a trust committed to him before or since? No man.

Secondly. He was entrusted with the important mission, and it was required at his hands, to baptize the Son of Man. Whoever had the honor doing that? Whoever had so great a privilege and glory? Whoever
led the Son of God into the waters of baptism, and had the privilege of beholding the Holy Ghost descend in the form of a dove. . . .

Thirdly. John, at that time was the only legal administrator in the affairs of the kingdom there was then on earth. And holding the keys of power, the Jews had to obey his instructions or be damned, by their own law; and Christ himself fulfilled all righteousness in becoming obedient to the law which he had given to Moses on the mount, and thereby magnified it and made it honorable, instead of destroying it. The son of Zacharias wrested the keys, the kingdom, the power, the glory from the Jews, by the holy anointing and decree of heaven, and these three reasons constitute him the greatest prophet born of woman.34

Herod Antipas recognized, at least initially, that John was a just and holy man and gladly listened to his message (see Mark 6:20). The Joseph Smith Translation also includes an addition to this phrase “and when he [Herod Antipas] heard him he did many things for him” (Joseph Smith Translation, Mark 6:21), implying that Herod Antipas may have protected him for a time from Herodias’s vengeful designs. She was offended by John’s condemnation of her marriage to Herod Antipas and plotted his death. At an opportune moment, Herod Antipas’s birthday feast, she enlisted the aid of her daughter Salome, who pleased Herod Antipas so much with her dancing that he foolishly promised her whatever she would have up to half of the kingdom. Herodias told Salome to ask for “the head of John the Baptist” (Mark 6:24). Despite his apparent reluctance, “yet for his oath’s sake, and for their sakes which sat with him” (Mark 6:26; see also Matthew 14:9), Herod Antipas sent the executioner to behead John. Because of Herod Antipas’s complicity in John’s murder, Luke records that Jesus, in speaking to certain Pharisees, called him “that fox” (Luke 13:32)35 and would not speak to him at his trial (see Luke 23:9).36 When Herod Antipas heard about Jesus, “for his name was spread abroad,” his clarion call to repentance, and his mighty works, he thought Jesus was “John the Baptist . . . risen from the dead” (Mark 6:14). The spiritual power of John and Jesus were so intertwined that Herod Antipas confused the two, the anointed Aaronic high priest and the anointed Melchizedek high priest and king, and perhaps felt guilty for beheading a man that he himself had once reverenced.

**Miraculous Postmortality**

Death did not arrest John’s mission. The Joseph Smith Translation adds that John the Baptist was witness to the miraculous outpouring of “the kingdom of God come with power” (Mark 9:1) on the Mount of Transfiguration (see Matthew 16:19; 17:1–3; Joseph Smith
Translation, Mark 9:3). Elder Bruce R. McConkie explained that other unnamed prophets may also have been present at this great event; however, in regard to John the Baptist, he was not the “Elias [Elijah] who appeared with Moses to confer the keys and authority upon those who then held the Melchizedek Priesthood; . . . rather, for some reason that remains unknown—because of the partial record of the proceedings—John played some other part in the glorious manifestations. . . . Perhaps he was there, as the last legal administrator under the covenant, to symbolize that the law was fulfilled.”

Approximately six months after the events on the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus was slain. The Lord revealed to Joseph Smith that when Jesus, the firstfruits of the Resurrection, came forth from the tomb, he was accompanied by many ancient prophets, including his beloved forerunner, John (see D&C 133:55). The Apostle John testifies that signs are given “that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name” (John 20:31). Of all the signs John recorded, the greatest was the miracle of resurrection, and John the Baptist was among the first to receive it.

In the dispensation of the fulness of times, John by right as the last legal administrator of the Aaronic Priesthood was privy to the grand events of the final dispensation. Joseph Smith declared that John personally visited him and Oliver Cowdery (see D&C 27:7; Joseph Smith—History 1:68–72), restoring the lesser priesthood and its keys to them in 1829 (see D&C 13; 27:7–8; Joseph Smith—History 1:68–72), preparing the way for Peter, James, and John to restore the Melchizedek Priesthood (see D&C 27:12), and later in 1836 for Moses, Elijah, and Elias to restore additional priesthood keys (see D&C 110:11–16).

John the Baptist’s full written testimony of Jesus is yet to come forth (see D&C 93:6, 18); nevertheless, part of his testimony was included long after his death with John the Beloved’s testimony. John the Beloved may have used John’s written account when compiling his own Gospel (see Joseph Smith Translation, John 1:1–34). A portion was also revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith and is recorded in the Doctrine and Covenants (see D&C 93:7–17). As a mortal, John the Baptist saw Jesus’s premortal glory, that he has always been the Word or Messenger of the covenant of salvation, the Redeemer, the Spirit of Truth, the Creator, and the Only Begotten of the Father who came to earth as a mortal to live among us (see D&C 93:7–17). John testified that in mortality a veil of forgetfulness was drawn over Jesus,
who developed his spiritual capabilities gradually, receiving “grace for grace” until he received all of God’s power (D&C 93:12–17). John’s witness of Jesus included details that could have come only through the miracle of divine revelation.

**Conclusion**

Greatness in the eyes of God was found in the heart of a humble man who faithfully followed Nazarite vows and dutifully carried out his Aaronic Priesthood responsibilities. He fulfilled his prophetic destiny to be “great in the sight of God” (Luke 1:15) in going before the Savior and preparing many for the baptism by fire (see Matthew 3:11). He was “great in the sight of the Lord” (Luke 1:15) because he went before and prepared many for the Lord (see Luke 1:17). John was the great “herald of the Messianic age, the messenger, forerunner, and Elias”—the one who stood at the transition from the old to the new covenant. In concert with his premortal foreordination, a sign was prepared so that he would know when he had fulfilled the most important portion of his mission. His birth to aged parents was miraculous as was his protection from the murderous decree of Herod the Great. He was the greatest of all Aaronic Priesthood bearers, given the responsibility to baptize the Son of God. Their ministries were perfectly intertwined; thus, Jesus testified of John’s greatness, while yet recognizing his own greater responsibility. John’s mission as an Elias also means that he was the first to restore priesthood keys to Joseph Smith in opening the dispensation of the fulness of times in preparation for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

Summarizing the significance of John the Baptist, Sidney Rigdon declared, “No man ever had a more important mission than John the Baptist: it was he who put a period to the Jewish polity: it was he who changed the services of the priesthood from sacrificing to baptizing: he was Messiah’s harbinger to announce his advent, on which depended the fate of the Jewish nation, and yet, notwithstanding the vast importance of his mission; for so important was it, that those who rejected his baptism rejected the council of God against themselves, still not one miracle was wrought to prove him to be a messenger of the Most High.” The scriptures record, “John did no miracle” (John 10:41); instead, John was the miracle.
Notes

1. John D. Davis and Henry Snyder Gehman, *The Westminster Dictionary of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1944), s.v. “forerunner”; see also 1 Samuel 8:11; 2 Samuel 15:1; 1 Kings 1:5; Isaiah 62:10. Similarly, Jehovah went before the house of Israel in leading them out of Egypt to the promised land (see Exodus 13:21) and before Cyrus to prepare the way for the return of the Jews from Babylon to Jerusalem (see Isaiah 45:1–2).

2. Elias is sometimes the New Testament Greek form for Elijah (Hebrew). In restoration scripture, however, Elias is used as both a name and title. In this paper, Elias is a title and refers primarily to John’s role as a preparer or forerunner. The title is also used in the New Testament referring to a restorer (see Joseph Smith Translation—John 1:22). John prepared the way for Jesus, whereas Jesus was the restorer who brought back the gospel and the Melchizedek Priesthood (Bible Dictionary, s.v. “Elias”). Although Elias is used in restoration scriptures, Elijah is preferred in most scholarly commentaries of the New Testament.


10. In *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* on page 261, a statement is attributed to Joseph Smith that likely was not his. The quotation, taken from an unsigned *Times and Seasons* editorial, commented: “When King Herod’s edict went forth to destroy the young children, John was about six months older than Jesus, and came under this hellish edict, and Zachariah caused his mother to take him into the mountains, where he was raised on locusts and wild honey. When his father refused to discover his hiding place, and being the officiating high priest at the Temple that year, [he] was slain by Herod’s order, between the porch of the temple and the altar as Jesus said” (*Times and Seasons*, September 1, 1842, 902). Because Joseph Smith was listed as editor of the newspaper, he has been credited with having written this. In the very first sentence of the editorial, however, Joseph Smith is mentioned in the third person. Additionally, according to February 1842 journal entries by Wilford Woodruff, he and John Taylor were appointed by the Quorum of Twelve “to edit the Times and Seasons and take charge of the whole establishment under the direction of Joseph the Seer. . . . Elder Taylor assists him in writing while it has fallen to my lot to take charge of the business part of the establishment” (*Wilford Woodruff’s Journal*, 1833–1893, ed. Scott G. Ken-
ney [Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1983], 2:153, 155). Thus, most Latter-day Saint scholars do not believe that Joseph Smith was the author of this comment, although he was likely aware of the legend. The Gospel of James, also titled the _Protevangelium of James_ or the _Infancy Gospel of James_, is a New Testament apocryphal account containing the legend that Elisabeth and John received divine protection in the mountains and that Zacharias was slain by King Herod’s officers (Wilhelm Schneemelcher, _New Testament Apocrypha: Gospels and Related Writings_, rev. [Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1991], 436). On January 31, 1844, Joseph Smith donated to the Nauvoo library his copy of the _Apocryphal Testament_ (Kenneth W. Godfrey, “A Note on the Nauvoo Library and Library Institute,” _BYU Studies_ 14, no. 3 [1974]: 1), a book that included “all the Gospels, Epistles, and other Pieces now extant, attributed, in the First Four Centuries, to Jesus Christ, His Apostles, and their Companions, and not included in the New Testament by its Compilers” (_The Christian Examiner_ 55, n.s., no. 25, March 1833). Jesus commented, “Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues and persecute them from city to city: That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar” (Matthew 23:34–35). The idea that this comment referred to Zacharias, father of John the Baptist, is most likely incorrect. Instead, it could refer to Zechariah, the last martyr of the Hebrew Bible (see 2 Chronicles 24:20–24).

Anna Brownell Jameson, in writing about this legend, said, “There is a very old tradition, as old at least as the second century, that King Herod also sought to destroy at the same time the son of Zacharias and Elizabeth—the young St. John, whose greatness had been foretold to him; that Elizabeth escaped with her son from amid the slaughter, and was afterwards miraculously preserved, and that King Herod, in his rage at being thus baffled, sent and slew Zacharias between the altar and the Temple.” Jameson also cites a Greek manuscript with Byzantine miniatures from the ninth century which depict King Herod, his counselors, an executioner and a child. In the same picture is Zacharias, pierced by a lance, and Elizabeth and John hidden in a rock” (Anna Brownell Jameson, _The History of Our Lord as Exemplified in Works of Art_ [London: Longmans, Green, 1865], 1:260).

11. Not all scholars agree with the Latter-day Saint assessment that John the Apostle is quoting John the Baptist in these verses. For example, R. Bultmann believed that the Johannine community altered John 1:1–18, the Logos hymn, so that it spoke of Jesus rather than John the Baptist (Thomas Wayment, “The Logos Incarnate and the Journey of the Soul: A New Paradigm for Interpreting the Prologue of John” [PhD diss., Claremont University, 2000], 16, 17, 19). The Joseph Smith Translations of Luke 3:5–9 and John 1, however, seem to make clear that the beginning of John’s testament is the testimony of John the Baptist.


43, 47 appear to indicate that thirty years is the age at which Levites began their priesthood service.


21. For a discussion of the differences between these two versions, “I knew him not” and “I knew him,” see Matthews, *A Burning Light*, 63–64. Matthews concludes that the difference is not serious. Although John had not known Jesus personally, he did recognize the moral purity of the person who sought baptism and did know of his mission.

23. Smith, *History of the Church*, 5:259. Further elucidating all that John implied by calling Jesus mighty is the term “mighty man,” found frequently in the Old Testament and associated with the valor of a warrior (see, for example, Judges 6:12; 11:1; 1 Samuel 9:1; 16:18; 1 Kings 11:28). The word *valor* means “intrinsic worth or merit; power, import, and significance; courage, bravery” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “valor”).

24. Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:251. Regarding priesthood power, Joseph Smith remarked, “We find the apostles endowed with greater power than John: their office was more under the spirit and power of Elijah than Elias.” This statement by Joseph Smith further accentuates that there is a difference between Elias and Elijah.

26. Matthew’s own account of his call to the apostleship indicates it was later than some of the other Apostles. This fact, however, does not preclude the possibility that he was a disciple of John who witnessed Jesus’s baptism or was an early believer.

27. The four Gospel accounts do not identify where John was imprisoned; however, Josephus does (Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.5.1–2).

28. Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.5.1–2. For example, Judeans and Samaritans complained to Rome regarding the tyrannical rule of Antipas’s brother Archelaus. Josephus recorded that one of Archelaus’s major transgressions according to the Jews and Samaritans was that he had “transgressed the law of our fathers, and married Glaphyra,” the wife of his dead half-brother. Augustus, perhaps concerned that a rebellion might occur, deposed Archelaus. Herod Antipas’s marriage to his living brother’s wife would have been even more noxious to the Jews, and thus perhaps Herod Antipas or Herodias might have thought that a popular Nazarite condemning his marriage could provide the impetus for being deposed (Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.13.1). See also Peek, “The Death of John the Baptist,” for more on the political difficulties in Herod Antipas’s reign.

29. The Greek word *paradidomi*, translated as “cast” into prison in Matthew 4:12, is translated elsewhere as “deliver” or “deliver up” (see Matthew 10:17, 19, 21; 11:27; 18:34; 20:19; 24:9; 25:14, 20, 22; 26:15; 27:2, 18) and “betray” (see Matthew 17:22; 20:18; 24:10; 26:2, 16, 21, 23–25, 45–46, 48; 27:3–4) (Walter Bauer, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian
John the Baptist: The Miracle and the Mission

Literature, ed. F. W. Danker, 3rd ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000], 761–63, s.v. “paradidomi”). See also, Raymond Brown, The Death of the Messiah (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 210–13. Additional examples of these translations can be found in the other three gospels. Inserting the meaning of “deliver up” or “betray” implies a conspiracy to silence John.

30. A conspiracy between the Herodians, the supporters of the Herodian dynasty, and Pharisees, the rabbis who opposed Herod Antipas, is difficult to imagine. When Jesus learned, however, what had happened to John, he went to Nazareth and Capernaum in Galilee (Matthew 4:12–13), perhaps for safety from the designs of the Pharisees in Judea. Other indications of Jewish involvement are seen in this passage to Peter, James, and John: “Elias is come already, and [the Pharisees] knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them. Then the disciples understood that he spake unto them of John the Baptist” (Matthew 17:12–13). Again, although Herodians and Pharisees seem unlikely partners, the Gospel writers point to conspiracy between them in their hatred for Jesus (see Matthew 22:15–16; Mark 3:6; 12:13). For additional commentary, see Matthews, A Burning Light, 88–90.

31. Wayment, Joseph Smith Translation, 32.
32. Wayment, Joseph Smith Translation, 32.
33. Jesus is possibly referring to the Herodians, a politically motivated segment of the Jewish population who supported the dynasty of Herod and who sometimes united with their usual opponents, the Pharisees, to oppose Jesus (see, for example, Matthew 22:15–16; Mark 3:6, 12:13).
34. Smith, Teachings, 275–76; emphasis added.
35. Although not contested in the Greek manuscripts, the Joseph Smith Translation does not corroborate Jesus calling Herod Antipas “that fox” (see Wayment, Joseph Smith Translation, 192). If this pejorative term and the telling of it to certain Pharisees is accurate, it is perhaps additional evidence of the duplicity among the Pharisees and Herod Antipas. For further commentary, see Matthews, A Burning Light, 89.
36. How long was John the Baptist’s mission? John’s public ministry presumably began at least six months prior to Jesus’s mission. Matthew 3, Mark 1, and Luke 3 record Jesus’s baptism when it occurred. On the other hand, the wording in John 1 indicates that the baptism had already occurred and that John the Baptist continued to teach and baptize others. John 3 moves John the Baptist from Bethabara to Aenon near Salim and says that he continued with his mission of baptizing, with the note that “John was not yet cast into prison” (John 3:24). Some time after this, John was put into prison, during which time his disciples came and visited him. Quite possibly John was placed in prison sometime near the end of the first year of Jesus’s ministry and probably remained in prison for at least a year, maybe a little longer. Thus, John’s ministry could have lasted from one to two years (J. Reuben Clark, Our Lord of the Gospels [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1968], 37, 62).
38. Until 1981, the heading of Doctrine and Covenants 93 identified the John quoted in the text as John the Revelator; however, the Joseph Smith Translations of Luke 3:5–9 and John 1 make clear that this is the testimony of John the Baptist.
40. Messenger and Advocate, January 1836, 244.
Simon Dewey, *The Good Shepherd*

The purpose of this piece is to praise the Lord, not to inform or enlighten. Any informing or enlightening is strictly coincidental.

John the Baptist said, “Behold the Lamb of God” (John 1:29). There is no mortal language adequate to describe the Lord; however, in the holy scriptures there are scores of names by which he is designated. Here we will mention or discuss only a few of them.

Regarding his mortal life, chronologically speaking, the earliest name for him is the Firstborn. Obviously that is because he was the first spirit offspring of our Heavenly Father (see Colossians 1:15). Therefore, he was, and is, the Firstborn (see D&C 76:54).

Not only was he the Firstborn, but when plans were discussed for Heavenly Father’s children to leave their spirit existence and become mortal by taking upon themselves bodies of flesh and bones, it was he who protected their agency and said, “Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever” (Moses 4:2), thus assuring the continuation of mankind’s agency as mortals. In doing so he first manifested himself as our Advocate with the Father (see D&C 110:4). Of course, he continues to be our Advocate, intervening and pleading for us.

When the time came for God’s spirit children to begin to leave his presence, the Lord became their Creator, which name contains a multitude of ramifications (see D&C 45:1). This name or title contains so many dimensions it is beyond our comprehension, yet when we call
him the Creator we do so with such ease, usually without beginning to realize the length and depth of what we are saying.

As Adam and Eve began their course on the earth, Adam was told that in his language “Man of Holiness” is the name of God and that his Only Begotten Son is named “the Son of Man, even Jesus Christ” (Moses 6:57). Therein God answered the much-argued question, what is the difference between the names “Son of Man” and “Son of God”? There is no difference. They mean the same thing.

Throughout the Old Testament period, the premortal Lord was known as Jehovah. Even in the last verse of the Book of Mormon, Moroni refers to him as “the great Jehovah, the Eternal Judge of both quick and dead” (Moroni 10:34).

During that period, when Moses was asked by God to go to Egypt and lead the children of Israel out of bondage, he asked the Lord what to tell the people: “What shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you” (Exodus 3:13–14).

That is perhaps the most basic name of God in the English language. There is a branch of philosophy called ontology. The study examines the ways different things are said to exist or, one might say, the ways in which things are said to be. The first-person singular of the verb to be is “I am.” Thus, the root or basis of all things is the existence of God. He declares such in his name I AM THAT I AM, or I am he who exists.

When the Lord was born of Mary, he became known as Jesus of Nazareth (see Mark 1:24). During his ministry many other names or titles were employed, such as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, or the Bread of Life, the Living Water, the Good Shepherd.

In performing his mission at the end of his mortal life, he accomplished the incomparable, infinite Atonement, followed by the glorious Resurrection, wherein he became “the firstfruits of them that slept” (1 Corinthians 15:20). He was the Christ, the Lamb of God, the Redeemer, the Deliverer, the Holy One.

Then came the long-awaited visit to the spirit world, where he ministered to the righteous as their Liberator and Savior and inaugurated the means of taking the gospel to Heavenly Father’s children in the spirit world (1 Peter 3:18–20).

When he returned to the highly favored disciples as their resurrected Lord, he initiated his forty-day ministry, during which we have reason to believe he introduced some of the most sacred principles, ordinances, and covenants belonging to the gospel (see Acts 1:3).
Sometime after those forty days, he visited the Nephites in their promised land. After Heavenly Father’s voice was heard introducing his Holy Son, the Lord declared, “I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world” (3 Nephi 11:14). Also, in discussing the law of Moses, he said, “I am he that gave the law, and . . . the law in me is fulfilled” (3 Nephi 15:5). Not only did he say, “The law which was given unto Moses hath an end in me,” but he declared, “Behold, I am the law” (3 Nephi 15:8–9).

Upon leaving the Nephites, he visited his “other sheep,” who were not of that land, nor of Jerusalem, nor of “any parts of that land round about whither . . . [he had] been to minister” (3 Nephi 16:1). The next event of which we know in the Lord’s work was the magnificent First Vision, inaugurating the marvelous Restoration of the gospel. Heavenly Father called Joseph by name, then personally introduced the Lord to him by saying, “This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!” (Joseph Smith—History 1:17).

At the end of this dispensation comes the greatly forecast Millennium. Paul the Apostle gave us appropriate titles for the Lord for that period, the “only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords” (1 Timothy 6:15).

Presumably the next logical title for the Lord is the Judge, or as Moroni called him, the Judge of both quick and dead (see Moroni 10:34). Here again is an explicit time that he is our Advocate. In modern revelation he said: “Listen to him who is the advocate with the Father, who is pleading your cause before him—saying: Father, behold the sufferings and death of him who did no sin, in whom thou wast well pleased; behold the blood of thy Son which was shed, the blood of him whom thou gavest that thyself might be glorified; wherefore, Father, spare these my brethren that believe on my name, that they may come unto me and have everlasting life” (D&C 45:3–5).

Actually, there are scores of names by which the Lord is called. A few other examples are the Word, the Word of God, the Savior, the Messiah, the King of Zion, and the Prince of Peace. In the Book of Mormon alone there are not only scores of references to Deity, but there are well over one hundred different names or titles. Legion are the ways man has tried to praise and worship him.

Some of the words in the Old and New Testaments usually translated as “praise” and “worship” have related meanings, and in something of an ascending order are: to fear, tremble, prostrate oneself, kneel, show piety, salute, surrender self, sacrifice, confess, respect, extend hands, serve, minister, support, render homage, thank, commend, applaud,
laud, adulate, praise, celebrate, make music, rejoice, glory, dignity, honor, adore, revere, worship.

It is a wondrous and glorious blessing to know that he is. Our indebtedness to him is incomprehensible, and yet we all struggle to express our awareness of his majesty and of our deep limitations. We honor, praise, and worship him, yet we know his greatness defies all mortal language. He lives. Because he lives, we live. Because he lives, we will live forever. I know he is our Redeemer. May we ever feel his presence. 

RE
Holzapfel: During a lifetime of scripture study, what have you learned about the process of studying the scriptures?

Meservy: This is something I feel deeply about. The Apostle Peter says, “No prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Peter 1:20–21). So it is scripture when the Holy Ghost is involved. In Romans the Apostle Paul states that it is the Spirit that brings conviction. He says that faith comes by “hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). He would say to the Jews that they had ears to hear but they don’t hear, and I presume that means hearing by the Spirit. To me, that is the key to understanding anything we do in the Church, whether it is sustaining the prophets to be our leaders or something else, the Holy Ghost whispers to us that this particular selection is true, that it’s inspired.

When people speak in conference, we expect them to speak with the Spirit, and if they speak with the Spirit, we expect we will be able to pick it up by the Spirit. Well, when we pick it up by the Spirit, we know that what they are saying is true. Faith comes by hearing deep down in the heart. I think there must be something to the Spirit’s functioning in the center of our anatomy because we talk about a burning in the bosom or feeling in our heart. The Spirit confirms the truth in a more powerful way than knowledge gained through our eyes and ears and...
sense of touch. And the Spirit brings a conviction in such a way that we know what we have heard is true.

Students of the scriptures need to be connected to the Holy Spirit to come away with the proper interpretation. Peter says there is no alternative. Holy men of God speak when they are moved upon by the Holy Ghost, and their writings are not to be privately interpreted, and that is why the world has so many churches, because people have privately interpreted the scriptures. So I think the greatest thing we can do for students is to help them appreciate that their biggest key to interpretation to any truth is to interpret it by the Spirit. The scriptures cannot be properly understood in any other way than by the Spirit. You cannot have a correct interpretation in any other way than by the Spirit.

Faith comes by hearing. That is where testimony comes. It is amazing what we can stand up and testify to when the Spirit is present. I was reading a testimony of President Hinckley in which he said, “I know there is a God. I know He created this earth. I know He has a plan. I know that the plan is for the happiness of His children. And I know that Jesus is at the center of the plan and makes it operate.” He was going right on through these things, and here is Keith Meservy

A conversation with Keith H. Meservy
reading his testimony, saying, “Hey, I know what the prophet knows.” And that is the thing that keeps me a faithful member of the Church; I know what he knows.

This Church has had such a fantastic history that if people did not have that spiritual conviction, they would have dropped off like flies. I remember Wilford Woodruff talking about one woman who moved from Kirtland and did not want to move anymore. She said, “I moved from Kirtland down here. I’ll be damned if I move any further.” And he said, “Yes, she may well be.” That’s it, the difference between having a testimony or not. If you have a testimony, you know that regardless of how difficult it is to do what you’re being asked to do, you’ll do it. Anyway, that’s discovering that you can learn by the Spirit.

When I returned from the service, I took a New Testament class at Brigham Young University in preparation to go on a mission. Then I went into the mission field, and we four missionaries decided on a Sunday that we would like to start reading the New Testament. That week became one of the marvels of my life. I don’t know how to describe the feelings I had as I read the New Testament. What I was learning now was a dramatic contrast with what I had experienced in that class. I remember Elder Harold B. Lee talking about being appointed to be an Apostle and reading through the New Testament and having a sense that he was there. I had that same kind of feeling. It was so vivid and real, and I am so grateful for this great testimony about the truth of the gospel, despite all the inadequacies of the record. It’s just a marvelous record!

It irks me when scholars date the Gospels after AD 70 simply because they feel that the prophets cannot see beyond their own time, and so none of the books that have these prophecies in them about the destruction of Jerusalem could have been written before AD 70. I say, “That’s ridiculous.” Prophets do see beyond their time. Jesus did, and we have all kinds of evidence in our scriptures about people being able to see beyond their time. The Lord touched Enoch in such a way that Enoch could see beyond his time, and we have examples of others. Moses looked at all the children of men and knew that many generations were going to fall away. The point is that prophets could see beyond their day, and these rational scholars who haven’t had that kind of experience deny that prophets could have that experience. Consequently, they deny that Isaiah could have known about the things he talks about, the restoration of the Jews to Jerusalem and so forth. So I think it’s bad for Church members to use AD 70 as a cutoff point for the Gospels.
From the earliest days of the earth, Jehovah told his prophets to record things. He told Adam to make a record. Later Enoch had the record of Adam. Abraham said he had the records of the fathers and discovered he had the right to all these blessings that his ancestors experienced. It was the scriptures that opened his eyes to what was available to him in this life. His father surely did not teach him about the records of the ancestors, but Abraham discovered it on his own.

In our day too, the Prophet Joseph Smith felt an obligation to make a record of all he experienced: all the difficult problems, all the things he was doing, all the harassment he was getting, and all the plans for the Church. It seems amazing to me that he had time to do anything beyond the demands of getting through each day.

I like the way the Gospel of Luke starts out: “Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us” (Luke 1:1). I wonder who those witnesses were. Were they members of the Church? People from the outside? Luke says these things were delivered by “eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word” (v. 2). So it is clear he had access to primary source material to make his record. The phrase “having had a perfect understanding of all things from the very first” (v. 3) shows how much confidence he had in the record. These records bear witness of the greatest life in the history of the world.

**Holzapfel:** What is one thing you have come to appreciate about the Old Testament from a lifetime of study—you know, the language, the history, the context?

**Meservy:** Mostly that I know it’s true. I think it provides an essential background to anybody that wants to study the New Testament and the Book of Mormon or the Doctrine and Covenants. It’s a rich mine that you have to search in order to get all you can out of it.

**Holzapfel:** Why is study of the Old Testament important for the Doctrine and Covenants?

**Meservy:** This is the day and age looked forward to by many of the prophets and people of old who yearned to see this day. This is the day of God’s fulfillment of his promises. The Old Testament is packed with prophecies of what he would do in the latter days when prophets would bring to fruition all his work. I think Joseph Smith understood that, and he said it caused him difficulty in bringing the Latter-day Saints to understand the ideas he was trying to teach. I suspect that these prophets had many more prophecies than were ever recorded and a greater vision of what God was going to do.
One thing I appreciate about Isaiah is that he wrote his prophecies in a very wicked day. I don’t know the proportion of the people that were faithful, but he promised them they were going to be destroyed, and here came the Assyrians. The Lord said he was going to use the Assyrians to avenge his anger, and they conquered forty-six of the fortified cities of Judah, devastating the country. The inspiring part of the story is that the Lord saved Jerusalem, but the point is that Isaiah lived among very wicked people. Violence and murder, deception, lying, and cheating—it was a very tough group. He saw they were going to be taken into captivity, but they would be brought back out of captivity. Another thing Isaiah saw is how the Lord was going to pull this all off and fulfill the prophecies.

Overall, there are more prophecies in Isaiah than in the books of any other prophet. He’s just marvelous. He offers great testimonials about God. Read Isaiah and pull out all the testimonies that you find in there about God. Isaiah prophesies of a marvelous work and about the one who would bring it all about. The Lord knew Joseph Smith and said right from the beginning that he had a work for him to do, and we have watched that work unfold. It is clear that Joseph had this vision about how the Church is going to fill the mountains here. In Kirtland, he asked the brethren to bear their testimonies, and when they were through, he said, “You know no more concerning the destinies of this Church and kingdom than a babe upon its mother’s lap.”

They asked W. W. Phelps to compose this song that says “millions shall know ‘Brother Joseph’ again,” and he was getting the message that this Church was going to grow and expand as Joseph Smith prophesied. To me that represents why the prophecies in the Old Testament are related to the work being done in the latter days by the Saints, the pioneers. You get the idea of how many times the Brethren refer to the Old Testament when they talk about the world today.

Holzapfel: What have you learned about the Lord from studying the Old Testament? When you read from Genesis to Malachi, what central message emerges?

Meservy: That he’s a personal God, that we are created in his image, and that he knows the end from the beginning. Something that impresses me about the Old Testament is that he is this mother hen trying to get the chickens back in under his protective wing, that he is committed to meeting the needs of his children down here, and that he is fair. All of the attributes of God that we learn about in the scriptures are displayed in the Old Testament. He’s a merciful God. There are so many terms in Isaiah: “Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity,
a seed of evildoers.” Can you imagine any of our Brethren standing up and addressing the congregation this way? “Seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters,” looking for Satan as lord, provoking “the Holy One of Israel unto anger”—why shouldn’t you be stricken? (Isaiah 1:4–5).

I think people need to read the covenant in Deuteronomy. There is a condition for the blessing and a condition for the curse. Ancient Israel would be stricken, existing in a small remnant like Sodom and Gomorrah. But then the Lord would say to them, “Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: but if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it” (Isaiah 1:16–20).

How had the faithful Saints in Jerusalem become as a harlot? The city was once full of justice, righteousness lodged in it, but now murderers—something went wrong. Princes have become rebellious, companions of thieves. These are the people he is addressing and promising forgiveness. “Every one loveth gifts, and followeth after rewards: they judge not the fatherless, neither doth the cause of the widow come unto them. . . . Ah, I will ease me of mine adversaries” (Isaiah 1:23–24). But he says, “Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes” (Isaiah 1:16), and I’ll forgive you.

Now you ask, “What do I learn about God in the Old Testament?” This is the answer: He is just what he purports to be. All the attributes of God are there. People have a hard time reading the Old Testament; they don’t know the history and the times of that era. One problem in Isaiah is all the metaphors. Nephi said if you have the Holy Ghost, then you can read Isaiah (see 2 Nephi 25:4), but he also says the wicked Jews understood Isaiah. I do believe that the knowledge about God is readily apparent in the Old Testament. He’s a God of judgment; it clearly comes through there.

**Jackson:** You talked about the knowledge of the Bible being indispensable for understanding the Doctrine and Covenants and other scriptures. What is the value of understanding modern revelation in order to understand the Bible?
Meservy: What we do is provide a description of how these things are being fulfilled, those ancient prophecies. I think it would be very satisfying if a Jew had an open heart and sat down and read our Doctrine and Covenants. I think it would ring bells. If he’s a Bible scholar of the Old Testament, that is all he would have to go on, but it seems there would be a converting power in showing how the Church today is accomplishing what was predicted anciently. And a lot of those prophecies have to do with the millennial period, and those are still waiting to be fulfilled. Catholics don’t believe in the Millennium, and I don’t know how many other modern churches believe in it. We do.

Jackson: Were you the first Latter-day Saint to come to the conclusion that the Garden Tomb was not the place where Jesus was buried?

Meservy: I have no idea, but I feel rather strongly about that. Some people look at the hillside next to the Garden Tomb and see the features of a skull and say, “This has got to be Golgotha.” They argue that the Garden Tomb is the place of Jesus’s burial because it is outside the city walls. It was General Charles Gordon in the 1880s who came up with the idea that it was the place where Jesus was buried. There is nothing about his reconstruction of the scene that would suggest that it is the place where Jesus was buried. I don’t like his explanation, and I just cannot imagine that it is the place. I’ve been there. Some people talk about having good feelings at the Garden Tomb. But I ask, “Are you having good feelings about the location or about the Resurrection?” If the Spirit is whispering to them that the Resurrection took place, that is one thing. But I can’t imagine people going around Israel trying to identify sites by good feelings. The Brethren don’t do that in America. When they wanted to find Joseph Smith’s first home, they got the historians and archaeologists to go find it. If it were important to know exactly where something happened, why haven’t the Brethren taken us into the Sacred Grove and said, “This is the place”? It’s the same in the Garden Tomb. It seems to me that there is not much of an argument in favor of it. But when I go back and study the history, I ask, “Why do the Christians believe that the other place is the spot?”

Jackson: The Church of the Holy Sepulcher?

Meservy: Yes. Let’s look at our history and say, how do we identify sites in our own history? How do we know where the Sacred Grove is? How do we know where the Hill Cumorah is? We can go back in our history to the sites, and we identify them now. We mark and restore places. I think that the early Christians must have known where things took place, especially the Crucifixion and burial of Jesus.
Jackson: How many years did you teach at BYU?
Meservy: Thirty-two years—1958 to 1990.
Jackson: You taught in Jerusalem in what years?
Jackson: What is the value of studying the scriptures on-site?
Meservy: I tell people, you can read the Pearl of Great Price or the story of Joseph Smith, and you can know the story is true. We can read the Gospels and know the Gospels are true. But once you go back to Palmyra and walk out of the Sacred Grove, you will forever after be able to visualize what Joseph Smith saw. Every time you read this story, it comes alive, and it’s more realistic. It’s a sense of realism that we get in going to these places. The people on tour are there for such a brief time. One lady said to me, “This is my second time,” and I said, “What brought you back?” I wanted her to tell me the land is just irresistible, but she said instead, “I’m here to just kind of sort things out.” When I stop and think about what I’d do differently, I think I’d like to go back and prepare students for the site itself and build it up with stories. I would do more traveling about and going to the sites. There are so many things in the Old Testament that it was fascinating to be in the Holy Land.

Holzapfel: Let me ask you one more question: what lesson of life did you learn from your students?
Meservy: One thing is the love for the Lord they have at an early age. This was especially true with the students in the Holy Land. They were over there because of how much they loved the Lord and the eagerness they exercised in their studies. Let me tell you a story. I think it was the last time I was there, and it turned out to be a profound experience for me. Monte Nyman said, “Keith, on Thursday night we all take our students and go up around the seashore.” We asked students ahead of time to share what would have excited them if they had been able to live in the days of Jesus and experience his love. We asked for volunteers, and one girl came up and said she would want to be that woman taken in adultery. Another said she would want to be that woman who touched his garment. So we got together at the seashore and had prayers and songs. Then the people stood up, and after the songs we had a prayer. There were cabins nearby, but nobody left. We had only been together maybe three and a half weeks.

Suddenly this guy sitting on the sand stood up and said, “I can’t stand it anymore. I’ve just got to tell you guys I love you.” He didn’t do more than that, but it was like he turned a key or pushed a button, and the kids fell into each other’s arms. He came over to me and
asked, “Brother Meservy, can I give you a hug?” I thought, “What is it? After being here such a brief time, how can he say ‘I love you?’” I realized that he knew some things about the other students because of the program they were in. They had all come over to study about the Lord and Savior and come to love him better. They had testimonies and were faithful members. He knew that. He’d been with those people three weeks, and in those three weeks he’d heard those students express appreciation for one another. He had found a corresponding response in his heart. He had heard them talk; he had heard them reflect their values in this or that situation. So in three weeks he had come to learn they were people like him, people who wanted to return to the Lord. I thought, “The Lord is here. This person loves the Lord. That person over there loves the Lord. They all love the Lord, and he loves them.”

That is how I feel about my wife. It dawned on me one night as I heard her talk about things that were important to her. I knew she wasn’t saying things just to impress me, but she was saying things out of her heart. I think that is why testimony meeting is my favorite. One person will stand up and bear testimony of things that are important to me, or maybe of things that I haven’t experienced that they’ve experienced. Someone else will stand up and do the same thing, and at the end of the meeting we have this wonderful feeling of love that ties us together. I think the spirit of love is the thing that binds us together, and that was the discovery I made at Galilee. The students’ spirit and desire for goodness—that was a wonderful revelation to me as I taught over the years. Students are just choice, wonderful people. I think of them going into the world, and I want to have a small part in their life to help them make their contribution.

Notes

2. William W. Phelps, “Praise to the Man,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 27.
Document Editing: Helping Students Quench Their Thirst

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Adapted from an address at the Mormon History Association Conference in Sacramento, California, in May 2008.

As a recently returned missionary, more intellectually hungry and spiritually alive than I had ever been, I enrolled in Religion 341 at Brigham Young University, a history course that covers the lifetime of Joseph Smith. It proved the most stimulating learning experience in my life to that point. I wanted to know all the professor knew. Moreover, I wanted to know how the professor knew. Together with my history courses, I studied American paleography (handwriting) and editing. I researched as often as possible in the Church Archives in Salt Lake City. I interned as an editorial assistant at BYU Studies, where among other assignments I verified the transcripts, indexed, and helped annotate the letters William Phelps wrote to his wife, Sally, in 1835.

Just then BYU Studies began collaborating with Jan Shipps on her edition of William E. McLellin’s journals. My combination of experiences led John W. Welch, BYU Studies editor in chief, to assign me to help Professor Shipps verify the journal transcripts. For an intense week, Jan and I read the original journals against the transcripts. I am deeply thankful for that formative few days with Jan and the tiny but clear scrawl of the Tennessean schoolteacher-turned-Apostle William E. McLellin. These literally hands-on experiences with the historical record shaped my understanding of the past and fed my hunger to know early Latter-day Saint history. Ever since I worked with the raw
documents, secondary sources cannot sate the need to know that my
professor fostered in me. I must know the historical record for myself.

I now teach the same course at BYU that profoundly influenced me. My experiences, together with my perceptions of what my students both need and crave, shape my curriculum. My course has two proximate purposes, both of which are ultimately and admittedly confessional. First, to help students remember, understand, analyze, and describe the history of the Church through 1844. Because the doctrine and truth claims of the Church are historical, knowledge of this history is essential to Latter-day Saint faith. Second, the course helps students grasp and implement a distinctively Mormon epistemology, described by Elder Dallin H. Oaks at the 2005 Library of Congress symposium on Joseph Smith as “the principle of independent verification by revelation.”¹ My job is to help my students learn how to learn and know by that principle, that is, to help them become independent, to take them to the well and explain how to drink but let them quench their own thirst.

The semester begins with two philosophical questions that the course answers by grounding them in the discipline of history. “What do you know?” I ask my students. “And how do you know it?” Then the rest of the semester features a documentary editing assignment that, according to one student, “helped me realize these important questions.” While they’re still wondering what I’m talking about, I explain that I’m asking what they know in an ultimate sense. What do they know about God? How do they know it? I’m also asking what they know about Latter-day Saint history. What role does Joseph Smith play in what they know and how they know it? Pretty soon we’ve established some basic premises of what we think we know. But figuring out how we know takes a while longer. The discussion turns to sources of knowledge and their transmission and accessibility to us. We recognize that without a historical record, we would not even know that Joseph Smith existed.

Then the discussion takes a turn. I show the students a purported October 1830 letter from Martin Harris to William Phelps that tells an unfamiliar and disconcerting version of a story they already know. It’s Hoffman’s sinister invention, the so-called salamander letter.² Who wrote it? we ask. When? To whom? The answers all seem readily apparent on the face of the document. Some of the students squirm as we read it. Revealing the nature of the forgery always generates a good discussion on the integrity of the historical record. For many students, this is their first consciousness of alternative ways of understanding or casting Joseph Smith. That recognition tends to cause them to be
more aggressively analytical and less passive. One student reported recognizing at this point that “history can be dangerous. History can be the weapon of a man’s hidden agenda.” So the students quickly learn that we are dependent on documents in every sense of the word dependent. They realize too that the historical record is wildly uneven, rich and sparse, true and false, illuminating and deceptive. They learn that not all documents are created equal or are capable of providing what they superficially claim. How can we know if a document is authentic? Authentic in what ways? Assuming authenticity, how do we know whether it accurately represents the past? In response to his own wrestle with these questions, one student recognized that “it must be hard to be a historian.”

The learning outcome (to use the current jargon) I seek is for each student to recognize that history is messier—or more “complex and nuanced,” as one student nicely put it—than they had likely assumed. They learn right away that the past is mediated to us by the severely limited historical record and our own cultural assumptions and human limitations. Before we’ve finished the first lecture of the semester I’ve implicitly asked the students to let go of the grand narrative most of them brought to class, where they were hoping to be reinforced rather than reoriented. But the course offers them something much more durable in return.

It helps them understand and appreciate the beauties of what I consider a distinctively Mormon epistemology—their intellectual and spiritual inheritance—the principle of independently verifying transcendent claims by a process that is equally and inseparably intellectual and spiritual. This is begun by engaging what we intend to verify: historical claims and the documents that make them. The students encounter the historical record both philosophically and tangibly. But the course emphasizes that after all historical methods are employed, the ultimate veracity of the truth of claims made in the documents cannot be established by historical methods. The course is designed to give students respect for and skepticism of historians and their methods and to empower students to discern for themselves the claims made by historians and by the historical record—in sum, to become independent of mediators.

This learning happens as students work on a semester-long documentary edition. Each student selects a handwritten, Church-related document composed during Joseph Smith’s lifetime. They explain the historical significance of their document to justify their choice. They do a bit of reading in the standard works on documentary editing and
then transcribe their documents according to accepted practices and their own editorial preferences. They then write an introduction and annotation. I review and return the document at each stage, and they turn in a revised edition at the end of the semester.

Let me explain each step of the process in a bit more detail. Whenever possible, I take the students to the Church History Library and the L. Tom Perry Special Collections in the Lee Library at BYU. Nothing piques their interest quite like an archival show-and-tell. They like to see the marginal notes Elvis Presley made in his Book of Mormon but are even more awestruck by the April 3, 1836, entry in Joseph Smith’s journal. In class we venture together into the online Selected Collections from the archives of the Church and into BYU’s online collection of early missionary journals. We pull up on the screen the images of Joseph’s Letterbook 1, as we call it, the first few pages of which are his earliest history. With these images before our eyes we notice Joseph’s handwriting, his literary limitations, his first recorded attempt to document what he called “an account of his marvelous experience and of all the mighty acts which he doeth in the name of Jesus Ch[r]ist.” As we read together the stream of profound consciousness Joseph poured onto the pages, the students get their first lesson on paleography. For nearly all of them the excitement is evident. The earlier abstract lecture becomes grounded in the tangible historical record in what is usually their first encounter with it. Joseph Smith begins to come to life as they see his writing and hear his historical voice with very little mediation. Over and over they comment about how “real” this exercise makes Joseph. Document editor and teacher Ann Hawkins called this kind of exercise “time well spent” because “students not only learn to pay attention to specifics when reading, but they gain . . . important theoretical understanding.”

Having been oriented to the resources available to them and awakened to a new world of possibilities, each student chooses a manageable document (sometimes part of a larger document). It has to be Church-related but not necessarily composed by a Latter-day Saint and dated from 1805 to 1845. Early in the semester the students turn in an image of the document they chose attached to a well-reasoned paragraph explaining why. This requirement gives them an opportunity, as one of them wrote, to “read many letters and journal entries written by Joseph Smith and other individuals around him,” reinforcing the course’s epistemological points. Students can know best by examining for themselves. We can tell stories about Joseph Smith all day long. But students do not become independent of my mediation until they
become immersed in his papers. My goal is to give them the power to verify his claims independently of me or anyone else.

Transcription comes next. Hawkins wrote that “teaching the skills of textual editing begins with helping students see the importance of specificity: specific words, meanings, contexts, and so on.” There is no better way to provide this help than to shepherd students through the process of transcribing a holograph (or in our case an image of a holograph). Students read about transcription from Stevens and Burg’s *Editing Historical Documents: A Handbook of Practice*, and we spend part of one class period discussing the particular problems their documents present. We meet one on one to work through challenges. The students both love and hate this process. They find it both fascinating and painstaking. Transcription requires them to become intimate with their slice of the historical record. One student wrote, “Transcribing the document forced me to use my own judgment and analytical thinking.” This student added, much to my satisfaction, “I came to discern for myself what the document stated and the events it described, without having to rely on anyone else. Of course it was helpful to see the insights of those who are more educated and learned in historical events, but this allowed me to take the knowledge I learned from them and formulate my own opinions.” Transcribing removes yet another mediator, raises awareness, and offers analytical opportunities. A student transcriber wrote, “I have learned to become more skeptical of the document editing that others have done by realizing that others’ interpretations of old documents are not to be completely trusted, but first analyzed and studied out.”

Transcribing a text raises questions about its context, and the next step is to research the document and write an introduction and annotation for it. “How long must our introduction be?” They always ask. “Not a single syllable longer than necessary,” is my answer. “What’s necessary?” they wonder. I tell them their introduction must do four things efficiently and accurately: (1) It must immediately declare the historical importance of the document; (2) it must describe why the document was written; (3) it must describe the person(s) who composed the document and the historical circumstances in which they did so; and (4) it must clearly explain their editorial decisions, or how they mediated between the document and the reader. I explain that their job is to provide a service to readers and that in performing it they should be careful not to mediate unnecessarily. It is not their job to tell readers what to think about the document. It is their job to make the document accessible for readers to think about.
Annotation is the next step. Seasoned document editors debate the nature of annotation. My course is no place to settle the controversies. The students are simply assigned to notice where the document leaves unanswered questions in the mind of an apt but not necessarily expert reader. Those are the places that need annotation. Do not write a thesis, I tell them, but a brief, accurate answer and a citation of the best sources where readers can learn more. Most of these students are advanced undergraduates and all of them are smart, but they require significant help in the research and writing process. Many of them do not know how to use their software to embed a footnote in a text, and most are ignorant of basic issues of style and format. I require them to learn how to write footnotes per Kate Turabian’s *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. But the aim of requiring annotation is only partly mechanical. Its most important function is to cause them to engage the document and its potential readership. Hawkins explained, “The intellectual work that students engage in—marking, for example, things they do not know—helps them imagine themselves, the [text], and subsequent readers in a sort of conversation.” Moreover, the process of asking the document questions reinforces the course’s main epistemological issues: what do we know and how do we know it? The conceptual, research, and writing processes of annotation require students to focus on those fundamentals.

Finally, after a response from me at every step, the students revise their document edition and turn in a clean final draft on the last day of the semester. It’s a substantial piece of work for them and for me. But the returns are satisfying and enduring. Hawkins wrote that “the results I have seen from integrating the skills of documentary editing far surpasses anything else I have tried for developing skills in critical reading, thinking, writing, and research.” Playing on words taken from the document he and his students edited, Robert Lay described the results of their experience as “lessons of infinite advantage.” Despite the admittedly audacious title, Lay nevertheless noted that the experience was “highly motivational and formative” for his students. He emphasized how the exercise sharpened their skills, opened their minds, and fostered respect for historians and document editors. He quoted one student saying, “I now know that footnotes do not just appear out of nowhere!” That’s a small victory for those of us who have spent days composing a single footnote, but it’s a lesson of great if not infinite advantage for the students who are now better able to answer the questions, what do we know, and how do we know it?
Returning to those questions, I am willing to go even further than Hawkins and Lay and assert that in the setting of Latter-day Saint history at BYU, document editing as an epistemological exercise produces infinitely valuable lessons. In other words, my ultimate pedagogical goal is to arm the children, as Arthur Henry King put it. The proximate skills and theoretical understanding the students gain are important. But they are means to the end at which I hope each student will arrive. That end is the ability to discern historical claims themselves.

This curriculum is designed in part to serve as the midwife for something close to what Judith Viorst has called “necessary losses.” In other words, students who have unfounded assumptions about Joseph Smith and early Latter-day Saint history often learn that what they “knew” is not grounded in the historical record. One wrote, “I came into this class with a fairly sound understanding of the history of my religion; that understanding, I have since come to learn, was founded upon unsure speculation and idealistic romanticism. Take polygamy for example. I had convinced myself wholly that Joseph Smith never himself practiced plural marriage and that the doctrine was nothing more than a means for the Lord to look after fatherless families and multiply the numbers of early Latter-day Saints. By reading through [documents] of the Kimball family, the Pratt family, and some of Joseph Smith’s wives, I have gained a whole new understanding of the doctrine and its purpose. I by no means fully understand it—perhaps only the Lord truly does—but I now feel more like a witness of its divine purpose and timing.”

I emphasize necessary losses. The students need not part with anything that is essential to their faith, as they come to see for themselves. In the process they become discerning; they learn the difference between folk memory and documented history and also between hostile interpretation and documented history. As painful as parting with cherished versions of the past may be, students appreciate the process and its results. They express a newfound confidence in the historical integrity of their faith and feel empowered by their increased consciousness of what they know and how. The course walks them through the process and illustrates how successfully history can be negotiated by those who believe Joseph Smith’s claims. I illustrate by citing my own experiences with the McLellin journals. They were published in the wake of the Hoffman forgery scandal, partly to answer critics who were sure they contained evidence damaging to Latter-day Saint truth claims. Trust me, they do not. They’re about how many miles McLellin walked each day, the biblical texts on which he preached, the meetings he attended,
and whether he slept well. And every once in a while they’re about how he learned for himself that the Book of Mormon was true or how a revelation to him through Joseph Smith answered his secret questions and gave great comfort to his heart.

Grant Palmer’s manipulation of Joseph’s 1832 history in his *Insider’s View of Mormon Origins* is another vivid illustration by which students learn both their dependence on the historical record and skepticism for mediators. The students are very smart, and with the documents only a few clicks away they need only some orientation to gain the skills to be independent of other scholars as they arrive at their own answers to the course’s key questions.

The course insistently works to empower the students to read and reason and analyze and know for themselves, so that they become independent of both sentimental folk memories and hostile interpretations of the historical record. Students come to class having read a narrative of the history slated for discussion. So class meetings become something more akin to a lab than a lecture. “Many history courses have you read, memorize, and repeat history,” one student wrote. “This was a way for me to dissect history for myself.” Over the course of the semester we examine Joseph Smith’s histories, journals, and letters; the Hurlbut affidavits; Ezra Booth’s letters; passages of Lucy Mack Smith’s memoir; the mountain of hearsay testimony of the Book of Mormon witnesses; chunks of Wilford Woodruff’s journal; the letters of Delilah McCoy Lykins; of course the McLellin journals; and dozens of other documents. We end the semester listening to Wilford Woodruff’s voice as captured by Edison’s phonograph. Very quickly the students become accustomed to the hermeneutic. They know that we’re always asking, what do we know and how do we know it? as we sort our way through the contested past by the light of the historical record.

From the outset most of the students could relate the general outline of the canonized account of Joseph’s First Vision. But they could not tell when it was written or under what circumstances. They could not compare it to Joseph’s other accounts or the several hearsay accounts. They did not know Reverend Walter’s critiques or Milton Backman’s painstaking responsive research. But they know all that at the end of the semester. They know that there are several accounts of the vision, they have found them in the Selected Collections database and read them, and they know how they compare and how they combine to make Joseph’s theophany arguably the best documented in history.

Even so, the philosophical and hands-on work of assessing historical claims, closely reading the historical record, and listening to a
variety of voices contest the past is all preparatory. It does the work of clarifying that documents testify of the historicity of the vision but that the documents do not and indeed cannot prove or disprove its historicity. In other words, the preparation empowers students to know the historical record for themselves and, very importantly, to know its limitations. They recognize that transcendent questions cannot be answered by the documents, but also that the very documents they study to arrive at that conclusion vividly describe a way of knowing that many of them choose to act out for themselves. Many of them decide to adopt the distinctively Mormon way of knowing that Moroni and Elder Oaks described. One characteristic student reported, “Through my document editing process, I have gained a stronger, more meaningful testimony of Joseph Smith the Prophet than I’ve ever known possible. He is more alive to me than ever before, and I look forward to learning more.”

Notes

4. Joseph Smith, Letterbook 1, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
An Outsider’s Experience Teaching Mormon History in Utah

Mark Edwin Miller

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Adapted from an address given at the Mormon History Association Conference in Sacramento, California, in May 2008.

I am going to discuss some of the ways I have approached the teaching of Mormon-related topics at a secular state school (Southern Utah University) that has, however, a predominantly Latter-day Saint student body. In essence, I bring an outsider’s perspective, being both a non-Mormon and a non-native Utahn. In methodology, I will detail issues that caused me trepidation, how I dealt with these anxiety-causing topics, how I presented the fear-inspiring lecture, and how these presentations were received by students in my Utah history course.

My interest in Utah and Mormonism grew out of my graduate training. I received my PhD in history from the University of Arizona, where I conducted research and published an article on Latter-day Saint colonization and antipolygamy prosecution in territorial Arizona in the Journal of Mormon History. Although this experience helped me land my current job, I must admit, teaching the subject of Utah history caused me much anxiety before coming to Utah in fall of 2006. In particular, there were several topics that generated some loss of sleep. In this paper I will focus on six events that caused concern my first year teaching Utah history to a predominantly Latter-day Saint student body: Native Americans, Mormon theology, and relations; early Church history and conflict with non-Mormons in the eastern states; tensions between Mormons and Gentiles in Utah over the
creation of the theodemocratic state of Deseret; the Utah War and Mountain Meadows Massacre; the issue of polygamy during the nineteenth century and enduring conflicts over plural marriage today; and anti-Mormonism as it related to delayed statehood. In preparing this presentation, I conducted a small student survey to help gain their perspectives. I was also able, in teaching my course, to draw upon training and experience I had in teaching culturally sensitive matters to teaching assistants at the University of Arizona.

When thinking about the chronology of Utah history, I immediately encountered a potential pitfall on the issue of Native American origins. I could also envision a tricky journey discussing the first contacts between the indigenous peoples of Utah and Europeans—in this case the Latter-day Saint pioneers. In particular, a potential issue concerned the prominent place of native peoples (or Lamanites in Mormon theology) in the Book of Mormon. I surmised that most of my students would be aware that Mormon theology holds the first inhabitants of the Americas in an exalted place as descendants of the house of Israel whom Jesus Christ visited—a major component of the Book of Mormon.

The origin of Indian peoples is thus an important historical and theological issue that had to be treated gingerly and in a culturally sensitive manner. I decided to present the topic in a way that positions the origins of Native Americans as a theoretical proposition. In this regard, I was aided by the fact that traditional native religions generally teach that the Creator placed their people within sacred homelands; many native peoples thus take offense to the widely accepted scholarly and scientific theory that ancestral Native Americans crossed the Bering Land Bridge during the last Ice Age and are thus of Asiatic origin. In outlining Indian origins, I therefore note that Latter-day Saint theology is one among several theories that include not only the scientific Bering theory but also native origins, stories, or beliefs. With no value judgments, I simply outlined competing beliefs and let students see the issue within a complex, contentious historical and theological debate that is multidimensional and multicultural.

Also related to Native American history was the topic of Mormon–Indian relations. According to the folk history of the state, Latter-day Saints enjoyed better Native American relations than found elsewhere in the American West. More harmonious encounters stemmed from the unique theology of the Mormon people. In a short lecture, I detail how there is some evidence to support this contention: local Utes made a distinction between friendly “Mormonee” and their enemies, the so-
called “Americats.” While he led the Church, Brigham Young tried to enforce his dictum: “It’s cheaper to feed Indians than to fight them.” He even tried to ally with the “Lamanites” against non-Mormons at various points in time. Overall, in this segment, I point to the sincere efforts of early Latter-day Saint missionaries like Jacob Hamblin who did endeavor to aid their native brethren with humanitarian gestures stemming from deeply held religious conviction. As I do with other historical topics, however, I show how early Mormon–Indian relations are a good example of the common clash between theory and practice—good intentions versus real-world competition. With several quotes I show how leaders like Heber C. Kimball came to see the Indians in Utah as Gadianton robbers, hellions of the Book of Mormon who were an obstacle and threat. Again, by laying out quotes of the leaders themselves, I let the students see that good intentions often come to naught on the ground, especially as the two groups vied for the limited natural resources of Utah.

My next topic led to some humorous results from which I learned and subsequently adapted my course materials. The origins of Mormonism and the conflicts the new faith engendered was a topic of great interest to students while I was teaching at Ouachita Baptist University in Arkansas. Students there had little, if any, knowledge of the topic and were generally fascinated by early Church history. Of course, I was aware that early Mormonism would be common knowledge to students at Southern Utah University. Even so, my first semester I went into some detail about Joseph Smith, his revelations, the origins of the Book of Mormon, and other related topics. Along the way I mispronounced Moroni, a name I had only seen in print. I was able to use the snickering as a humorous break, but of course I was privately mortified. Adapting, I developed a confidant to go over Latter-day Saint and Utah names such as Nephi, Gadianton, and Deseret. Also humorously, I went into great detail about the difficulty of pulling a handcart across the plains, not knowing most of the students had attended camps doing just this! They laughed at that.

After informal discussions with several students, I realized that the predominantly Latter-day Saint student body had much knowledge of pre-Utah Mormon history. I also realized that I did not have time to cover certain topics in Utah history if I spent too much time on these issues. Because of this, the next year I evolved the lecture. I now focus class discussion around the old settler–Mormon conflict and detail four or five main points of controversy that engendered virulent anti-Mormon sentiments in the mid-nineteenth century. Conflicts over the
birth of the Book of Mormon, communalism, bloc voting, polygamy, and land competition together proved central to the reason why the Latter-day Saints clashed with non-Mormons, ultimately forcing them to immigrate to Utah.

Conflict is a major theme of my lectures on nineteenth-century Utah history. I note that problems followed the Saints west and erupted between U.S. officials and Brigham Young over his plan to create what Thomas Alexander calls the “Theodemocracy” of Deseret: a quasi-independent nation in the desert wastes of the Great Basin. This controversy was of long duration and multifaceted. In teaching the topic, I simply set out the goals of the Latter-day Saint hierarchy in creating Deseret. Using quotes from Young himself, I show that he and others wanted a form of independence from the United States but were ultimately swept into the nation with the Mexican War, making the new Utah Territory subject to the power of non-Mormon officials. Key to this topic was Mormon leaders’ beliefs that the Millennium was imminent and that they were God’s true representatives on earth as they would be after the Second Coming. Of course, U.S. laws clashed with these deeply held notions. Previous background on conflict and even massacres against the Saints at the infamous Haun’s Mill helps set the stage and makes it comprehensible why Young and the others would want to isolate and separate themselves from the United States. The context is well known to most Latter-day Saint students but becomes clear to non-Mormon students in the class as well.

To get to the basic arguments of non-Mormon officials against the Saints, I show a quote from one appointee reciting a slew of anti-Mormon rhetoric he sent back east. I note that communications were poor, which contributed to misinformation that the Mormons were practicing blood atonement or sacrifice, but I also acknowledge that some allegations were true. I note that the Latter-day Saints did vote in blocs, that General Authorities were the source of nominations for 100 percent of territorial officials elected in Utah; the flock simply rubber-stamped their choices. To charges that Brigham Young was dictator, I remark that many Utah historians conclude that Young did have more power than any other official in U.S. history. A common charge was that Mormons were lawless. I argue that they were very law-abiding people except when it came to polygamy and other religious tenets that clashed with Anglo-American law. In this case, I go into detail regarding the operation of territorial probate courts, noting that the local bishop served as judge and that locals bypassed the federal courts. The Saints were so successful in using their own law system that during the
Civil War one territorial justice heard exactly zero cases. I ultimately allow the students to see both sides: that there were baseless charges but that outside officials had reason to believe the local Saints in Utah were not operating in ways that nineteenth-century Americans viewed as 100 percent American, voting in all-Mormon blocs and boycotting non-Latter-day Saint businesses.

Another controversial topic I engaged was polygamy or plural marriage. The issue of polygamy is both a historical fact that affected Utah’s statehood and a modern phenomenon that impacts the image of Utah outside the state. I knew this was a hot-button issue before coming to Utah—and this was before the recent Warren Jeffs trial and Eldorado, Texas, child custody case. I decided to deal with the subject in a discussion format. As preparation, I had the students read sections of our textbook detailing federal efforts to quash polygamy in Utah Territory. I also had them read an online description of polygamy written by Jessie Embry for the Utah History Encyclopedia, a concise work that takes the issue to the present, especially as practiced by the Fundamentalist Latter-day Saints. Feeling a bit like Oprah working a crowd, I moderated a heated debate that lasted the entire hour-and-twenty-minute period.

Of the first semester, this discussion of plural marriage was my most enjoyable moment, as it appeared to be for the class. I let historical data speak for itself while allowing the largely Latter-day Saint students to delve into this emblematic Mormon issue intellectually and honestly. We discussed arguments for and against it (with many students saying there were no plausible arguments for it). Analyzing the landmark Supreme Court case Reynolds v. U.S. was very illustrative: students seemed to see the dilemma court officials faced in drawing lines between religious beliefs and practices that may be harmful to people. Most came to see the practical dilemma Church President Wilford Woodruff faced before issuing the famous Manifesto of 1890 banning the practice. We had engaging debates over whether plural marriage could be OK among consenting adults, though most felt the issue of child welfare and abuse overrode religious beliefs among the modern Fundamentalist Latter-day Saints.

Another Utah conflict I detailed was the late-nineteenth-century battle over statehood, a struggle largely involving Gentiles and the Church establishment. I end the controversy period of Utah at the turn of the century by revealing how changing demographics, economic commonalities between Mormons and non-Latter-day Saints,
and mainstreaming ideologies of Mormon leaders served to make Utah increasingly similar to surrounding Mountain West states.

I begin the Americanization era with Colonel Patrick Connor, a Civil War officer who ushered in the mining industry in the state, an economic activity that opened the territory to non-Mormon immigration and influences. Connor provides several inflammatory quotes that prove useful to show modern students the tensions surrounding statehood. I also display census records detailing how mining did, in fact, open up the state to non-Latter-day Saint immigrants, including many from Eastern Europe. Along with the railroad and defense-related communities, I try to shift more focus to non-Mormon Utah by detailing mining enclaves scattered around the state. In terms of economics, I concluded the series by trying to show how financial matters could, and did, draw diverse peoples together into modern groups like the Chamber of Commerce in pursuit of common goals, namely helping Utah expand economically. Here, I try to show how these forces ultimately brought a form of accommodation to Utah politics. This fact can be seen with the dropping of the unique Peoples’ Party and Liberal Party—in favor of the dominant Republican and Democratic Parties by 1892. We conclude by showing how Church President Joseph F. Smith and Senator Reed Smoot proved central to mainstreaming the Saints into American society.

I saved the most controversial topic for last: the Utah War of 1857 and the related Mountain Meadows Massacre. Of all the issues I tackled my first semester, the Mountain Meadows Massacre was the most contentious yet most important to local history. The event happened about fifty miles southwest of Cedar City and was carried out by local militiamen. Added to my trepidation was the fact that I had a student in the course whose last name was Dame and, as I correctly surmised, was related to one of the key instigators of the massacre, William Dame. Being familiar with the emotionally loaded nature of this event, I approached teaching the subject in a lawyerlike manner. I also saw the event as a good tool for introducing budding graduate students to historiographic debates.

I began the day’s lecture by taking on a somber, serious tone (which is sometimes hard for me). I started by noting that context is central to understanding this event. It was apparent that the difficult part would be explaining why it occurred or perhaps that episodic mass murder can never be explained. I also believed it was important not to appear to lay collective blame on modern Mormons, either at the state or local level, while also not excusing the murderers’ actions. I
pointed out that in order to understand the massacre, you must know the context in which it occurred. Of course, students were already well versed in the anti-Mormonism of the nineteenth century by this point. We discussed the fact that in the summer of 1857 the U.S. Army was marching toward Utah with 2,500 troops to quell a supposed rebellion. I used slides to show the rhetorical buildup on both sides, with eastern papers fanning the flames of anti-Mormonism, while in Utah Elder George A. Smith traveled south issuing fiery sermons, dredging up the past history of anti-Mormon atrocities.

With this background established, I informed the class that certain facts are well accepted, namely that a wagon train of Arkansan emigrants made its way through Utah during the height of the so-called Utah War of 1857. There were tense encounters because the Saints refused to sell them provisions in the wartime atmosphere. At Mountain Meadows a group of Paiutes, led by Indian agent John D. Lee and local Latter-day Saint militiamen, attacked the camp. They were under orders from Parowan militia commander William Dame and stake president Isaac Haight. After several days of standoff, Lee rode into camp under a flag of truce and convinced the wagon train to give up, promising protection from the Paiutes. At a prearranged moment, on September 11, the militiamen executed the members of the wagon train, sparing only children too young to testify. It was not until twenty years later that officials convicted and executed Lee for the crime. He was the only one brought to justice.

At this point I introduced the historiographic debate over the central question: who was to blame for the massacre? Here, I noted that this is a common conundrum in any genocide or mass killing, from Nazi Germany to Rwanda to Bosnia. Howard Bancroft was the first major historian to look at the massacre in 1889, ultimately agreeing with the courts that Lee, as Indian agent, was squarely to blame. I then gave some detail on famous local historian Juanita Brooks, who in her 1950 book concluded that Lee was scapegoated for the crime. She surmised that the Arkansans were the victims of bad timing and war hysteria. I then outlined Will Bagley’s controversial recent book on the topic, Blood of the Prophets. Bagley claims that Young tacitly ordered the attack. He bases this conclusion on circumstantial evidence from Dimick Huntington’s journal that Brigham Young met with Paiute chiefs prior to the event and “gave” the herds of the wagon train to the Indians, asked for their alliance in the coming war, and claimed he could not control the Indians as they would “do what they will.” I finished our excursion into historiography by detailing the conclusions
of prominent BYU professor Thomas Alexander. He concludes that there is no evidence that Young or other high Church leaders ordered the event. To the contrary, the only evidence we have is a letter from Young to the Cedar City group telling them to leave the wagon train alone. According to Alexander, the militia simply panicked over what the train would do once they escaped to California: would they come back with an army for revenge? With a brief examination of historical interpretations, we then had a discussion concerning the contested events. The next semester I showed a documentary by Brian Patrick called *Burying the Past* that discussed the dual issues of laying blame for the event and the ownership of the site—a clash between the Latter-day Saint Church and descendants. This really encouraged a spirited and emotional debate among the students.

While a graduate student at the University of Arizona, I attended seminars in order to lead sessions on culturally responsive teaching at teaching assistant orientations. We came to advocate maintaining some form of objective distance from both the subject matter and individual student opinions. By maintaining respect for both diverse student opinions and for the actions of actors in the past, in theory, students should feel more engaged and comfortable and learn from both sides in any debate.

To test these theories, I conducted a small survey of students in my Utah history course. The dominant comment on the survey was that I brought a balanced and fair perspective to teaching Mormon-related topics in Utah history. One said I provided an outsider and non-Mormon perspective to many topics Utah students think they know, but actually know, only from a religious perspective. Noting that many students were non-Latter-day Saints, one respondent remarked that I provided a respectful environment where students of all faiths felt comfortable discussing ideas. One said I had a “nonpreachy” style detailing controversial topics—a fact that aided non-Mormon students, especially those from outside the state. One said she gained a valuable perspective on Mormon history from an outsider that showed how non-Utahns must see their history. Others compared my class to courses they had at other institutions, noting that I did not make fun of Mormonism or belittle aspects of it, experiences they had had at other universities. These respondents said I did not appear patently on one side of debates like polygamy as other professors have. Another liked my academic and purely historical approach, keeping lectures and discussions on a purely secular plane and not veering into doctrine or divine explanations for many actions in the past. One student liked the
way I fused specific Utah and Mormon history with larger topics of western America.

Some students offered mild but constructive critiques. Several noted that my newness to Utah and its local history led me to feel self-conscious that the students may have known more about certain issues than I did. One recalled my mispronunciation of names like Nephi but thought that I likely learned and did not make the mistake again (which was true!). A student noted that my non-Latter-day Saint background may have led me to a cursory explanation why some Church leaders acted the way they did. Despite these critiques, all the students said I always showed respect for the Latter-day Saint faith and for all faiths, for that matter—the greatest compliment I could receive in a culturally sensitive course.

To conclude, my first several years at Southern Utah University have certainly been an adventure in teaching Mormon history. Despite some early trepidation, I have come to find teaching Latter-day Saint-related topics in my Utah history course to be one of the several most rewarding aspects of all my teaching responsibilities today. The very tensions inherent in certain topics and from the fact that I am not from Utah leads to an often electric atmosphere in class—something we all know is a wonderful thing in college teaching. I have found that the predominantly Latter-day Saint student body have more than met me halfway in the learning and teaching process; it has truly been a joy to teach them.
Sweetwater Revisited, Sour Notes, and the Ways of Learning

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Adapted from an address given at the Mormon History Association Conference in Sacramento, California, in May 2008.

In May 2007, my Religion 342 students had written a review of Chad Orton’s article, “The Martin Handcart Company at the Sweetwater: Another Look,” published in BYU Studies in 2006. After engaging other issues in class, only ten or fifteen minutes remained when I projected a slide containing Solomon Kimball’s well-known account of events at the Sweetwater River in November 1856, an account Orton examines and revises in the article.¹

Nine years old in 1856, Solomon Kimball did not witness the handcart rescue, though his elder brother David played a prominent role in the scenes at the Sweetwater. Not until 1908, however, did Solomon Kimball write about the rescue, and his best-known narrative appeared in 1914. By the time he wrote, several other accounts had been published. In 1878, handcart emigrant John Jacques first described several “brave waders” helping Saints across the Sweetwater in a newspaper series. In 1888, Orson F. Whitney mentioned the incident in his biography of Heber C. Kimball. Whitney said that the rescuers “immortalized themselves” by their brave efforts. Naming three men, including David Kimball, he said they carried some 500 emigrants across the river and then contracted “severe colds” that “finally conduced to their death.” (At the time of this report, however, one of the three men named was still alive.) In 1890, Daniel W. Jones
recounted his own remarkable experiences as a rescuer. He essentially ignored events at the Sweetwater and discounted efforts “to make individual heroes of some of our company,” insisting that “everyone did all they possibly could.”

When Whitney (1892) and Andrew Jenson (1893) revisited the handcart saga, they relied on John Jacques’s earlier narrative to capture the Martin Company’s ordeal. Then in 1907 another handcart veteran, Josiah Rogerson, retold the story for a newspaper, writing that Daniel H. Grant (probably George W. Grant) spent nearly two hours carrying some 150 emigrants across the Sweetwater. Rogerson praised Grant as a hero and recalled Grant telling him decades before that “his services that day” had “ruined” his health and left him an “invalid” through rheumatism.

Not until 1908 did Solomon Kimball narrate the Sweetwater incident. In language closest to Whitney’s 1888 version, he said that three young men’s brave service in the frigid water induced “colds that finally terminated in their deaths.” Then he added an element to the story that had never been written before. He said that Brigham Young “wept like a child” when informed of the rescuers’ efforts at the river, “and declared that this act alone would immortalize them.” When Kimball wrote a series of articles about the 1856 emigrants for the Improvement Era in 1913–1914, he finally wrote what probably became the best known paragraph about the wider handcart rescue. Though he cited several other authors, Kimball again hewed closest to Whitney’s portrayal. Yet when he reiterated his own version of Brigham Young’s reaction, this time Kimball asserted that the prophet “later declared publicly” that the young men’s heroism would “ensure [them] an everlasting salvation in the Celestial Kingdom.” To date, no contemporary record of such a statement has surfaced. Were it a Kimball family tradition, one might expect to find it in Whitney’s earlier writings.

With such puzzles in mind, Orton investigates the events at the Sweetwater and reports new evidence about the number of rescuers in the river, the number of emigrants assisted, the subsequent lives and deaths of the rescuers, and the comments attributed to Brigham Young. Having used available records to revise Kimball’s narrative, Orton then constructs a new interpretation of the significance of the Sweetwater episode within the larger rescue effort. Referring to that paragraph in Kimball’s 1914 narrative, I asked my students something like, “What’s right and what’s wrong with that account?” The first hands went up on the back row, where three or four male students sat (all returned missionaries). Soon after the first student started talking,
I felt heat rising on the back of my neck. He said that “he only ‘felt the Spirit’ when reading the traditional account.” Then a nearby student weighed in: “I don’t see what’s so wrong with that version anyway,” he said, questioning the value of revisiting the story. And one of them raised another issue: Why would President Hinckley use this story if there’s something wrong with it? In retrospect, these seem like predictable concerns, but they caught me by surprise that day, in part because student reactions had been so positive the previous semester. Taken aback, I saw their concerns as pitfalls to avoid rather than a puzzle to engage. What might have been the beginning of a thought-provoking discussion felt more like a standoff.

There was a problem that day, but my perception of the problem was skewed because desire and ego as well as reason and faith inform my teaching and learning. Ironically, as Randy Bass points out, having a problem is something we like when it comes to research. Problems are “at the heart of the investigative process,” and we enjoy talking to our colleagues about them. In teaching, however, we generally don’t want problems—we are anxious to avoid or fix them—and if colleagues ask about them, it can “feel like an accusation.” Yet we actually professionalize teaching when we “problematize” it, when we treat teaching and learning as subjects worthy of “ongoing investigation” and “communal discourse.”

It takes time to adopt this outlook. In a journal entry two days after that classroom encounter, I wrote of being “crestfallen—visibly distraught, I think—at the negative reaction.” I seemed to be as defensive as some of my students. Over time, however, what felt initially like a crisis began to look like a case for ongoing investigation—a problem worth having (as Bass would say). With mixed motives, I changed the way I introduced Orton’s study to students, and I started collecting additional evidence about the way they encountered a revision of their past. The project, though unfinished, yields some interesting insights about what it means to learn and teach Church history at one university.

What am I looking for? Reminding us that students are not “empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge,” David Pace urges teachers to examine “what . . . students bring to the history classroom that may have a major impact on their learning.” Students come to college with some sort of historical narrative already in place (learned in school and popular culture). They also arrive in our classes with certain “ways of thinking about the past”—what Pace calls “preexisting cognitive organization.” Without some reorientation, both of these “preexisting conditions” may impede, rather than facilitate, new learning.
As a concrete example, it appears that historians read documents and narratives more actively and critically than novices, probing authors’ motives, assumptions, and evidence. As Sam Wineburg observes, they “decode” authors and texts, seeking to locate them in a meaningful context and subjecting them to stiffer “cross-examination” than untrained readers. To succeed in history, students need to practice these kinds of mental procedures.

I teach Latter-day Saint history in a Religious Education department, which serves students from all disciplines on campus. Do observations about the discipline of history apply to teaching and learning in my classes? The syllabus does not advertise learning to think like a historian as an expected course outcome. Nor, I think, do many students consider that a central purpose of religious education at BYU–Idaho. But the syllabus does say that the class should help students grow as learners and teachers of truth. Can reading and thinking more like a historian help in that regard? I think it can, if it helps students to be more discerning as learners and teachers.

What Student Responses Reveal about Their Learning

Hours after that eventful class in May 2007, I printed two papers to read as I left town, intentionally choosing two student authors who likely held contrasting views about revisiting Sweetwater. At the time I simply wanted to see how widely their judgments varied about the value of the study. Since then, I have reexamined papers from six classes over three semesters to see what they reveal about the ways students read, think about, and make meaning of the Mormon past.

As expected, the first two students diverged widely in their review of Orton’s article.

Student 1 (male): There is great value in searching for the truthful details in any such story. In our culture we tend to romanticize stories and hope for a greater emotional stir, and therefore sometimes details are left out or exaggerated. . . . Although I wouldn’t have thought to do it on my own, the extra research on the subject brought new light to the subject and also made me think of those today who constantly are working hard for others but are not receiving public praise.

Student 2 (male): There is little value in this article. There were a few new pieces of information, and a lot of speculation. . . . The author tried unsuccessfully to balance his view between an appreciation of the heroic act and a desire to blow the traditional account all to heck. I don’t see any historical value, just some new Mormon trivia. This article is like speculating on all the deep doctrines of the church . . .
[that] lack value as necessary to gain a testimony of the truthfulness of the gospel.

The first reader admires the research effort, infers both causes and effects of romanticized stories in his culture, and draws a usable lesson from the revised narrative. The second reader doubts the author’s freedom from bias, suspects that his inferences overreach his evidence, and dismisses the article’s normative value. He also poses some provocative questions about the construction and uses of narrative as he cross-examines the text.\(^\text{10}\)

I structured the review around several questions intended to help students move up a gradient of intellectual activity from basic comprehension to analysis and evaluation as they read and wrote.\(^\text{11}\) I had ignored any affective elements of learning. When student 2 showed gaps in capturing Orton’s arguments or evidence, had his emotional reservations impeded the basic mental processes required to digest the article? I had told students what to look for but said nothing about how to investigate and make meaning of the author and text. Who was the more accomplished reader and meaning-maker—the receptive or the critical student? And who grew more in the course of the exercise? First impressions may be deceptive.

It could be illuminating to consider what comments from the most critical (or dismissive) readers reveal about the challenges of teaching and learning Mormon history,\(^\text{12}\) but most readers are closer to the first student. In six classes over four semesters, at least 90% reach a generally favorable conclusion. Most of them effectively summarize new knowledge learned, and they embrace Orton’s revision of a narrative most of them have heard repeatedly and seldom questioned. This happens despite the fact, explicitly reported in about one-third of papers, that rethinking the familiar account brings an initial sense of loss.\(^\text{13}\)

What skills do they practice, and what capacities grow? As they “look over a historian’s shoulder,” do they learn to read a text differently? Do their ways of thinking about the past grow in sophistication? Perhaps the best test of growth would be how they decode and reconstruct another narrative, without coaching from either Orton or me. To date, I have not (intentionally) designed such an encounter, but I continue to collect and reflect upon student work that reveals some interesting elements of the problem.
Tweaking the Exercise: Introductions and Questions

Teachers need to “build a continual case for learning . . . instead of assuming that students see the self-evident value” of the work we give them. This applies with special force when the “learning and critical thinking” we seek may bring with it “an ambivalent mix of feelings . . . in which anger and confusion are as prominent as pleasure and clarity.” As obvious as this statement may seem, it can be difficult to implement it consistently, but it makes sense to help students “know why we’re so committed to certain activities.”

Even if you’re convinced that the cause is just, it can be hard to articulate why you want students to experience certain things and difficult for them to grasp your intentions, especially before they encounter the learning activity. Full disclosure may remain out of reach, but intentionality is a worthwhile goal.

As I first tinkered with the Sweetwater assignment, nervousness motivated me as much as scholarly teaching. Over time I grew more comfortable about my case for the activity and more intrigued about what student responses can teach us. What began as tactical maneuvers, closely tied to one assignment, has evolved into a strategic approach to most class activities, where revisiting Sweetwater weaves into a semester-long conversation about how we read, think about, and make meaning of our past.

One of the first adjustments was to try to lower emotional barriers to new knowledge. Most of my students don’t read historical periodicals, so BYU Studies connoted nothing to them. Noticing that some students referred to “Brother Kimball” and “Mr. Orton,” I started by introducing the author of the article as “Brother Orton,” sometimes adding that he worked for the Church History Department.

For the first two semesters of 2007, my course syllabus introduced the article as “a nice model of inquiry.” I described the scholarly tasks the author performed, using familiar verbs. It never occurred to me to ask my students what this introduction meant to them, nor did I ask what they thought of my assertion that Orton went about his work with “discipline and humility and even charity.”

In subsequent semesters, I tweaked the introduction to the assignment, making it simpler but more direct. The Winter 2008 syllabus for Religion 342 explained that students would review some “historical scholarship,” calling Orton’s article “a nice example of researching a well-known but partly misunderstood story.” I continued to describe
the tasks he performed but introduced them with a basic statement of purpose: “to understand events better.”

Since evidence collected in the summer semester showed that even receptive students perceived some costs in revisiting Sweetwater, I started asking them to spell out what they saw as the “benefits and costs of digging deeper into the story.” In sorting through answers to this question, I found that the costs and benefits students identify give insight into the quality of their thinking.

In addition to statements acknowledging sadness, surprise, or disappointment at the fallibility of the best-known version of the story, some of the more thoughtful statements about the costs of inquiry raise issues like how to deal with contradictory primary sources, how descendants come to grips with more complicated portraits of ancestors, how best to account for mistakes in Solomon Kimball’s narrative, and how to constitute a narrative that focuses on the most important issues. These statements show students thinking somewhat independently of both Kimball and Orton as they deconstruct and reconstruct narratives of the rescue.

Some student comments about the costs of inquiry have troubled me. When I asked students to write the costs and benefits on index cards in two classes (fall 2007), I was surprised to see how many students said Orton had found the letter of the story at the expense of its spirit. Several said the revision was secular, not spiritual. What concerns me most about this response is the adjectives with which student papers describe the spiritual story—words like heroic, exciting, glorious, magical, mystical, romantic, moving, and dramatic. Similarly, I don’t know what a student means when he worries about “a blow to one’s testimony of the pioneers.” This looks questionable as religion or history.

When students write of the benefits of further research, they tend to echo Orton’s arguments: the grandeur of the wider rescue story, the justice of acknowledging other heroes, and the need to scrutinize ill-documented prophetic statements with wider doctrinal implications. Many go a little further in saying “the story [is] a lot more meaningful” in light of new knowledge, and that a history free of embellishment is more reliable. Some other “benefits” students discover may actually reveal simplistic notions about history, such as claims that we know the whole truth now, that true history has saved us from myth, or that there must have been a cover-up.

I made two more adjustments in winter 2008. Even though Orton unveils Solomon Kimball as the human source of the famous narrative,
I chose to reinforce this by asking students what questions they would like to ask Kimball, identified as “author of the earlier account” and Orton, identified as “author of this new study.” In prior semesters, a distinct minority of student papers actively critiqued either author. In response to this new question, many more students directly cross-examined Kimball’s memory, sources, and purposes for the narrative, some more empathetically than others. Many students asked what motivated Orton to revisit the story—a sign of admiration, curiosity, or caution—but also a meaningful element of historical reading and inference.19

I also used pre- and post-class blogs to collect some more information about learning. The pre-class blog asked students to share what they knew of the Sweetwater incident and how they learned it. The intent was to learn how prior knowledge would affect their reading and learning. Unfortunately, most posted comments immediately after they read the article. This gave me a preview of their reactions, but no good data to track the links between their prior understanding and their capacity to acquire new understanding.20

In the post-class blog, I asked students to describe and explain what use they would make of Kimball’s account if they were teaching a fireside about the handcart rescue. A majority of students thought it best to rely on recent research, but some could see reasons to continue using the account, despite its limits, for various purposes. Students on both sides of the question developed moral arguments about Kimball’s narrative and the role it has played in wider Latter-day Saint history. For example, if something is flawed but seems to do good, what does that mean?

It Started with a Mistake

When class ended that Friday in May 2007, two students paused on their way out. In a conciliatory tone, the first student said I had cut him off before he could completely describe his response to the reading. Encountering doubts about Kimball’s account had set him on edge, but when he read Orton’s concluding observations he saw value in the research. What he said haltingly as we talked, he said better in his paper, which I read several days later:

I have come to love the quote. . . . about three men helping the saints cross the Sweetwater. . . . I felt the Spirit and it really pricks my heart every time. [And] for a large part of the article it seemed the writer was trying to prove the entire thing wrong and tear apart the account. . . . But as . . . in life you have to see things through to the end. The last
few pages brought into light for me why the article was written. . . . It is true that the events leading to the crossing and after the crossing are more or less forgotten. . . . This is why we are told to dig deeper into things. We don’t want to miss all the other great things that we could learn because we only know the parts that every one focuses on.

This student may not have plumbed the deepest analytical or normative implications of the exercise. But his words suggest that he learned—he struggled, he persisted, and he learned.

Rereading that paper months later, I see that the student performed some useful tasks as a learner and teacher. For example, he unveiled Solomon Kimball as creator of the narrative he so admired—giving the quote a history. He followed and admired Orton’s workmanlike examination of primary and secondary sources about the event, despite doubts about the endeavor. Lastly, he drew on his best principles to make meaning of a revised narrative. The story still taught him about courage, endurance, and sacrifice, and it also illustrated another virtue he associated with his faith: “to dig and look deeper into things and try to gain a better understanding for ourselves.”

To me, his response reveals promise, both spiritually and intellectually—I see him growing as a learner and teacher of truth. Ironically, had I heard him out in class, a crisis may never have blossomed and ripened into a problem worth investigating and talking about.

Postscript

In April 2008, Elder Quentin L. Cook of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles talked about the handcart rescue in general conference. I knew he was a descendant of one of the rescuers singled out in Solomon Kimball’s account, and I wondered what meaning Sweetwater had for him.

Elder Cook recounted his mother giving him Orson Whitney’s biography of Heber C. Kimball, and he quoted Whitney’s account that the rescuers risked their lives and thereby “immortalized themselves” among a grateful people. He then noted his own ancestor’s efforts at the Sweetwater and the great impression such deeds made on him as a teenager. He recalled wanting to prove his devotion by some dramatic act, only to be taught by a grandfather that the real lesson he should learn was to give “consistent, faithful dedication to the counsel of a prophet.”

Later I read Elder Cook’s talk. Checking the endnotes, I reacted enthusiastically when I saw that he had cited Orton’s article. Why would that matter to me? Perhaps it illustrates that teachers, like their
students, do not encounter history as empty vessels. We read and understand the past in a process where experience, intellect, spirit, and emotion all play their part. The more discerning we become, the more likely we are to achieve harmony among these ways of learning.

To illustrate, consider the thought process of a student who wrote about what he would say to someone who “felt the Spirit more with the less accurate version.” He began by acknowledging that he was one of those people stirred by the excerpt from Solomon Kimball’s article, which he remembered from a Church Educational System video. Having examined Orton’s evidence, the student observed that the 1914 version “seemed to focus in on a few and was really a ‘Hollywood’ version of the truth.” Upon initial reflection, he wondered if being moved by that account meant that he “really felt the Spirit as much as I just felt good.” Probing further, he considered what the Holy Ghost could teach a discerning learner: “The Spirit is trying to tell us that something significant happened here, and we can really learn from what happened. The Spirit, if listened to, might also be helping us hunger after the truth of the story.” Reflecting on his own emotional response to an incomplete account, he warned against a tendency “to feel so caught up in the magic that we forget to listen to the Spirit fully.” In history and life, that kind of discernment can help us grow as learners and teachers of truth.

Notes

1. “After they had given up in despair, after all hopes had vanished, after every apparent avenue of escape seemed closed, three eighteen-year-old boys belonging to the relief party came to the rescue, and to the astonishment of all who saw, carried nearly every member of the ill-fated handcart company across the snowbound stream. The strain was so terrible, and the exposure so great, that in later years all the boys died from the effects of it. When President Brigham Young heard of this heroic act, he wept like a child, and later declared publicly, ‘that act alone will ensure C. Allen Huntington, George W. Grant, and David P. Kimball an everlasting salvation in the Celestial Kingdom of God, worlds without end’”; Solomon F. Kimball, “Belated Emigrants of 1856,” *Improvement Era*, February 1914, 288.

2. Thanks to the index of Mormon Overland Travel, 1847–1868 at lds.org, the interested student can readily investigate many of the records of the handcart emigrants and rescuers online. Doing so should prompt some sympathy for the task of earlier narrators, as the sources vary in their memories of events. Jacques’s and Rogerson’s newspaper series are available there, among others. For material quoted above, see John Jacques, “Some Reminiscences,” *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, December 14, 1878, 1; Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1945 [1888]), 413–14; Daniel W. Jones, *Forty Years Among the Indians* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, [1890]), 68; Josiah F. Rogerson, “Martin’s

3. Contemporary records do confirm other words of praise. On the very day that the Martin Company arrived in Salt Lake City, in tones seldom heard during the “Mormon Reformation” of 1856–57, Brigham Young said that “no man or woman . . . has refused to do as requested, with regard to this immigration; they have run by day and night. . . . [And] scores of men have been riding by day and night, without having enjoyed an undisturbed night’s rest during the last two months. . . . They have been . . . laboring with their might and have not refused to do what we have required of them; this is to their praise.” He concluded by blessing the Saints and honoring the rescuers: “[The] winter blast . . . cannot stop the Mormon Elders, for they have faith, wisdom and courage; they can perform that which no other men on the earth can perform” (Deseret News, December 10, 1856, 320).


6. Thomas, journal, May 6, 2007. The entry continues: “My perception that history is unwanted by most members colors my reaction, and the fact that I’d just worn myself out over another long paper probably didn’t help. Certainly there is some pride that gets irritated at such exchanges. How do I persuade in long-suffering, and even agree to disagree agreeably? Talking to two of the three after class, I felt like we achieved some understanding, and the thought struck me that it would be okay for members of the Twelve to react differently to the article. But I want to remind them that the revised story is actually better—more fair to others, more consistent with basic principles, even bigger—than the tradition. And when a student insists there is nothing new or worthwhile of substance in the study, I want to fight back, but I realize some of that may simply be insecurity about my own efforts to extend inquiry into previously rehearsed stories. . . . I need help. I’ve prayed for charity, and we’ll see if I can be a Christlike mentor in my questions, correction, and praise.”

7. David Pace, “The Amateur in the Operating Room: History and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning,” American Historical Review 109, no. 4 (October 2004), 1171–72, 1176–79. The amateur in his title seems not to be the novice reader but rather the history teacher whose knowledge of content and the discipline far outstrips his or her scholarly understanding of how students learn. Few teachers (including me) can unpack how they read differently as a result of their training, nor how cognitive organization may shape the way students explain and evaluate events and their meaning.

8. Sam Wineburg, Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts, 74, 77, cited in Pace, “The Amateur in the Operating Room,” 1179–81. Incidentally, when Pace speaks of the amateur, he refers to teachers well trained in the discipline but ill informed about the scholarship of learning, rather than their students in training. Arrington salutes amateurs who mentor future Mormon historians and bequeath “their passion for understanding and interpreting the past in ways that enrich the present.” Yet he acknowledges that the amateurs’ passion may undermine their fidelity to disciplinary norms about evidence and inference. In my

9. My syllabus for Religion 342 Latter-day Saint History and Doctrine Since 1844 (Summer 2007) lists the following course objectives: “1. Improve your understanding of Latter-day Saint history and doctrine as it has unfolded from 1844 to the present. 2. Improve your understanding of the context and impact of continuing revelation in the Church. 3. Improve your ability to learn and teach Latter-day Saint history and doctrine. 4. Strengthen your faith in Christ and deepen your resolve to become his true disciple (see D&C 1:17–23, 30–33).” For the winter 2008 semester, I altered my aims to better fit “thinking like a historian” and emphasize drawing connections and added a new objective: “strengthen your capacity as a learner and teacher of truth, who learns ‘by study and also by faith,’ and prepares ‘diligently’ to teach, so as to receive ‘grace’ and ‘be instructed more perfectly’ (see D&C 88:78–80, 118–26).”

10. Note how the second reader, though unschooled in history, raised provocative analytical and evaluative questions, only to dismiss them prematurely, while acknowledging that he was defensive: (a) “That brings me to wonder, what makes up a historical account? . . . Surely Brother Kimball’s account of the story isn’t what we’re calling ‘the’ historical account.” (b) “What was Brigham Young thinking when he made the promise of eternity? Did he even say that? What was Solomon Kimball thinking? It’s all speculation.” (c) “Should we hold President Hinckley accountable for telling the erroneous account from the pulpit at past general conferences? I hope not.”

11. In summer 2007, I asked them to address the following issues in their review: “1. What questions does he ask to dig into the story further? 2. What does he find—what new evidence and information does he provide to revise the historical account? 3. What conclusions does he draw about the meaning or significance of the story? 4. What is your view of the value of digging into this story further, and what questions would you ask to understand more about the story or its meaning?” When grading the papers, I tend to focus on comprehension related to the first three questions. In reviewing the papers as artifacts of learning, the relationship between answers to the fourth question and other answers are more informative.

12. For instance, summer 2007 (male): “I also have to wonder when two prophets have discussed the incident, how accurate is Orton’s article? It is a peer-reviewed article offering sources, but that does not make it perfectly valid, regardless I’m not sure I appreciate his questioning the prophet. I sense contention as a result, as the original story obviously appeals to the hero archetype we all have inside us. . . . History is all perception, and in many ways I think I would like to stick to the original, even if it means ignorance on my part. . . . Obviously more happened than we were first told, but that is true of all history, and that’s something that will not change.” Summer 2007 (female): “I personally am quite happy to believe what I had prior known. His so-called ‘digging’ into the story did not make the message of selfless sacrifice any less for me. I almost feel a little offended that Mr. Orton needs to delve into the menial facts of the story. For me, the meaning of the story is far more important than the facts. I don’t believe I have any questions regarding this story or its meaning. I am completely content with the information I already have.” Fall 2007 (male): “There are possibly more costs to such a digging. The first being that you can’t prove that there is enough proof
to state whether a miracle really occurred or not: the Sweetwater crossing miracle, or the miracle of Christ dying on the cross and three days later being resurrected, or any other recorded miracle, at that. The second being that you minimize the effect that such a story can have on a reader. Even though the story might not be completely accurate, the message that it displays is often lost in all the facts. . . . The most detrimental cost for digging into a story so deeply is that you are likely to contradict yourself. . . . In what way can an invalidly proven miracle with little real significance symbolize selfless sacrifice?”

13. Consider these statements by favorable readers. Fall 2007 (male): “It kind of depressed me at first to read this and learn that these were not the only ones to do such a marvelous deed. . . . I think on it now and say, ‘Why be saddened that dozens or even more Saints came back and rescued these people in suffering conditions? I should be ecstatic that so many faithful Saints listened to the prophet.’” Winter 2008 (female): “I didn’t want to believe it at first; this is one of my favorite stories. . . . It was sad to realize that the story wasn’t completely true. However, I do enjoy knowing more of the truth.”


15. I hadn’t consciously considered emotional barriers to learning before May 2007. In e-mails to Chad Orton and a defensive student soon after my bad experience, I wrote of failing to set it up so they would know Orton “was on ‘their side’,” not “trying to tear anybody down” (John C. Thomas, e-mail to Chad Orton, May 7, 2007; e-mail to student, May 8, 2007, text in author’s possession).

16. The title “Brother” works for and against authors in Mormon history as they move across audiences, as Richard L. Bushman or Ronald W. Walker could tell you.

17. Several students also complain that a Sweetwater miracle gets gutted in revision. Since the rescuers eventually die in Kimball’s narrative, it is hard to tell if these students associate a miracle with their mortal carrying capacity or their eternal glory. It concerns me when young Latter-day Saints equate the spiritual with the spectacular, dramatic, and emotional; see Howard W. Hunter, “Eternal Investments,” in *Charge to Religious Educators*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1994), 74; Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 7.

18. These students might profit by applying Henry Eyring’s views of science and religion to historical learning: “What is true about the Gospel of Jesus Christ—not what you understand and think, which is partly nonsense, no matter who you are—but what is really true is all that we are committed to. . . . [If] you are afraid that science [or history] is going to knock the gospel over, you really haven’t got your religion in shape” (*Mormon Scientist: The Life and Faith of Henry Eyring* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2007], 242–43).

19. One student critiqued Orton’s rhetorical strategy quite thoughtfully (summer 2007, male): “The author took something loved and treasured in almost every Mormon heart and dashed it to pieces and then attempted to put it all back together again. . . . would have started the article with an overview of what everyone has already heard, but instead of reiterating every single detail before destroying it, I would have followed my Dad’s favorite talk radio reporter, Paul Harvey, by telling, ‘the rest of the story.’ . . . I would have simply told the entire story from the facts. I would have, instead of tearing down to rebuild, built upon the basis of their faith, and increased their knowledge about what really happened.”

21. One puzzle remains: What does it mean when he says he “felt the Spirit” each time he heard a fallible narrative? To me, one sentence in the conclusion dangled loosely: “And all throughout my membership in the Church I have been taught to listen to the Spirit, and it will teach me the things that I should know.” How does that comment relate to the rest of his conclusion? Did truth distill on his soul because he chose to “see things through to the end,” or was that principle itself the key disclosure?

22. One reason Sweetwater is sensitive is due to Church leaders’ use of the Kimball account in public discourse. The most notable example is President Gordon B. Hinckley’s quotation of the Solomon Kimball account in a talk given in 1981, shortly after he became a counselor in the First Presidency. Almost none of my students were alive then, but the Church Educational System subsequently incorporated President Hinckley’s remarks into a film that reenacted the river crossing (1997). I suspect that many of my students have seen the short and stirring film, but relatively few mention it in writing. It does nonetheless seem to shape some of the most negative reactions to Orton’s article.


24. Student paper, summer 2008 (male).
From the time the Book of Mormon was published, its readers have wondered about its geographical setting. Following is a lively debate between two thoughtful scholars. To motivate study of this topic, the Religious Educator offers their different viewpoints.

In recent years, many scholars interested in Book of Mormon geography have argued that the events of the Book of Mormon played themselves out in a Mesoamerican setting. Repudiating earlier and widespread assumptions that the “narrow neck of land” that figures so prominently in the book’s geography was the Isthmus of Panama and that the Nephites’ and Lamanites’ history ranged over the whole of North and South America, many now think that a restricted geography around the Isthmus of Tehuantepec provides the best setting for the book’s events in light of such considerations as recent archeological discoveries and the distances and geographical features mentioned and implied in the book itself.¹ Others have suggested limited sites centered in the eastern United States, specifically near the Susquehanna River and around the Great Lakes;² these proposals, however, have been convincingly discounted on the grounds that they fail to account for some of the more salient geographical features mentioned in the Book of Mormon like the narrow neck of land and a prominent northward-flowing river, and for the lack of an archaeological record temporally and materially consistent with evidence from the book.³
In this paper, I examine two important pillars of the “Limited Mesoamerican” thesis: first, that the geographical descriptions provided in the text itself require that the final battles of the Jaredites and Nephites took place relatively close to both peoples’ centers of civilization near the narrow neck of land; and second, that the hill where Joseph Smith found the gold plates does not match the Book of Mormon’s descriptions of the hill where the final battles took place. I argue that both ideas, in spite of how widely they have been accepted, are based more on assumptions about the text than a close reading of it and that the text does not require either—indeed, there is much in the text that suggests that the distance between the narrow neck of land and the site of the final battles was quite large. Stated differently, the idea that the final battles took place far from the center of most of the other activities discussed in the book is consistent with all the logical requirements of the text, and the hill in upstate New York—or one like it—meets every real requirement the text places on the Book of Mormon’s hill.

Through all of this, I am not arguing that the New York hill is necessarily the same hill mentioned in the Book of Mormon or that the final battles were necessarily fought a great distance from the book’s other events. Also, I am looking only at the requirements of the text and not at other considerations that would need to be taken into account to develop a full model of Book of Mormon geography. The point is simply that there is nothing in the text requiring the final battles of the Nephites and Jaredites to have taken place within a few hundred miles of the land of Zarahemla or the narrow neck of land and near a hill of a vastly different nature than New York’s Hill Cumorah. The paper concludes with implications these observations hold for future research into the question of Book of Mormon geography and some suggestions for how that research might proceed.

A Limited Geography?

As John L. Sorenson and Sidney B. Sperry articulate it, the argument that the Hill Cumorah/Ramah must be located relatively close to Zarahemla is based on several pieces of textual evidence. One of the most important was provided by the small group of men Limhi sent from the land of Nephi to Zarahemla to enlist the Nephites’ aid against the Lamanites, who were holding the people of Limhi in bondage. Not sure of where they were going, Limhi’s men found what Sorenson identifies as the “final battleground of the earlier people, the Jaredites”—in Limhi’s words, “a land which was covered with bones
of men, and of beasts, and was also covered with ruins of buildings of every kind” (Mosiah 8:8). Supposing this to be the remains of Zarahemla and her Nephite population, Limhi’s men returned to the land of Nephi (see Mosiah 21:26), demonstrating that the final battle of the Jaredites had taken place close enough to Zarahemla for travelers from Nephi to confuse the two sites.6

Another important part of this thesis is that the final battles of the Jaredites took place over a relatively limited area. This is demonstrated by the prophet Ether, who “fled for his life from the king’s headquarters in Moron, ‘hid himself in the cavity of a rock by day, and by night went forth viewing the things which should come upon the people.’ (Ether 13:13)” While in hiding, Ether “made the remainder” of the record he had apparently begun earlier and watched the progress of the Jaredite war.

“After eight years of intermittent combat,” Sorenson writes, “battles were still going on in the land of Moron, still within Ether’s viewing range. And he was still in his cave after a population of more than two million, which had covered ‘all the face of the land,’ had been killed (Ether 14:11, 22–23; 15:2). Finally, after the cataclysmic battle near the Hill Ramah, the Lord sent Ether from his cave to make the last entry in his record and deposit it where Limhi’s exploring party would find it.”8

For Ether to “observe most of the action while moving about only short distances from his cave base,” the final battles must have taken place within a relatively small area near Moron, which, according to Moroni, lay “near the land which is called Desolation by the Nephites” (Ether 7:6). Putting it all together, Sorenson suggests that “a hundred miles from Moron to the hill Ramah would probably accommodate all these facts.”9

As odd as it may sound initially, the legitimacy of this thesis depends largely on Ether staying near his cave as he watched the Jaredites annihilate themselves. That the cave was in the neighborhood of Moron and that Moron was near the land of Desolation are well-established facts (see Ether 13:13; 7:6). So, too, is Desolation’s proximity to Zarahemla, as demonstrated through the story of Limhi’s men confusing the two. If Ether watched everything unravel in the general area around the cave, including the final battle, then Ramah/Cumorah clearly lies relatively close to the Nephite lands mentioned so often throughout the narrative of the Book of Mormon. A careful reading of the text, however, shows that Ether’s cave actually drops out of the story long before the final battle is fought. Sorenson, in his sum-
mary of the events, includes the cave in his picture of the last battle and
the death of Shiz, but the last we actually read of it in the narrative is in
Ether 13:22, when Ether fled back to the cave after failing to convince
Coriantumr to repent. This took place very early on, in Ether’s second
year of hiding. Ether later watched the armies of Shiz and Coriantumr
gather together around the Hill Ramah and “went forth” to size things
up after Coriantumr slew Shiz, but no mention is made of the cave in
either case (see Ether 15:33, 13).

One might argue that Ether’s location at the cave is implicit in the
latter part of the story even though it is not made explicit in the text.\textsuperscript{10}
It should be noted, however, that Moron itself, and other locations
that figure prominently in the early years of the wars (valley of Gilgal,
wilderness of Akish), also drop out of the latter part of the narrative.\textsuperscript{11}
The turning point comes during the reign of Lib, whose career clearly
begins in the land of Moron (see Ether 14:10–11). Following Lib’s
pursuit of Coriantumr through the wilderness of Akish, however (see
14:14), Moron and other familiar sites entirely disappear from the
story. In their place comes a succession of plains, lands, valleys, hills,
and waters, only one of which, Ramah, appears earlier in the entire
Jaredite narrative—and that appearance, significantly, was only when
Omer “departed out of the land” in his flight from his son (9:3).\textsuperscript{12} One
is left with the strong impression that the “swift and speedy” war, in
which the combatants “did march forth from the shedding of blood to
the shedding of blood” (14:22), took them out of the traditional center
of Jaredite lands and into a completely different area—an impression
made even stronger by Moroni’s statement that Coriantumr, when
leaving the wilderness of Akish for the plains of Agosh and the begin-
nning of this phase of the wars, “had taken all the people with him as
he fled before Lib in that quarter of the land whither he fled” (14:15).
Moron, it appears, was largely—if not completely—abandoned in the
course of these wars, and at precisely the same point in the story when
we lose sight of Ether’s cave.\textsuperscript{13}

All of this suggests the distinct possibility that what Limhi’s men
found in their search for Zarahemla was not the scene of the Jaredites’
final battle, but the scene of a battle (or battles) that had been fought
early on in the Jaredite wars, prior to the scene of action shifting from
the land of Moron elsewhere.\textsuperscript{14} Moroni, abridging Ether’s account,
identifies no less than ten distinct battles between Coriantumr and
his enemies that took place in or near the land of Moron (see Ether
13:16, 18, 23–24, 27–30; 14:3–4, 11–14). He also identifies two other
periods of extensive warfare in the area—one a “war upon all the face
of the land” in which “every man with his band [was] fighting for that which he desired,” and the other a two-year period in which “all the people upon the face of the land were shedding blood” (13:25, 31). All of these took place within a limited area in and around Moron, the sum total of which could easily account for the extensive destruction Limhi’s men found.

The dead from these ten battles and two other wars were part of the slain “two millions of mighty men, and also their wives and their children” that Coriantumr would later count after the apparent shift in the scene of action from Moron to other regions (Ether 15:2). The remainder of the population died after this shift in theaters, in the “swift and speedy” war through cities, plains, and valleys that left “the bodies of both men, women, and children strewed upon the face of the land” (14:22), but before the final battle at Ramah. Given how many people had perished before Ramah appears in the narrative, one wonders how many people were actually left to fight in the final battle itself. In fact, some evidence in the text suggests the possibility that only a few thousand people ultimately closed ranks at Ramah. Moroni tells us that after five days of fighting, everyone had fallen except for fifty-two on Coriantumr’s side and sixty-nine on Shiz’s side (see Ether 15:15–23). After another day of fighting, Coriantumr’s numbers were down to twenty-seven, while Shiz had thirty-two—about a 50 percent mortality rate on each side for that day’s fighting (see 15:25).

While there is no way to determine the actual rate of mortality for the previous days’ fighting, there is no reason to think the rate for the sixth’s day’s battle was exceptional in any way; one suspects, in fact, that those who had made it as far as Ramah were fairly evenly matched, and victories there were hard won. If the mortality rate per day was roughly the same during the first five days of fighting as it was for the sixth, then each side started off with somewhere between two and three thousand people. While significant, especially since their deaths represent the end of an entire civilization, five or six thousand people dying in a battle was hardly exceptional by Book of Mormon standards and does not represent the magnitude of destruction that greeted Limhi’s men and gave the land of Desolation its name. The nature of the text doesn’t allow us to draw any firm conclusions, but the numbers that we do have leave the door open for the idea that the Jaredites’ final battle at Ramah was nothing compared to what had happened previously.

Unfortunately, Moroni provides no firm clues about how far Lib’s and Shiz’s pursuit of Coriantumr took the Jaredites. He mentions numerous topographical features and place-names, indicating that the
area was not terra incognita, and occasionally indicates the direction of Coriantumr’s flight from one place to another (see Ether 14:26; 15:10), but in most cases direction and distance are open-ended.¹⁶

That Ramah was in a very different area from Moron is clear from his record, as was the existence of a seashore an undisclosed distance to the east of Moron, and Ogath’s location some distance south of the waters of Ripliancumen (see 14:26; 15:10).¹⁷ That the pursuit had a significant eastern trajectory, at least at one point, is clear (see 14:26); that it also had a northern trajectory is suggested by the fact that no mention is made of Limhi’s men, coming from the south, finding any ruins south of the Desolation/Moron area.¹⁸ What other directions were involved over the course of the pursuit, and how many miles actually separated these and the other places mentioned in the account, are open questions, and it should be clear that Sorenson telescopes the events in his description and summary of them, flattening their complexity and the strong evidence suggesting that they actually took place somewhere other than near the land of Moron.¹⁹

Proponents for the limited Mesoamerican thesis find further evidence for “the close proximity of Ramah to Moron” in the account of the flight of Omer. Appearing early in Jaredite history when the Jaredite population must have been “tiny,” Omer fled from an upstart son in Moron to the east sea, traveling “many days” with his family and passing Ramah/Cumorah en route to the sea. Omer later returned to Moron after the threat had passed. “If the area to which he fled, and thus of the last battle, was within a hundred miles or so of Moron, Omer’s flight and return make sense,” reasons Sorenson. “A much greater distance would seem strange, given the small population.”²⁰

Taking a different tack, Sidney B. Sperry finds significance in Moroni’s note that Omer “came over and passed by the hill of Shim” on his way to the “place where the Nephites were destroyed” and beyond (Ether 9:3).

The “hill Shim” . . . was the place in Middle America where the prophet Ammaron hid the Nephite records. . . . And when Moroni mentions in such a casual way that Omer passed from the Hill Shim “and came over by the place where the Nephites were destroyed,” it is hard to believe that Cumorah was not in the same region as the Hill [Shim].

“This is especially so,” argues Sperry, when we later see Omer’s friend Nimrah and a small number of others join Omer in his exile (see Ether 9:9).²¹
On close examination, however, the whole affair begs enough questions to seriously compromise its utility as a “confirmation of the close proximity of Ramah to Moron.”22 How far wouldn’t a family and their friends run from an assassin? Why should a small population (if such really was the case) limit the distance people might flee to save their lives to one hundred miles? And why should it seem so unlikely that Omer would meet up with his friends from Moron many hundreds of miles away? Lehi and his family, for example, who were also fleeing assassins under the direction of the Lord (see Ether 9:3; 1 Nephi 2:1–2), ended up half a world away from their point of departure, where their descendants met up with the descendants of another group of people who had left from precisely the same place. In addition, and in spite of Sperry’s confidence on the matter, Moroni’s “casual” juxtaposition of the Hill Shim and the site of the Nephites’ destruction does not necessarily imply that the two were close together. Moroni provides no information about how far apart the two were, and may have mentioned them by name simply because they were the only places on Omer’s route with which readers of his father Mormon’s record would be familiar.23 It is not even clear, in fact, that the Hill Shim was located in “Middle America” as Sperry asserts. That it was north of the city Desolation is clear,24 but how far north is an open question.25 It was apparently unnamed when the prophet Ammaron hid the records there, and it was not a site with which Mormon, who evidently spent the first ten years of his life in the land northward, was familiar,26 allowing for the distinct possibility that it lay somewhere beyond the centers of population in that direction. At best, Sorenson and Sperry are able to fit Omer’s story into a limited geography, but the story itself hardly requires or confirms such a model.27

Asserting that the “last cities and landmarks mentioned by Mormon” prior to Cumorah coming on the scene “are clearly in the land of Desolation in Middle America,” Sperry argues that Mormon’s account of the Nephites’ destruction requires Cumorah to be in Mesoamerica as well. However, of the “last cities and landmarks” he mentions, only two—the cities Desolation and Teancum—were demonstrably in the land of Desolation near the narrow neck of land (see Mormon 3:5; 4:3). How far Boaz and the Hill Shim were from the city Desolation is impossible to say,28 but it is clear from Mormon’s summary of the flight from that area that by the time the Nephites reached the city Jordan and other cities, they were several “lands” (note the plural) from the area (see Mormon 5:5), let alone still within it or even immediately adjacent to it.29 While the text does not allow us to be any more precise
regarding the locations of the sites mentioned just prior to Cumorah’s debut on the scene, it does appear to allow room for the idea that the Nephites traveled a substantial distance on their way to Cumorah.

Other Evidence for a Limited Setting

Two other pieces of evidence might be invoked to support the idea that the Book of Mormon text requires a limited geography, although both break down upon close examination. The first is Limhi’s description of the area where his men found the Jaredite record as “a land among many waters” (Mosiah 8:8), which sounds much like Mormon’s description of the land of Cumorah as “a land of many waters, rivers, and fountains” (Mormon 6:4). There is no reason to conclude, however, that these lands of “many waters” are necessarily one and the same; indeed, the authors’ use of the indefinite article before each phrase suggests that there are many such areas, as does a third reference in the text to such an area (see Helaman 3:4).

The second is the contention that since the “battle-worn” and “deeply wounded” Coriantumr could not have traveled far after Ramah, the site of the final battle must have been fairly close to where he was found by the people of Zarahemla. This argument assumes, however, that Coriantumr was essentially crippled or incapacitated after the battle—an assumption not necessarily supported by the text. All we read is that he had lost a lot of blood and that he collapsed after decapitating Shiz (see Ether 15:27, 30, 32); nothing in the text indicates his wounds would have prevented him from traveling after he had time to heal and regain his strength. He had been severely wounded at least once before Ramah and had recovered enough to fight—and win—again (see Ether 13:31, 14:3), and, because he was arguably the best of the “large and mighty men as to the strength of men” (15:26) among the Jaredites, there is a real chance that he could have recovered sufficiently from his wounds at Ramah to travel long distances. Even his death nine months after being found by the people of Zarahemla (see Omni 1:21; Ether 13:21) says nothing about his health following Ramah, as the text provides no information about how long after the battle he was found. He may have died of old age or other causes rather than his wounds.

Some might argue against the plausibility of even a healthy Coriantumr and Ether traveling any substantial distance following the final battle—the former to be found by the people of Zarahemla, and the latter to deposit his record of Jaredite history “in a manner that the people of Limhi did find them” (Ether 15:33). Omer, too, would have
made a similar trip after the Jaredites almost destroyed themselves following his flight out of the land (see 9:3–13). As difficult as such a trek might be for individuals or small numbers to make, it is hardly out of the question—indeed, Sorenson makes a good case for the plausibility of Moroni making the same trip, albeit in the opposite direction, in his discussion of the limited Mesoamerican theory. While Moroni presumably would have traveled under the prompting of the Spirit, the journey of Coriantumr, Ether, and Omer can be explained in terms as simple and understandable as individuals who have been displaced by warfare wanting to return home—not only a natural impulse, but a very powerful one as well, and fully sufficient to account for people making such a trek.

At the very least, then, the evidence discussed above should make it clear that the text does not require that the site of the Jaredites’ and Nephites’ ultimate destruction be within a hundred miles or so of the narrow neck of land. In some places, in fact, the text appears to suggest a very different scenario—that is, that the battles took place far from the centers of their civilizations, in some sort of northern backcountry with which the Jaredites and Nephites were familiar, but that, with a few exceptions, generally lay outside the scope of their records. Other events and descriptions from elsewhere in the Book of Mormon similarly hint at a far-flung Nephite hinterland to the north of their center of civilization as well. Mormon, for example, writes that “an exceedingly great many” people departed out of Zarahemla in the last half of the first century BC and traveled north “to an exceedingly great distance, insomuch that they came to large bodies of water and many rivers” (Helaman 3:4). Sorenson, advocating a limited geography for the Book of Mormon, suggests that this was the Valley of Mexico, a lake region some 450 miles northwest of his proposed site for Zarahemla and “near the extremity of the Mesoamerican culture at the time of our record.” At the same time, however, Mormon reports that it “was only the distance of a day and half’s journey for a Nephite” to cross the narrow neck of land (Alma 22:32), some 75–125 miles, by Sorenson’s estimate, which fits well with the 120-mile-wide Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Such being the case, why would Mormon identify 450 miles as “an exceedingly great distance” when a 120 miles was “only . . . a day and a half’s journey”?

The difference in wording might partly be a result of who, precisely, was doing the traveling: Mormon might have considered 450 miles to be an “exceedingly great” distance for settlers to travel, while a fast individual—perhaps an athlete in a race—could cover 120 miles
in only a day and a half. Without more information, however, it is just as possible that the difference in wording reflects Mormon’s perception of the actual distances involved, regardless of who was traversing them. If such is the case, one traveling to the Valley of Mexico would be on the road perhaps six days to the other’s day and a half; would Mormon really consider an extra four or five days’ travel sufficient grounds for replacing the adverb “only” with “exceedingly great”? The text is too vague to permit any firm conclusions (hence Sorenson’s very rough estimate of the distance), but it at least opens the door to the distinct possibility that Nephites at this point in their history were traveling and settling much farther than 450 miles from the city of Zarahemla.35

Similarly suggestive of an extensive Nephite backcountry is the prophet Nephi’s six-year mission in the “land northward” some twenty years after people began traveling to “exceedingly great” distances in that direction (Helaman 6:6; 7:1). Mormon passes over the details of this mission; all we know is that Nephi “had been forth among the people who were in the land northward, and did preach the word of God unto them,” and that “they did reject all his words, insomuch that he could not stay among them” (Helaman 7:2–3). Nephi may have spent the six years in a relatively limited geographical area, much like the sons of Mosiah seventy years earlier had spent fourteen years among the Lamanites in and around the land of Nephi (see Alma 17–26). But the sons of Mosiah were establishing and building up churches a good part of the time—a happy circumstance conducive to keeping missionaries in one place that Nephi didn’t enjoy. The report is far too vague to support any firm conclusions, but we should be open to the possibility that a six-year mission among unreceptive, even hostile, people would have taken Nephi farther afield than a few days’ journey from the land southward.

Yet another indication that a substantial distance may have lain between the narrow neck of land and the site of the final battles is the fact that it required four years for both the Jaredites and the Nephites to gather all their supporters (perhaps including foreign allies) in the area to Ramah/Cumorah (see Ether 15:14; Mormon 5:6–7; 6:5). The issue for both peoples was a pressing one, and one can only wonder why it would have taken so long if everything was happening in a limited area of only a few hundred miles in extent—especially if, in the case of the Nephites, that limited area had been a war zone for over thirty years leading up to the final battle.36 Sorenson offers some reasons explaining why the Lamanites might allow the Nephites four years to gather their forces, but he doesn’t address the equally important ques-
tion of why the Nephites needed that much time in the first place. Yet again we lack the details, but the evidence we do have does not preclude the idea (and may even suggest the idea) that a much larger territory was involved at this point in the stories than allowed by the limited Mesoamerican theory.

The Hill Cumorah and Its Environs

It should be clear from the above discussion that there is nothing in the Book of Mormon that is at odds with the idea that the final battles of the Jaredites and Nephites took place in some hinterland far to the north of these groups’ centers of civilization. In fact, there is much in the book that may suggest and support such an idea. What about the textual requirements for the hill near which these battles were fought? Several scholars, following the lead of David Palmer, recently have argued that the Book of Mormon accounts of the final battles—especially the battle between the Nephites and Lamanites—require a much different hill than the hill near Palmyra, New York. One of the biggest problems they have identified is the New York hill’s size. Palmer argues that the hill described in the Book of Mormon “must have been a significant landmark, because the surrounding area was named after it” and that it had to be large for Mormon to be able “to survey the entire scene of carnage from the top of the hill.” Neither logic nor the text, however, bears out either of these assertions. Nothing requires that the land of Cumorah be named after the Hill Cumorah, for example; quite possibly, the lines of influence went the other way. Even if the land had been named after the hill, the hill’s significance need not be a function of its size; rather, it may lay in the significance of something that had happened there earlier. Nor should Mormon have had any difficulty surveying the scene from the top of a relatively small hill like the one in New York, from which the city of Rochester, some twenty miles away, is visible on a clear day.

Palmer also argues that the hill must have been quite large because “it is quite clear that the battle took place on that hill and the plain leading up to it.” This is clearly an assumption on his part, however, as nothing in the text suggests that any part of the battle took place on the actual hill. The Nephites pitched their tents around it, and Mormon climbed it after the battle, but there is no evidence that any fighting took place on it (see Mormon 6:4, 11). A hill need not even be particularly large for a large number of people to fight around or near it. Hundreds of thousands could fight around or in the vicinity of a fence post if they were so inclined; the limiting factor is not the
central object’s circumference, but its proximity to geographical features (oceans, lakes, cliffs, etc.) that prevent the requisite number of combatants from fitting within the designated area. No such limiting feature exists anywhere in the vicinity of the New York hill.

Similarly, Sorenson argues that the hill must have been “high enough that the wounded survivors would be safe on top from being spotted by the Lamanites below.”43 Again, however, the text hardly requires such an interpretation. Mormon writes that he and his fellows viewed the destruction after “the Lamanites had returned unto their camps” but gives no information about where those camps were located (Mormon 6:11). They may have been out of sight several miles away, with Mormon and his companions not dependent on the hill’s height for their safety. Rather than suggesting that the hill was quite large, in fact, the story might just as validly imply that the hill was fairly small—so small that Mormon had to wait for the Lamanites to withdraw from view before he dared climb it. The text simply does not give us enough information to know one way or the other on this score, and it should be clear from the foregoing that, here as elsewhere, the Book of Mormon makes no absolute requirements of its Hill Cumorah that the hill in New York is unable to meet.

Some have suggested that the climate, topography, and physical features of a hill like the one in upstate New York do not match Book of Mormon descriptions for the site of the last battles. Both Sorenson and Palmer, for example, have argued on the basis of Omer’s flight past “the place where the Nephites were destroyed, and from thence eastward, . . . to a place which was called Ablom, by the seashore” (Ether 9:3), that Ramah/Cumorah was near an eastern sea.44 Where no distance between Ramah/Cumorah and the seas is specified, however, such a conclusion is unjustified—a thousand miles could lie between the hill and the eastern sea as easily as ten. Similarly, Palmer argues that the text requires a volcano in the area, although it is clear that he is conflating Cumorah and the Nephite heartland in this case.45 Palmer also argues that the absence of any mention of cold or snow “is strong evidence that no part of the Nephite history took place as far north as New York.”46 Again, however, such a conclusion is unjustified; by this logic, the final battles were evidently accompanied by no weather at all, as no climatological phenomena are mentioned in the text at this point in the story. Nor was Mormon necessarily referring to “water springing from under the earth” when he noted the presence of “fountains” in the land of Cumorah, the lack of which, according to Palmer, is further evidence that Palmyra’s hill is not the hill of the Book of Mormon.47
“Fountain” is used earlier in the Book of Mormon to designate at least two phenomena other than water springing from the earth—the Red Sea in one case, and a river in the other (see 1 Nephi 2:9, 12:16). Home to several large bodies of water and rivers, upstate New York fits the bill very well.

A more substantial criticism of a setting for the final battles far to the north of the narrow neck of land is the contention that the hill had to be located in an agriculturally productive area to sustain the numbers of people massing there prior to the final battle between the Nephites and Lamanites. Although upstate New York is fertile and productive today, for example, maize was not cultivated there until after Book of Mormon times—a simple fact that, for some, calls into serious question the region’s ability to produce the food necessary to sustain the armies. Again, however, such a concern is based more on assumption than the actual text, which gives little concrete information about how the Nephites actually gathered to Cumorah. We have no idea how long large numbers of people were living in the area. We know from Mormon’s chronology that the Nephites took flight from the city of Jordan and other cities in about the three hundred and eightieth year (Mormon 5:3–7), that sometime later Mormon requested that the Lamanite king allow them to gather to Cumorah (6:2), and that by the end of three hundred and eighty four years all the Nephites had made it there (6:5). The text implies that the gathering was a process and that some were there longer than others, but there is no reason to think that hundreds of thousands of people were living there for four years—just the opposite, in fact. Nor does the text require that the armies were growing their food on the spot. Quite possibly they were not; earlier periods of warfare saw armies on both sides receiving provisions from somewhere other than the fields of battle (see Alma 56:27–30; 57:6, 8, 10–11, 15; 58:4–5, 8), and at one point early in the first century AD the Nephites had gathered enough provisions to maintain “thousands and . . . tens of thousands” of people a full seven years (3 Nephi 3:22, 4:4)—several years longer than Mormon’s armies were gathering to Cumorah. Like Helaman’s ten-thousand-man army earlier, each of Mormon’s twenty-three armies of ten thousand might have come to Cumorah prepared with enough supplies “for them, and also for their wives and their children” (Alma 56:28) to last as long as necessary, rendering the agricultural productivity of the site of the final battles in the fourth century AD a moot point. In the absence of any textual evidence suggesting that the armies grew their own food at the site of the final battle, and in the presence of textual evidence
indicating that the Nephites were capable of storing and transporting tremendous amounts of supplies, one must take seriously the proposition that the battle at Cumorah may have been fueled largely from somewhere outside.

Another criticism with textual roots leveled against the possibility of New York’s Hill Cumorah being the site of the final battles is that the hill, and the area immediately around it, “lacks the expected archaeological record”—that is, the “fortifications, habitations, weapons, or skeletons” we should expect to find at such a site.50 The text, however, gives no evidence that either the Jaredites or Nephites constructed any buildings or fortifications in the area; the most we read about during the four years in which the Nephites were gathering to Cumorah are the “tents” Mormon’s people pitched at some undisclosed distance “round about” the hill (Mormon 6:4).51 Nor does the text provide any information on the final disposition of the dead, their (supposed) armor, and their weapons on the battleground. Bodies might ultimately have been buried, burned, removed, or left to rot, and armor and weapons, based on the information we have in the text, could have been hauled off by the Lamanites or others as easily as they might have been left on the ground.

With the Lamanites continuing to war among themselves after destroying the Nephites (see Mormon 8:8), this last point is an important one; armor and weapons would have continued to be in high demand among the Lamanites, calling into serious question the proposition that such valuable items would have been left on the field following the final battle. Without more textual information about how and where the opposing armies made their weapons, and what materials were used, even the reported absence of arrowheads and flint chips in the area cannot be considered “evidence” that battles were not fought in the area.52 If we use the text as our guide, in short, scholars need to be open to the possibility of finding all sorts of different scenarios at the scene of the final battles, including the very real possibility that there might not be much there at all.

Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

I have argued that there is nothing in the Book of Mormon text that requires the final battles of the Jaredites and Nephites to have taken place in the general proximity of these peoples’ center of civilization near a narrow neck of land. Many things in the text, in fact, suggest just the opposite. I have also argued that there is nothing in the text that would render a hill like New York’s Hill Cumorah unfit as
a candidate for the Book of Mormon’s Hill Cumorah. Again, though, I have not argued that the New York hill is necessarily the same hill mentioned in the Book of Mormon or that the final battles were necessarily fought a great distance from the book’s other events.

It should be clear from the above, however, that we may need to look for Cumorah farther to the north, in some sort of Jaredite and Nephite backcountry, than many have thought necessary in recent years. In doing so, it is of paramount importance that scholars continue to keep the requirements and ambiguities of the text firmly in mind as they formulate their hypotheses for what they should expect to find. What sort of archaeological evidence, for example, should we expect to find for Book of Mormon peoples living outside the centers of their civilizations? The answer quite possibly could be “not much.” One gets the strong impression from the text that much of the region lying between the centers of civilization and Ramah/Cumorah, although known to the Jaredites and Nephites, was sparsely settled, at least when compared to the areas the narrative primarily deals with. Cities quickly give way to plains and valleys in Lib’s and Shiz’s pursuit of Coriantumr to Ramah (see Ether 14:17–15:11), while “towns and villages” come into the picture during the Nephites’ race for Cumorah (Mormon 4:22; 5:5). No settlement of any size is identified near Cumorah itself, suggesting that even the villages thinned out along the way. Archaeological remains and Nephites and Jaredites in this area, therefore, could be few and far between, and on a far humbler scale than one should expect to find at the cultural centers. Along with being open to the possibility of finding all sorts of scenarios at the scene of the final battles, as discussed above, scholars should also be open to the idea that Book of Mormon peoples in far-flung areas may have adapted their clothing, implements, and building practices to the climate and resources in the new area, and that much of what they find may therefore be of a very different character than remains found closer to the centers.

How far from the Jaredite and Nephite centers should we look for Ramah/Cumorah? It should be clear from this paper that as far as distances and directions go, many places in northern Central America and North America might be considered potential candidates. While I have not argued for it exclusively, it should also be clear that a site in upstate New York should at least be considered a possibility and may not be as far-fetched as some might imagine. By means of coastal plains and the Mississippi and Ohio river valleys, a natural, well-defined path of sorts exists between Central America and upstate New York. Although the 2,300 miles of coastal plains and river valleys that lie between Central
America and Manchester, New York, might seem impossibly far, the use of such an extensive territory by a single people is not without parallel in the pre-Columbian New World—the Inca Empire of South America, for example, extended almost twice that distance, and over much more difficult terrain. Old World examples of peoples covering such extensive territories for settlement, trade, and warfare abound, as do examples from American history like John Fremont’s escapades in California or the Mormon Battalion. Lehi’s group itself appears to have traveled at least 2,100 miles from Jerusalem to Bountiful, with Nephi and his brothers traveling an additional 1,000 miles in the course of their two trips back to Jerusalem from Lehi’s encampment in the valley of Lemuel. If the apparent Jaredite and Nephite backcountry somehow utilized these river valleys and their tributaries—perhaps as sites for scattered settlements, or communication or trade routes with other peoples—upstate New York would come into the picture very naturally during the extremities of genocidal warfare, as opposing sides coursed the length of their “interaction sphere” looking for recruits. The use of such a natural path leading away from the centers of civilization also explains how two different peoples at two different times in history ended up at precisely the same place for their final battles—a difficult thing even for a limited model to account for, frankly. As a possible source of men and supplies relatively close to the site of the final battle, this hinterland might also explain how 230,000 Nephite warriors, plus their wives and children, really could end up over 2,000 miles away from the narrow neck of land and the scene of most Book of Mormon events.

However plausible one may or may not consider the idea of a New York Cumorah to be, it should be noted here that two distinct cultures did flourish in the Ohio and Mississippi river valleys during Jaredite and Nephite times. Remains of the earlier of the two, the Adena, date from around 500 BC to AD 100; remains of the latter, the Hopewell, date from around 100 BC to AD 400. While neither culture appears to have attained to the level of urbanization we read about in much of the Book of Mormon, a Hopewelian effigy pipe carved in the shape of a toucan taking food from a hand and a caiman-shaped copper cutout from Pike County, Illinois, indicate contact of some sort between these people and Central American peoples during Book of Mormon times.

Could these cultures represent a distant, relatively sparsely settled Jaredite and Nephite backcountry or hinterland that developed over the course of these peoples’ histories (for examples, see Alma 63:4, 9; Helaman 3:3–8), or could they reflect the presence or influence of
Book of Mormon peoples or traders in the area? Less dramatically, might these areas simply have been within the purview of Jaredites and Nephites? The dates of the remains, their location in a natural corridor extending north from Central America, and the physical evidence for contact with that area are certainly suggestive of such possibilities. So, too, is the nature of their artifacts and remains, which include both barley and maize (compare Mosiah 9:9), strings of pearls (compare 4 Nephi 1:24), and numerous copper headplates and breastplates (compare Mosiah 8:10; Alma 43:38; Helaman 1:14; 3 Nephi 4:7; Ether 15:15). The orientation and dimensions of many Hopewell mounds and earthworks also indicate an advanced understanding of astronomy and mathematics. Suggestive, too, at least for those willing to take seriously the possibility that the final battles were fought in upstate New York, is the fact that the northeasternmost sites for both cultures are located near Lake Ontario. With a text that allows for “towns and villages” lying some distance north of the great urban centers near the narrow neck of land, the remains of these two cultures beg the attention of those Book of Mormon scholars who have traditionally confined their research to Central America.

Just as early Spanish descriptions of Central American peoples and ruins have shed light on a Mesoamerican setting for the Book of Mormon, so might the records of early explorers, missionaries, and settlers in North America shed some light on a possible Jaredite and Nephite backcountry in the north. Such sources and resources have received very little attention in the past from trained scholars, some of whom have quickly dismissed them as “very old gossip and folklore,” “old hearsay,” or a “credulous mishmash of opinions.” This charge, to a degree, is true; one reading these sources quickly finds himself buried in suppositions about Persians, Tartars, antediluvians, and other explanations growing out of the sources on ancient peoples available to nineteenth-century Americans. At the same time, many of the sites and artifacts are still around today and have subsequently been classified as representative of the Adena and Hopewell cultures mentioned above. While we might be inclined to disagree with early Americans’ interpretations of what they saw, their descriptions of the ruins, artifacts, native vocabularies, native practices, and native traditions that they found so suggestive of biblical and classical civilizations constitute an important source for understanding pre-Columbian America. At the very least, such sources deserve the careful scrutiny of Book of Mormon scholars trained in archaeology, anthropology, ethnography, history, linguistics,
and comparative religion before they are rejected as irrelevant to Book of Mormon studies. 57

Some of these sources even have the potential to help us solve long-standing difficulties the Book of Mormon presents. As just one example, Josiah Priest, in his popular American Antiquities, describes a cave on the Ohio river in which pictures of three animals “like the elephant in all respects except the tusk and tail” are found, along with representations of human figures whose clothing “resembles the Roman.” 68 Given the problem the elephants of the Jaredites have presented to defenders of the Book of Mormon over the years, we should ask, where did Priest get his information? Are there other contemporary descriptions of this cave and its pictures? If there really was such a cave with pictures, where is it located? Are the pictures still visible? Are there, or were there, datable remains in the cave or in the immediate area? Priest’s book and many other early publications and records like it contain all sorts of tantalizing hints like this, 69 and while the possibility is very real that many of these reports are more legend, imagination, and even fraud than anything, it would be inexcusable for students of the Book of Mormon to brush them aside as such without further scrutiny.

These are just a few of the research ideas that suggest themselves when one is willing to consider the possibility that Cumorah lay north of Mesoamerica. Some are probably more viable than others, and all are open to debate. The point, though, is that rather than leading to a dead end, a reconsideration of the geographical requirements of the Book of Mormon appears to open up several avenues for potential research into a variety of Book of Mormon topics, and not just geography. Where these avenues might lead remains to be seen; at this point, the fact that such opportunities exist in this direction should be considered significant. Insofar as they appear to be viable in terms of the requirements of the text, it seems clear that they are worth pursuing as part of our larger effort to identify and better understand the peoples, setting, and meaning of this remarkable book. 69

Notes

1. The theory has found its best expression in John Sorenson, An Ancient American Setting for The Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1996); and David A. Palmer, In Search of Cumorah: New Evidence for the Book of Mormon from Ancient Mexico (Bountiful, UT: Horizon, 1981). Other treatments include Joseph L. Allen, Exploring the Lands of the Book of
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Mormon (Orem, UT: S. A. Publishers, 1989); and F. Richard Hauck, Deciphering the Geography of the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988).


10. One might also argue that Ether’s location at the cave is suggested in Ether 13:14, which states that “as [Ether] dwelt in the cavity of a rock he made the remainder of this record, viewing the destructions which came upon the people, by night.” In 15:33, however, we read that he “finished his record” after he “went forth” following the death of Shiz. Taken together, these two verses imply that he worked extensively on the record while living in the cave, and perhaps brought it near to its completion, but that the idea expressed in 13:14 that he actually “finished” the record there is not to be taken completely literally. Nor does Moroni’s statement that Ether “finished his record” and then “hid them in a manner that the people of Limhi did find them” (Ether 15:33) necessarily mean that he finished the record close to where Limhi’s men found them in the land of Desolation. Moroni tells us in the same verse that we are only getting the briefest glimpse of all that happened, leaving the door open to the very real possibility that Ether finished his record far from where he actually hid it.

11. At least two battles between Coriantumr and his early enemies were fought in the valley of Gilgal (see Ether 13:27, 30). The wilderness of Akish also appears twice before the rise of Shiz—once as a battlefield, and once as an area where Coriantumr took refuge from Lib (see Ether 14:4–5, 14). Neither appear in the narrative after Shiz came on the scene.

12. Lib’s and then Shiz’s pursuit of Coriantumr led through the plains of Agosh (see Ether 14:15), into the land and valley of Corihor (see 14:27–28), the valley of Shurr and upon the hill Comnor (see 14:28), to the waters of Ripliantcum (see 15:8), to a place called Ogath (see 15:10), and to the hill Ramah (see
15:11). None of these occur earlier in the narrative. Incidentally, traditional lands eventually completely drop out of Mormon’s account of the wars leading to the Nephites’ final battle as well (see Mormon 4:19–5:8; 6:1–4).

13. Ether fled to his cave near Moron after unsuccessfully trying to convince Coriantumr to repent (see Ether 13:22). The next time Ether appears in the text, which is after Lib’s and Shiz’s pursuit of Coriantumr has commenced, the cave is not mentioned (15:13).

14. Sorenson identifies the area Limhi’s men found “as the final battleground of the earlier people, the Jaredites,” but nowhere does the Book of Mormon make that identification (Sorenson, Ancient American Setting, 14). The area becomes known as the land of Desolation, “the land which had been peopled and been destroyed” (Alma 22:30), but the Book of Mormon never identifies Desolation as the site of the last actual battle between Shiz and Coriantumr.

15. See note 12 above.

16. We have no solid clue indicating how far and in what direction the plains of Agosh might lie from the wilderness of Akish, for example, or how far and in what direction the waters of Ripliancum might lie from the land of Corihor (see Ether 14:14–15; 14:27–15:8).

17. Moron appears to have lain near a seashore (see Ether 14:11–12), but the text fails to provide any directions in this case. We cannot conclude, therefore, that this seashore is the same one mentioned in Ether 14:26, which clearly lay “eastward” of the plains of Agosh and perhaps Moron.

18. Nowhere in the Book of Mormon are Jaredite ruins mentioned south of Desolation.

19. Like Sorenson, Palmer disregards the ambiguity of the evidence when he argues that the Jaredites’ final battle took place “in the presence of an established populace” and “right in the midst of the Jaredite settlements and cities” (Palmer, In Search of Cumorah, 60–61). Hugh Nibley, on the other hand, notes the “wilderness” setting of the Jaredites’ final battle, far from “the great monuments of Jaredite civilization” that “abound in the land of the south that they first settled” (Hugh Nibley, Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites, ed. John W. Welch, Darrel L. Matthews, Stephen R. Callister [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988], 227–28). In an additional argument for a Mesoamerican setting for the final battles, Palmer interprets the fact that some Nephites, after Cumorah, sought refuge in “the south countries” (Mormon 6:15) to mean that Cumorah was near the narrow neck of land leading into the land southward (Palmer, In Search of Cumorah, 44). Mormon’s use of the phrase “south countries,” however, rather than “land southward”—the phrase he usually employed in the course of his record to specify the traditional Nephite center—raises the strong possibility that he had something in mind other than an area south of the narrow neck. Later Moroni refers to the same area as the “country southward”—again, a different phrase than that traditionally used to designate the actual land southward (Mormon 8:2).


22. Sorenson, Ancient American Setting, 16.

23. Mormon mentions the hill Shim in Mormon 1:3 and 4:23, and the Nephites’ final battle at Cumorah in chapter 6 of his book. The exact direction the site of the final battles lay from Moron is also unclear. By telling us that Omer,
after reaching “the place where the Nephites were destroyed,” went “from thence eastward,” Moroni appears to be telling us that in coming “over” from Moron to the hill Shim, and from the hill Shim to Ramah/Cumorah, Omer was traveling directions other than straight east (Ether 9:3).

24. Mormon took the records from the hill Shim following a Lamanite offensive out of the land southward, which was under Lamanite control at the time (see Mormon 4:19–23; 2:29).

25. The Nephites had fled an undisclosed distance from the narrow neck of land to the city Boaz, and from Boaz to another undisclosed distance through “towns and villages” before Mormon took the records from the hill (see Mormon 4:19–23). See below for a more detailed discussion of Mormon’s and the Nephites’ flight to Cumorah.

26. Ammaron tells Mormon that he will find the records in the “land Antum,” at a hill “which shall be called Shim” (Mormon 1:3; emphasis added). Mormon went into the land southward when he was eleven years old, although it is unknown whether this was the first time he had been there (see Mormon 1:6).

27. Probably the most valid conclusion to be drawn from Omer’s flight “out of the land” of Moron, in fact, is that Ramah was in a different land than Moron (Ether 9:3).

28. The Nephites fled an undisclosed distance from the city Desolation to the city Boaz, then another undisclosed distance from Boaz to the city Jordan and other cities. It was sometime during this latter move that Mormon took the records from the hill Shim (see Mormon 4:19–5:4).

29. Sperry appears to be identifying the land northward with the land of Desolation. While the Nephites may have done the same in the first century BC (see Alma 22:31), Mormon’s reference to the “north countries” (Mormon 2:3) suggests a more complex situation by the middle of the fourth century AD. So, too, does his numerous references to various “lands” in his recital of events leading up to, and immediately after, the treaty with the Lamanites in which the Nephites were given the land northward for their inheritance (see 2:4–6, 16–17, 20, 27, 29; 3:5–6). Given that the treaty line was drawn at the narrow neck of land, at least some of these lands (especially those referenced in 2:27) must have been in the land northward.


34. Elsewhere I argue that there are good reasons for rejecting Sorenson’s identification of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as the Nephites’ narrow neck of land; see Andrew H. Hedges, “The Narrow Neck of Land,” *Religious Educator* 9, no. 3 (2008): 151–60.

35. According to Sorenson’s proposed map, similarly, the distance between Bountiful at the narrow neck of land and the “Distant Land of Waters” to the north is about the same as the distance between Bountiful and the land of Nephi to the south—that is, about three hundred miles (Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 37). Yet nowhere does the Book of Mormon suggest that it was an “exceedingly great distance” from the land of Nephi to the narrow neck of land—in fact, the expedition undertaken by Limhi’s men, discussed above, suggests just the opposite. If Sorenson’s reconstruction of the distance between the land of Nephi and
the narrow neck of land is correct, three hundred miles, at least, does not appear to have been an exceptional distance by Nephite standards.


38. Clark considers Palmer’s study of Cumorah “the most thorough analysis of the physical expectations for the hill Ramah/Cumorah” available (Clark, “Limited Great Lakes Setting,” 29). Sorenson defers to Palmer’s judgment on this topic as well (Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 350).


40. It may be a small point, but the text doesn’t actually have Mormon surveying “the entire scene of carnage” from the top of the hill. Mormon “did behold” the 10,000 men he led, and he “beheld” the 10,000 Moroni led, but simply recorded that the other 210,000 “had fallen” or “did fall,” without indicating whether he actually saw them at that time or not (Mormon 6:11–15).


42. Sorenson argues this point (Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 350).


45. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah*, 38–41. Several authors have suggested that the earthquakes, severe storms, sinking cities, and three days of darkness attending the death of the Savior resulted from a nearby volcanic eruption. Never once, however, does Mormon mention Cumorah by name in his lengthy and detailed discussion of the areas affected by this destruction. Any conclusion that Cumorah suffered from these calamities is based on a reconstruction of the geography, not on a direct statement in the text.

46. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah*, 41. Palmer again conflates Cumorah with the Nephite center here by citing the fevers mentioned in Alma 46:40 as further evidence for a “temperate, tropical or subtropical climate”—apparently without realizing that upstate New York is considered a temperate climate. As a further problem, Alma 46 deals with events and situations some 450 years prior to the final battle of the Nephites.

47. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah*, 44.


51. Mormon’s description of how the Lamanites had “gone through and hewn down” his people and how they “passed by” him (Mormon 6:10–11) suggests an open field of battle at least as much, and perhaps more, than it suggests a battle taking place in the midst of various kinds of fortifications.

52. Langdon Smith, “Looking for Artifacts at New York’s Hill Cumorah,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005), 50–51. The absence of evidence for an event, of course, cannot be considered evidence for the absence of the event. This is especially true for questions involving the archaeology of New York’s Hill Cumorah, where no professional archaeological studies, apparently, have been conducted (see Clark, “Archaeology and Cumorah Questions,” 146). Langdon Smith’s note on the absence of arrowheads and chipping sites is based on
conversations he had with various locals and two walks he took through plowed fields in the vicinity of the hill.

53. In his defense of the proposition that both Jaredites and Nephites could have traveled from Central America to upstate New York, Nibley provides several examples, from both the Old World and the New, of large numbers of people traveling thousands of miles in relatively little time, often against a backdrop of war. See Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites*, 223–28, 451–54; and Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 426–30.

In addition to the peoples described by Nibley, one might add the Persian Empire and the territory conquered by Alexander the Great, both of which extended some 3,000 miles from Macedonia in southern Europe to the Indus River in India. (The 22,000 miles Alexander and his armies covered in the course of their campaigns, incidentally, demonstrates how much ground ancient armies were capable of covering.) Similarly, the later Roman Empire, much of which was conquered and maintained by armies operating over land, stretched some 2,500 miles from northern England to Upper Egypt, and from the Atlantic coast of Spain to upper Mesopotamia. For maps and descriptions of the above examples, see Chester G. Starr, *A History of the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 278, 396, 402, 658.

54. S. Kent Brown, “New Light from Arabia on Lehi’s Trail,” in Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, John W. Welch, ed., *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 79–80. Brown also references the historian Strabo, who relates an account of a 10,000-man Roman army that took six months to travel between 1,000 and 1,100 miles down the west side of Arabia in 25–24 BC. The army retraced its steps after disease broke out, taking a mere two months for the return trip (Brown, “New Light from Arabia,” 80).

55. The suggestion that Mormon and his army may have followed a natural route from Mesoamerica to upstate New York does not require that every individual from both sides followed this same route as they gathered in to Cumorah over the course of the next four years. Individuals and groups living in along the coasts or river systems could have made their way to Cumorah along any number of routes, thereby avoiding their opponents. Depending on how strictly the Lamanites honored their king’s promise not to attack the Nephites until they had gathered to Cumorah (see Mormon 6:2–3), such avoidance may not even have been necessary during the gathering process.


62. The suggestion that there may be some connection between the Adena and Hopewell cultures and the Book of Mormon is not new, but it has generally been made by those advocating some sort of a limited Great Lakes geography for Book of Mormon events. For recent examples, see Edwin G. Goble and Wayne N. May, *This Land: Zarahemla and the Nephite Nation* (Colfax, WI: Ancient American Archaeology Foundation, 2002); Wayne N. May, *This Land: Only One Cumorah!* (Colfax, WI: Ancient American Archaeology Foundation, 2004); Wayne N. May, *This Land: They Came from the East* (Colfax, WI: Ancient American Archaeology Foundation, 2005).

63. See, for example, Sorenson and Roper, “Before DNA,” 16.


65. Archaeological sites at Marietta, Paint Creek, and Circleville, Ohio, for example, which figure prominently in these early accounts (for example, see Josiah Priest, *American Antiquities and Discoveries in the West* [Albany, NY: Hoffman and White, 1835], 42–46, 169–75, 222), have been dated to Hopewell times and continue to be studied today.

66. Many have argued that the Book of Mormon, which recounts the course of civilizations in America derived from biblical peoples, merely reflects common early American theories regarding the ancient ruins so visible in the Mississippi and Ohio river valleys. Intent on refuting such ideas, Joseph Smith’s modern defenders have failed to see that the evidence behind these early theories might actually be invoked in support of the Book of Mormon’s claims to ancient origins and connections with ancient Near Eastern cultures.

67. The uncritical use of these sources in connection with dubious other “sources” (such as the fraudulent “Michigan Relics”) by various researchers advocating a limited Great Lakes geography for Book of Mormon events (see sources listed in note 60 above for recent examples) has no doubt contributed to scholars’ negative assessment of their worth.

68. Priest, *American Antiquities*, 146, 149.

69. These include evidence for mass burials, iron tools or weapons, armor, and horses, much of which was apparently found near sites that have subsequently been dated as either Adena or Hopewell (Priest, *American Antiquities*, 157, 183, 185, 191).
Response to Andrew Hedges’s “Cumorah and the Limited Meso-American Theory.”

In his article on the Hill Cumorah, Andrew Hedges challenges two long-held assumptions of advocates of a limited Mesoamerican geography. First, “that the geographical descriptions provided in the text itself require that the final battles of the Jaredites and Nephites took place relatively close to both peoples’ centers of civilization near the narrow neck of land,” and second, “that the hill where Joseph Smith found the gold plates does not match the Book of Mormon’s descriptions of the hill where the final battles took place.” While granting that recent alternative models which limit Book of Mormon events to the Great Lakes or Susquehanna River regions “have been convincingly discounted,” the author suggests that the limited Mesoamerican view is also problematic and that the above two tenets rest “more on assumptions about the text than a close reading of it and that the text does not require either.”

Hedges’s admonition that we pay close attention to the text and that we more carefully distinguish between our own deductions and inferences and what the text actually says is a welcome one. While I disagree with much of what the author says in his paper, I am grateful for the opportunity to reexamine the Book of Mormon text and some of my own long-held ideas. It is my hope that the readers of the Religious Educator will likewise benefit from the exchange.
Of course, knowing what the Book of Mormon says or doesn’t say is only the first step. As with most texts, there are parts of the record that are more ambiguous than others, and these may lend themselves to different possible interpretations, particularly on questions relating to the reconstruction of Book of Mormon geography. In such cases, it is not enough to suggest different possibilities. We want to determine which possibility or which interpretation is more plausible or probable. That means we have to prudently weigh various options in order to judge which possible interpretation is the most likely. In some cases, other readings are possible, and the text may not strictly require a limited Mesoamerican view. The more important question is whether these other possibilities are more likely than those which favor a limited Mesoamerican model. While the Book of Mormon text may not require a particular reading, we may rightly judge one possibility to be more plausible, more compelling, and more probable than another.

In what follows I will explain why the final battles of the Jaredites and the Nephites, including those at Cumorah, best make sense as having taken place near a narrow neck of land, believed by most contemporary researchers on the Book of Mormon to be in southern Mexico, and why the alternative of a far distant location of a hill in New York does not make sense. I will then address the question of the hill’s description as given in the text. I leave the reader to decide whether the weight of the more probable interpretation requires us to read the text in a certain way.

A Land of Many Waters

One indication that the Hill Cumorah was relatively near the narrow neck of land can be seen in what the Book of Mormon says about that hill being in “a land of many waters.” Limhi’s men “traveled in a land among many waters” (Mosiah 8:8). Mormon also says that Cumorah “was in a land of many waters, rivers and fountains” (Mormon 6:4), suggesting that the lands of Desolation and Cumorah were within the same general region. Since it is unlikely that Limhi’s people, coming from the land of Nephi in the land southward, would have traveled very far into the land northward before turning back, the land of many waters must have included or have been relatively near the land of Desolation. Morianton’s attempted flight to a region in the land northward “which was covered with large bodies of water” (Alma 50:29) suggests a similar location to the reader. The “large bodies of water” region is reminiscent of the “waters of Ripliancum, which by interpretation, is large, or to exceed all” (Ether 15:8, emphasis added).
It was there that Coriantumr was nearly killed before the final battle at the Hill Ramah not far away. The Morianton episode suggests that the rebel’s intended destination northward was near enough to pose a significant threat to the Nephites within the land of Zarahemla (see Alma 50:32). A land that is mentioned during the reign of Helaman is also described in similar terms as a region of “large bodies of water and many rivers” (Helaman 3:4), leading some readers to believe that these lands were the same, but this land, in contrast to the others, was an “exceedingly great distance” from the land of Zarahemla. John L. Sorenson and others make a believable case that this latter region may have been the Valley of Mexico.

Hedges faults Sorenson for apparent inconsistency in suggesting that the Valley of Mexico, which he estimates to be 450 miles from Chiapas, could be “an exceedingly great distance” from Zarahemla, while at the same time holding that the narrow neck of land could be the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (approximately 120 miles). All of this, of course, depends on who was doing the traveling. A Nephite soldier or messenger might be able or need to move faster than most other individuals would normally travel. We would also expect small groups to travel at a somewhat slower pace, moderate-sized groups to move somewhat slower. A group traveling with women and children or flocks of animals will not move as fast as a group of soldiers. What is missing is some actual data on the movements of comparable groups. It would have been more helpful if he had made use of some of the data Sorenson had already provided on this question. Based upon historical data for moderate-sized groups numbering in the hundreds and traveling on foot, Sorenson estimates such a group would average between nine and twenty-five miles per day, not one hundred miles a day. Moreover, Hedges’s estimate of 450 miles would be as the crow flies, not as the foot walks. A fairer estimate for travelers on foot going from Chiapas to Mexico City would be closer to 650 miles. At the high end of the estimate, at twenty-five miles per day, such a group might reach their destination in a little over two weeks, but that is about the maximum and does not take into account any other factors that might impact the journey. At the low end of the estimate, nine miles per day, it would take at least seventy-one days, or about two and one-half months. If the groups traveling in the Book of Mormon were large ones numbering in the thousands, which seems likely based on earlier migrations (see Alma 63:4), the distance covered per day may have been even less, lengthening the time needed to arrive at their destination. When one also takes into account possible logistical concerns involved in a
journey from Chiapas to the valley of Mexico in the first century BC, it could easily have been considered “an exceedingly great distance.” Nothing in the text, however, hints that Cumorah was that far away.

**Limhi’s Search Party**

In the account of the people of King Limhi, a search party of forty-three “diligent” men traveled from the land of Nephi and were “lost” in the wilderness “for the space of many days.” They found the ruins of the Jaredites, which they mistakenly concluded were those of the people of Zarahemla, before returning and reporting back to the king (see Mosiah 8:8). Since the Jaredites were destroyed in the land northward and since the people of Limhi recovered the plates deposited there by Ether, the relative distances between the lands of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Desolation have significant implications for both the scale of Book of Mormon lands as well as the location of the Hill Ramah or Cumorah.

Although Limhi’s men were mistaken that the Jaredite ruins were Zarahemla, it is apparent that they had enough information before and after their journey to make such a conclusion seem plausible. It is also noteworthy that although they believed they were “lost” they were still able to find their way back to the land of Nephi. That suggests that previous to their departure, they had at least a general idea of the direction they should go to appeal for help and how long it should have taken to get to Zarahemla, even though they were uncertain of the precise route. Under such circumstances a “diligent” search party would perhaps count the days they traveled. In any case, *something* would have led them to eventually conclude that they had gone far enough. Sorenson argues that they would not likely have gone more than twice the estimated distance before turning back. If we accept that view as reasonable, then the Jaredite land of destruction encountered by Limhi’s men would have been within a comparable distance from the land of Nephi.

While the Book of Mormon does not give us the precise distance from Nephi to Zarahemla, we can form some reasonable inferences based on the text. First, Limhi’s search party was gone for “many days” not “many years” or even “many months.” Second, even if we do not know the precise distance, we have a pretty good idea of how long a journey between Nephi and Zarahemla should have taken. Alma’s group of more than 450 men, women and children with their flocks took about three weeks with divine guidance (see Mosiah 23:3; 24:19–20, 25). Those, however, traveling between Zarahemla and
the land of Nephi who had food problems (see Mosiah 9:3) or who had to hunt for their food on the way (see Alma 17:7–9) are said to have taken “many days.” Ammon’s group of sixteen strong men “who knew not the course they should travel in the wilderness” are said to have “wandered many days in the wilderness, even forty days did they wander” (Mosiah 7:4; emphasis added). That is nearly double what it took Alma’s people and their flocks to travel in the opposite direction. The journey back with Limhi’s refugees is described similarly as taking “many days” (Mosiah 22:13). Unlike Alma’s people, who had divine guidance, Limhi’s group had to rely on what Ammon and his men had learned of the route on the way up, but since they were apparently well provisioned (see Mosiah 22:12), and Ammon and his men now knew the way back, we would assume that the return journey, even if not as direct as Alma’s, would not have exceeded the forty days it had taken them to get there. We can infer from the above that a group of men, women, and children traveling with their livestock, who knew where they were going and had enough food, could travel between Zarahemla and Nephi in somewhere from twenty-two to forty days. In real world terms, it is worth noting that Mormon pioneers, who often traveled with animals crossing the Great Plains, averaged about eleven miles per day. In his study of Guatemala, McBryde notes that men on foot drive herds of pigs through the rugged highlands a distance of seventy miles in eight days, averaging nine miles per day. If we assume Alma’s people averaged about ten miles per day, the journey between Nephi and Zarahemla would be on the order of 220 miles; this could be somewhat shorter or longer depending on the actual distance traveled per day. If we also assume that Limhi’s search party on their northbound journey took twice as much time as Alma’s group, they could have traveled as much as forty-four days or less before turning back, suggesting that the distance from Nephi to the land of Desolation was in the range of hundreds of miles rather than the thousands.

Final Jaredite Movements

Proponents of a limited Mesoamerican geography also find evidence for the nearness of the Hill Ramah or Cumorah in the account of the final Jaredite battles in the closing chapters of the book of Ether noting that the events mentioned there seem to have occurred near the land of Moron and the center of Jaredite lands just north of the narrow neck. Hedges disputes that conclusion, insisting that the text of Ether provides “no firm clues” about the directions traveled and that “in most cases direction and distance are open-ended.” I disagree—
directions are mentioned in the text, but not those that make likely a drawn-out movement several thousands of miles northward away from the narrow neck of land or a journey from southern Mexico to New York. Hedges writes, “That the pursuit had a significant eastern trajectory, at least at one point, is clear.” Agreed. “That it [the movement of the Jaredite armies] also had a northern trajectory is suggested by the fact that no mention is made of Limhi’s men coming from the south, finding any ruins south of the Desolation/Moron area.” This is circular reasoning. What Limhi’s people found actually suggests that the final Jaredite battles were near the narrow neck of land, since the land of Desolation bordered the land of Bountiful across the isthmus (see Alma 22:30–31). The discoveries of Limhi’s search party are evidence for a far northern Jaredite destruction only if we first assume what Hedges needs to prove, that there was a significant and far distant movement away from Jaredite centers of settlement in the south. There is no indication in the text that the Jaredite armies moved northward to any significant degree. The only directions mentioned in the final Jaredite battles are east and south, but never north.

Hedges places his proposed northward movement to backwater country at the point in the text where Lib chases Coriantumr through the wilderness of Akish (see Ether 14:14–15). After this, “Moron and other familiar sites entirely disappear from the story. In their place comes a succession of plains, lands, valleys, hills, and waters, only one of which, Ramah, appears earlier in the Jaredite narrative.” He finds further justification for this in that Moroni “mentions numerous topographical features and place-names.” It is in this geographical data that he sees his proposed change in theater to a far distant and northerly location. Here, however, he exaggerates the geographical data in the text. Topographical features and other geographical indicators are not “numerous” at this point in the narrative. Quite the opposite—and that is a problem for such a scenario. After the death of Lib, the armies battled their way from the plains of Agosh to the eastern seashore, during which time “many cities” were overthrown by Shiz and burned with fire (see Ether 14:16–26). At or near the eastern seacoast, Coriantumr was able to beat Shiz, who then fled with his armies to the adjacent valleys of Corihor and Shurr to battle at the Hill Comnor (see Ether 14:27–31). From there, after a brief respite, they moved to the “waters of Ripliancum” (Ether 15:8). Since all subsequent movement in the text is southward from there (see Ether 15:10), any northward movement by the Jaredite armies would, to be consistent with the text, have to fit into these last few geographical references. Assuming
the narrow neck of land was in Middle America, this seems a slender thread on which to hang a journey of several thousand miles to New York. The lack of *any* reference in the text to a northward trajectory of the Jaredite armies further complicates that scenario.

Hedges’s suggestion that at this point the action had moved away from traditional Jaredite lands near the narrow neck of land is somewhat undermined by the reference to the “land” and “valley of Corihor” (Ether 14:27–28). While this is the first and only reference to a land and valley of that name in the text, it does recall the earlier rebel Corihor, who figures in the narrative of the early kings Kib and Shule and who, after his defeat at the hands of the later, repented and then received power in Shule’s early kingdom (see Ether 7:3–22). If such power included land or oversight of land under the overall governance of Shule, a location not far from the capital at Moron seems plausible. While the point may not be definitive, it suggests that the “valley of Corihor,” the last battle point referenced before Ripliancum and the turn of action southward to Ramah, was relatively near the Jaredite capital, by the narrow neck of land and not thousands of miles away.

**The Land of Desolation**

According to Hedges, the “swift and speedy” war, in which the [Jaredite] combatants ‘did march forth from the shedding of blood to the shedding of blood’ (Ether 14:22), took them out of the traditional center of Jaredite lands and into a completely different area.” Of course the fact that the war was “swift and speedy” need not mean that great distances were covered but could mean that a restricted area was rapidly enveloped in the destruction. This seems to be what the last two chapters of the book of Ether describe. Following the death of Lib, Shiz pursued Coriantumr through the plains of Agosh to the east sea, a region which contained many Jaredite cities and significant resources which the rival armies could either utilize or destroy (see Ether 14:16–26). The reference to “many cities” and the availability of large numbers of people suggest that the region they were passing through was a very significant one in terms of civilization, not a sparsely populated backcountry. The destruction during this phase of the war was apparently unprecedented in both scale and intensity. “And so great and lasting had been the war, and so long had been the scene of bloodshed and carnage, that the whole face of the land was covered with the bodies of the dead. And so swift and speedy was the war that there was none left to bury the dead, but they did march forth from the shedding of blood to the shedding of blood, leaving the bodies of both men,
women, and children strewed upon the face of the land, to become a prey to the worms of the flesh” (Ether 14:21–22; emphasis added).

Hedges suggests that “what Limhi’s men found in their search for Zarahemla was not the scene of the Jaredites’ final battle, but the scene of a battle (or battles) that had been fought early on in the Jaredite wars, prior to the scene of action shifting from the land of Moron elsewhere.” This seems unlikely based on what the text says. The reference to the destruction of “many cities” and numerous unburied remains reminds us that Limhi’s people found the plates of Ether in the same place that they “discovered a land which was covered with bones of men, and of beasts, and was also covered with ruins of buildings of every kind” (Mosiah 8:8; emphasis added; see also Mosiah 21:26). The Nephites called that region the “land of Desolation” (see Alma 22:30). While the destruction described in Ether 14 may conceivably have been widespread, its mention at this particular point in Moroni’s narrative seems to pin it to a particular time and region—the first year of Lib in the path of Coriantumr’s flight from Shiz at the escalation of the war. That would mean that Coriantumr’s flight route, from the plains of Agosh to the eastern seacoast, one of the last reported movements in the narrative, would likely have been within or near the land called Desolation by the Nephites and also near the narrow neck of land. A Hill Ramah/Cumorah near Desolation seems more likely than in some distant region far to the north.

Omer’s Flight to Ablom

Another important piece of textual evidence is found in the account of the flight of King Omer from a conspiracy against his life (see Ether 9:3). Based upon this account and other passages such as Ether 7:5–6, proponents of a limited Mesoamerican geography have surmised that the lands of Desolation, Moron, the seashore to the east, the hills Shim and Cumorah were all comparatively close to each other. In his paper, Hedges rejects this view, suggesting that the account is too ambiguous to conclude that Moron and Ramah were close together. Omer, he reasons, would have gone as far as necessary, even thousands of miles to escape his potential assassins. He notes that Lehi traveled half way across the world after people sought his life. Lehi, however, fled to a far distant land of promise, never to return. Omer also fled from the power of Akish but did return after his would-be assassins destroyed themselves. That Nimrah and his men were able to find Omer’s small group (see Ether 9:9)—and that the refugees learned details of the destruction of the people of Akish and then went back to resume
Omer’s previous rule—argues against a far distant refuge for Omer (see Ether 9:10–13). While the distance between Moron and Ramah is not specified, the proximity of the Jaredite capital to the land of Desolation (see Ether 7:6; Alma 22:29–32) and the lack of reference to any northward movement in these passages suggest that Omer’s escape route to Ablom took him near the narrow neck of land, on his way to the eastern seashore. Since the only directional referent mentioned in the passage is east, Omer’s escape route from Moron, passing by the hills Shim and Cumorah to the seacoast would seemingly lie upon an essentially west-to-east trajectory, not far from the isthmus, in which a northward direction does not seem to have been a significant factor.

Hedges argues that the reference to Omer “going over” to Shim and Cumorah and “from thence eastward” means that “Omer was traveling directions other than straight east.” I disagree. “Over” is a *topographical* term rather than a *directional* one. “Over” suggests some kind of elevation. To “come over” suggests the crossing of a topographical feature or boundary of some kind. These meanings are consistent with Webster’s definition of the term as well as the use of the term in the Book of Mormon, where it is used for crossing a boundary like a river (see Alma 6:7; 8:3; 16:7) or passage over an area between lands (see Alma 15:18; 21:11–12; 30:21; 43:24–25; 59:6). To make sense of the geography here, we have to reconcile the “many days” of Omer’s flight in Ether 9:3 with Lib’s single flight to the sea in Ether 14:12. Sorenson does so by suggesting that Omer took an unexpected roundabout way over mountains or some other topographical feature in order to avoid pursuit.12 That seems plausible. On the other hand, the nearness of the Jaredite capital to the land of Desolation and the narrow neck of land and the eastward trajectory of both Omer and Shared and the lack of any northern one strongly argue against a far distant location for the Hill Ramah.

**The Hill Shim**

Further evidence for the nearness of the Hill Ramah or Cumorah can be found in Mormon’s account of the final Nephite battles with the Lamanites, which seem to put the Hill Shim in or near the region of the final Nephite battles.13 Hedges questions whether the Hill Shim was even in the land of Desolation. Yet the Book of Mormon does provide clues from which we can infer such a location. The Nephites were driven from the land of Joshua “in the borders west by the seashore” (Mormon 2:6) to the city of Jashon, which Mormon tells us was “near” the Hill Shim (Mormon 2:17). From Jashon the Nephites were driven
to the land and city of Shem (see Mormon 2:20–21). From there they were finally able to beat back their enemies and temporarily regain their possessions in the land southward (see Mormon 2:22–27). The Nephite success in retaking the lands southward suggests that the Hill Shim in the land northward was not far distant from the land of Zarahemla.

Later events in Mormon’s account also suggest that the Hill Shim was relatively close to the narrow neck of land. The city Desolation was near the narrow pass at the treaty line dividing the land northward from the land southward (see Mormon 2:29; 3:5), putting that city in the southern portion of the greater land of Desolation which spanned the narrow neck and bordered on Bountiful (Alma 22:31-32). Its sister city, Teancum, was also in the “borders” near the city Desolation and was by the sea (see Mormon 4:3). After being driven from both cities, which were by the narrow pass (see Mormon 4:14–19), the Nephites fled to the city of Boaz (see Mormon 4:20). When driven from there, the Nephites gathered up the refugees they could save from any towns and villages along the way (see Mormon 4:22). Hedges argues that a lengthy journey to New York may be inferred from this passage, but this is unpersuasive. Mormon describes a routed people, not a trans-continental migration, and nothing in the text suggests that the retreat involved great distances. One thing is clear from the passage; after the loss of the city of Boaz, the Nephites were no longer able to block the Lamanites from just one city or strategic point, as they had previously been able to do, but were forced to defend the city Jordan and several other cities or strongholds simultaneously (see Mormon 5:3–4). That suggests that north of Boaz the land became wider and that the city of Boaz was the last stronghold along the more defensible narrow bottleneck route that could block the Lamanites from getting into the Nephites’ northern possessions. Like the popping of a cork from a bottle, the loss of that strategic point allowed the Lamanite armies to flow into the lands northward, forcing Mormon to remove all the records from the Hill Shim (see Mormon 4:23). Clearly Boaz, the next city mentioned after Teancum and Desolation at the narrow pass was near enough to the Hill Shim that the records hidden there were directly endangered by its loss, or Mormon would have had no need to move them. When we add to this the information discussed previously on Omer’s flight to Ablom, a location near if not within the greater land of Desolation for the Hill Shim cannot be avoided.
Ether, the Cave, and the Record

In his abridgment of the twenty-four plates recovered by Limhi’s people, Moroni tells us that Ether dwelt in a cave (a “cavity of a rock”) during the final years of the Jaredite conflict and that he went out at night to witness events and then would return to the cave to record them. After fleeing for his life, he wrote the remainder of his account in the cave (see Ether 13:13–14, 18, 22). Hedges acknowledges the potential implications of this point but dismisses the argument. “A careful reading of the text,” he suggests, “shows that Ether’s cave actually drops out of the story long before the final battle is fought.” Does it? Moroni wrote, “And he hid himself in the cavity of a rock by day, and by night he went forth viewing the things which should come upon the people. And as he dwelt in the cavity of a rock he made the remainder of this record, viewing the destructions which came upon the people by night” (Ether 13:13–14; emphasis added). In addition to providing personal protection, the cave also provided a place where Ether could write in peace and would save him the trouble of having to carry the plates with him when he went out to observe. After witnessing the final showdown between the two rivals, “the Lord spake unto Ether, and said unto him: Go forth. And he went forth, and beheld that the words of the Lord had all been fulfilled; and he finished his record; (and the hundredth part I have not written) and he hid them in a manner that the people of Limhi did find them” (Ether 15:33; emphasis added). In these passages Moroni tells us how Ether accomplished his work. He dwelt in the cave for safety during the day and went out at night to witness and observe. After doing so he then would return to the cave to record what he had witnessed. Moroni does not say that he stayed there every day or that he went out every night or that he even came back every night, but he does indicate that Ether came and went from the cave frequently enough to witness the events and return to his refuge to record them. This is inescapable. He is close enough to Ramah to keep track of the numbers of survivors after each day of battle, to hear their mournful cries and witness the final melee between Coriantumr and Shiz. Taken together, both passages (Ether 13:13–14 and Ether 15:33) do suggest that after he saw Coriantumr kill Shiz, Ether “went forth” upon the land to witness the fulfilment of the Lord’s prophecies and perhaps confirm that none of the other combatants were left and then returned to the cave as he always did. He then “finished” the remainder of his account as Moroni says he did in the cave and hid the record itself “in a manner that the people of
Limhi did find them” (Ether 15:33). Since Limhi’s people found the record in the land of Desolation (see Mosiah 8:8; 21:26; Alma 22:30), Ether must have hidden it near the final battle scene. Why would he have taken it anywhere else? Hedges argues “that the idea expressed in [Ether] 13:14 that he actually ‘finished’ the record there is not to be taken completely literally,” but given what the text says it is difficult to see why it should not be, nor is it clear how not taking this passage literally represents a more careful reading. The proximity of the cave to the final Jaredite movements and the final battle at Ramah clearly place the Hill Ramah near the narrow neck of land, not several thousand miles away.

Coriantumr

Some students of the Book of Mormon have suggested that Coriantumr’s wounded and weakened physical condition would have limited his travel after the final battle near Ramah. Since he was found by the people of Zarahemla, a journey of several thousand miles from New York to Middle America under such conditions is difficult to explain. A closer location would be more reasonable. Contrary to this view, Hedges argues, “Nothing in the text indicates his wounds would have prevented him from traveling after he had time to heal and regain his strength. . . . There is a real chance that he could have recovered sufficiently from his wounds at Ramah to travel long distances.” What the text says casts serious doubt upon such a scenario.

First, the final melee where Coriantumr killed Shiz was not more than a day away from Ramah. So the final battle never took him far from the hill (see Ether 15:28–29).

Second, the question of Coriantumr’s physical condition has to be considered. The wars in Ether 13–15 extend over a period of nearly fifteen years. During that time he was seriously wounded in his thigh, which kept him from going to battle for two years (see Ether 13:31), and he also suffered a wound in his arm (see Ether 14:12). Even more serious were the later wounds inflicted on him by his relentless opponent. “It came to pass that Shiz smote upon Coriantumr that he gave him many deep wounds; and Coriantumr, having lost his blood, fainted, and was carried away as though he were dead” (Ether 14:30; emphasis added). After a period of recovery (see Ether 15:1), he was able to fight again, sort of: “They fought an exceedingly sore battle, in which Coriantumr was wounded again, and he fainted with the loss of blood” (Ether 15:9; emphasis added). Were these new wounds or was this a rewounding of the old ones, or both? Four years later, after seven
Plausibility, Probability, and the Cumorah Question

days of battle at Ramah, he along with the other survivors “fought for the space of three hours, and they fainted with the loss of blood” (Ether 15:27; emphasis added). After gaining some strength, they then fled from their enemies and were overtaken the next day where they were forced to fight again. After killing Shiz, “Coriantumr fell to the earth, and became as if he had no life” (Ether 15:32; emphasis added). This suggests to me that his physical condition was precarious.

Third, remember Coriantumr’s state of mind when he realizes, too late, the enormity of the destruction and loss of millions of men, women, and children: “He began to sorrow in his heart, . . . and his soul mourned and refused to be comforted” (Ether 15:2–3). So in addition to his physical wounds, he descended into despair.

Fourth, in contrast to earlier occasions when he was carried away (see Ether 14:30), nobody was left to carry him from the field, protect him, or nurse him back to health after the final battle with Shiz. He was alone.

Fifth, the text does not say that Coriantumr found the people of Zarahemla but that they found him (see Omni 1:21). The Lord brought Mulek and the people of Zarahemla into the land of Desolation before they went southward (see Alma 22:30; Helaman 6:10). A reasonable inference is that they found Coriantumr in the land of Desolation also. He would certainly be in need of care. And how was his old thigh wound? We might envision him hobbling southward for a few miles, but for thousands?

Sixth, the implications of Ether’s prophecy to Coriantumr need attention. The prophet foretold that the king “should only live to see the fulfilling of the prophecies which had been spoken concerning another people receiving the land for their inheritance” (Ether 13:21; emphasis added). This does not sound like the promise of a long life.

Finally, there is matter of how long Corianatumr lived after he was found. “Coriantumr was discovered by the people of Zarahemla; and he dwelt with them for the space of nine moons,” that is, less than a year (Omni 1:21). According to Hedges, this passage “says nothing about his health following Ramah, as the text provides no information about how long after the battle he was found.” When we consider his many wounds, his state of mind, his discovery by the people of Zarahemla, likely near the land of Desolation, his living only until he saw the fulfillment of the prophecy of other people inheriting the land, and his collapse after killing Shiz (see Ether 15:32), the statement that he lived only nine months after he was found by them is not surprising, and we can only wonder how he managed to live even that long. By the
end of the book of Ether, Coriantumr was a solitary, severely wounded, mentally exhausted veteran of a fifteen-year genocidal war in a state of physical collapse, who had repeatedly lost a lot of blood and just about everything else. Found by Mulek’s people, he lived nine months, died, and was buried by them. In light of these factors, does a location for the Hill Ramah or Cumorah near the land of Desolation, by the narrow neck of land, not seem more reasonable than a lengthy and arduous trek to New York and back?*

**Time and Distance**

Often unnoticed by readers is the fact that all of the events described in Ether 14:11 through 15:11, including the movement from the land of Moron to the Hill Ramah, apparently occurred during the same year (“the first year of Lib”; Ether 14:11). This has obvious and significant implications for any proposed far distant trajectory, like that suggested by Hedges, since one must somehow fit the events described in the text into that time frame. How far could a premodern army travel in a year? Military historian Ross Hassig, basing his ideas on data from premodern armies, estimates that Aztec armies under normal conditions could march at a rate of between twelve and twenty miles per day (nineteen–thirty-two kilometers). Could they have forced a faster march? Perhaps. However, “a forced march covers greater distance by marching more hours, not by going faster, but it is avoided if possible because it impairs the fighting efficiency of the army.” It would also be impossible to keep up a forced march for very long.

Since we know that the Jaredites moved from the land of Moron, which was near the land of Desolation and the narrow neck of land, to the Hill Ramah during the same year, Hassig’s numbers give us a reliable measure by which we can gauge the proposed movements of Jaredite armies in the Book of Mormon from the land of Moron somewhere in Middle America to a proposed Hill Ramah in Palmyra, New York. For the purposes of comparison, we will use Sorenson’s proposed location for the narrow neck of land at the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as a point of reference. We do this because that is the most northerly of all the proposed Middle American candidates for that location and would be the closest to New York. Sorenson suggests a location for the city Desolation somewhere in the vicinity of Minatitlan in southern Mexico along the river Coatzacoalcos. It is approximately twenty-five hundred miles by road from Minatitlan to Palmyra, New York. Based on Hassig’s estimates, it would take a premodern army anywhere from 125 days to 208 days just to travel that distance if it encountered no
impassible obstacles. So anywhere from a third to more than half of the year would have been taken up just by the march itself.

There is more to the story, however, than straight-line estimates. Aztec armies were among the most organized and efficient military forces known to Mesoamerica, yet they never had to march such distances as we are considering here. The Aztecs had a well-established system of roads that facilitated travel, but an army traveling twenty-five hundred miles from Middle America to New York could not have expected these for most of the way. While armies can march without roads, terrain permitting, “doing so drastically reduces their speed, lengthens the campaign, and significantly increases logistical costs.”

There would be many logistical difficulties for a hypothetical journey from southern Mexico to New York.

After the Jaredites moved out of their traditional centers of control near the isthmus, how would they feed and provide for their army? Assuming they pillaged or gathered up what they could use, there would still be limitations on how much they could carry with them on foot. David Webster, drawing upon Mesoamerican data, notes, “Warriors might have carried their own supplies or been accompanied by porters who did so. Either system is very inefficient and would have limited the duration of campaigns, in my estimation, to two weeks or less, counting travel time each way and the hostilities themselves.”

Based on sixteenth-century records on Indian food consumption, Hassig estimates that Indians needed around 2.1 pounds (.95 kg) of maize per day. Each porter carried an average load of fifty pounds (twenty-three kg) per day. At the height of their power, Aztec armies seem to have averaged about one porter to every two warriors; “nevertheless, this porter-to-warrior ratio and the above consumption rates meant that the army could travel only eight days if all the porters’ loads were dedicated to food (which they were not).”

Another key to the Aztecs’ military success is that they had not only well-established roads but a network of tributary towns along their path who could offer supplies to armies that were on the march. These tributary towns along the roads could be notified in advance about the approach of an army and supply needed provisions. This greatly facilitated the reach of such an army, but it depended to a certain degree on good and reliable communication, and once a military force moved out of its centers of control, the army would lose any such advantage. “Another major logistical problem,” notes Hassig, “was securing the necessary two quarts of water per man per day. While providing water was easier than supplying food, the need for water could affect the
route selected, and using available resources such as rivers involved considerable time.”

The point here is that all of these factors would significantly decrease the distance any army could travel in a year’s time. Since they would not be able to carry enough provisions with them to last over such a lengthy journey and since hunting would be impractical for large groups, it would be necessary to forage for food and water or plant crops along the way. That would also greatly increase the time any northbound trajectory would take. Then Coriantumr and Shiz would have to find a way to feed their respective armies when they arrived. All of these factors greatly reduce the distance that could be covered by even a well-trained and hardened premodern army.

But the Jaredite forces in these final chapters of Ether were not a typical army. By the time they got to Ramah, they had gathered not only soldiers but also numerous civilians—men, women, and children of various dispositions and conditions. The “armies” of Coriantumr and Shiz (or were they more like angry, armed mobs?), would be far less organized and less disciplined and would move even slower than a typical army; hence the estimates based on Aztec conditions may be too optimistic. When one also factors in the time it takes to fight, kill, pillage, fortify, and recover strength after the battles and destruction mentioned in the text, a one-year journey of such a distance for the Jaredite armies seems not merely unlikely, but impossible.

In addition to the above, other considerations also come into play. Assuming a New York location for the ancient Hill Cumorah, what advantages would such a proposal provide to Mormon and the Nephites? Mormon was deeply pained by the suffering of Nephite women and children (see Moroni 9:19; Helaman 15:2). Given such suffering, why would he propose a journey of twenty-five hundred miles for a battle for which he, at least, knew there was no hope of military victory? Were there no places between southern Mexico and New York where the Nephites could make a final stand? And why would the Lamanite king, who was clearly having his own way at this point, ever agree to such a proposal? As Hammond bluntly put it years ago, “The Lamanites were wicked but they were not stupid. They, as well as Mormon, knew that the Nephites had already lost the war—and it needed but one more battle to end it. Why not do all of this in the country where each side could furnish the necessary equipment and provisions of war instead of having to fend for them in the mountains, in the deserts, and in the rivers?” Can one imagine Robert E. Lee asking Ulysses S. Grant in 1865 to allow the tattered armies of southern Virginia and all
of their Confederate sympathizers to leave Virginia and gather to Mexico City for a battle in order to decide the fate of the Union?

Years ago, in response to criticism of the Book of Mormon, Hugh Nibley noted several historical examples of military leaders in antiquity who made lengthy journeys in military campaigns, suggesting that such leaders would have brushed off such objections about distances with a laugh.26 Hedges points to Nibley’s work and offers several examples of his own to support his case for a lengthy retreat away from Jaredite and Nephite centers by the narrow neck of land to the Hill Cumorah for the final battle. Though well intentioned, these arguments are problematic on a number of levels.27 One difficulty with the analogies is that they do not address comparable historical situations. Hammond’s response to Nibley comments is relevant here.

All of these conquering commanders conducted campaigns of subjugation. Each was hunting for someone who would stand up to him and fight. Not one of these agreed with his adversary that they both leave their homelands and go to a far distant unknown land simply to fight to a finish. Not one of them took with him a million or more home folk, old men, old women, cripples and pregnant women, for whom he would have had to provide logistics. . . . To have been fair with Mormon’s portrayal of the preparation for the battle at Cumorah he would have had to find mutual agreement between—say Caesar and Pompey to go to Moscow instead of Thessaly to fight the battle of Pharsalus. He would have had to show further that Caesar was obliged to take along with him and provide logistics for the fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters of each of the soldiers, as well as all other Romans who favored him instead of Pompey, including the aged, the cripples and the new-born babes. Yes, surely Pompey would have brushed such a proposal “aside with a laugh.”28

A final consideration is of course the fact that Mormon would need to be in a place where he could write, abridge, and finish up his sacred record, as well as a place to hide up all the Nephite records once that was done. This would be difficult to do on the road or in flight. Just transporting all the records would have presented a nightmarish challenge. Would it make better sense for him to propose a lengthy journey from southern Mexico to New York, one that would take his people the more part of a year just to traverse, or would he not rather choose a closer location within traditional Nephite lands still under their control with which he and his people were familiar where he could complete that task more or less unobstructed?
Criteria for Cumorah

We should remember that what is at issue is not where Moroni buried his father’s record, but whether the hill in New York was the final battlefield described in the record where both the Jaredites and the Nephites met their ends. Based upon the text and inferences drawn from the text, many readers have concluded that Mormon’s Cumorah and Joseph Smith’s Cumorah were not the same hill and that the former, which is mentioned in the text as the final battlefield of the Nephites, was relatively close to the centers of Jaredite and Nephite settlements near the narrow neck of land, while the latter, where Moroni hid up his father’s record, possibly a namesake of the other, was not. David Palmer and other investigators have put forth criteria that any candidate for Mormon’s hill should meet. They have also argued, I think persuasively, that while the New York hill seems inconsistent with this description, at least one plausible Mesoamerican candidate exists that is. Hedges argues that many of these criteria are faulty, since they are not all explicitly mentioned in the texts describing the Hill Cumorah. Some of these criteria, however, logically follow from the evidence already discussed above.

Recent scholarship on the question suggests that the only natural phenomenon that could account for all of the events described in chapters 8 through 10 of 3 Nephi would be volcanic activity. Hedges does not dispute the validity of these conclusions, but he questions their relevance to the Cumorah question. The connection is reasonable, however, if the Jaredite and Nephite armies never left their primary centers of settlements near the isthmus. The destruction at the death of Christ enveloped important settlements at both ends of the lands southward and northward, bracketing the region in which these events were witnessed to have occurred. That sphere of destruction included the Amulonite city Jerusalem in the land of Nephi at the southern extremity (see 3 Nephi 9:7), and Jacobugath in “the northernmost part of the land northward” (3 Nephi 7:12). Since Cumorah seems to have been close to or within the land of Desolation in the southern portion of the land northward, that seemingly places it within the destruction zone, even if the hill is not referenced in 3 Nephi. Given these parameters, the suggestion that Cumorah was in a volcanic zone seems reasonable, although it poses a serious problems for the New York correlation.

Hedges disputes the idea that Cumorah’s “fountains” refer to natural springs. Although problematic for the New York hill, it fits
particularly well with Cerro Vigia in Mexico. He notes that the term “fountain” is also used by Nephi to refer to the Red Sea (see 1 Nephi 2:9) as well as the river from the vision of the tree of life (see 1 Nephi 12:16), but since Mormon describes rivers in addition to fountains in the land of Cumorah, they must refer to something other than rivers (see Mormon 6:4). Springs seem likely. Seas in this context do not—even more so if, as Hedges argues, the Hill Cumorah is not near the eastern sea. In his teachings, Mormon also distinguishes between good fountains which bring forth good water and bitter fountains which bring forth bad water, which more readily suits the idea of a spring than the ocean (see Moroni 7:11).

Additional criteria for the Hill Cumorah are derived from what the text says about the hill itself (see Mormon 6:4). What advantage did Mormon and his people hope to gain from gathering to such a location? Hedges questions whether the hill would have needed to be large or a significant landmark. Even so, it is difficult to see what advantage a lengthy journey to the hill in Palmyra would have offered to the 230,000 Nephites and their families who were planning to fight there. Hedges questions whether the battle even involved the hill at all, but this seems a reasonable inference. After Mormon’s people gather to the land of Cumorah, they camp “round about” the hill (Mormon 6:4), suggesting that the hill itself possessed, or at least that the Nephites believed that it possessed, some strategic value. Mormon’s language also suggests that the Nephites at Cumorah were arrayed in a defensive position rather than an offensive one. For example, the Nephites “behold the armies of the Lamanites marching towards them” and “await to receive them” (Mormon 6:7; emphasis added). The Lamanites “came to battle against us” (Mormon 6:8; emphasis added). “They did fall upon my people” (Mormon 6:9). It appears that the Nephites awaited their enemies at Cumorah (see Mormon 8:2) rather than marching out to meet them. Given the defensive considerations, does it not seem likely that this played a key part in their decision to locate at the hill in the first place? The New York hill does not seem to be large enough to have accommodated the defensive needs of so large a force. Mormon as an able military leader would have known what those needs would be and would have kept them in mind when he selected the site. This careful selection does not mean that all of the fighting need have taken place on the hill, but that the hill was somehow central to the battle seems unavoidable.

One advantage in the abundance of water at Cumorah is that it would be useful in cultivating crops to feed the large numbers of
Nephites gathered there and would help attract potential recruits. Hedges argues that the text itself does not say that they grew food on the spot, so this criteria is not a valid one. In earlier times of warfare, he reminds us, the Nephites were able to receive provisions from elsewhere. He notes that in the war against the Gadianton robbers the Nephites collected enough provisions to last for seven years (see 3 Nephi 4:4), and Helaman’s army was resupplied by provisions from elsewhere. These analogies, however, are not apt to Mormon’s day (see Moroni 9:7–8, 16–19). In their war with the robbers, the Nephites gathered to the center of their lands, not in some far distant location (see 3 Nephi 3:21). Helaman’s men were only a few days from their supply source at Zarahemla, yet, in spite of his army’s proximity to Zarahemla, his men nearly starved to death (see Alma 58:6–9).

No doubt, the Nephites who gathered to Cumorah would have taken what they could carry with them, but they were having trouble holding onto things (see Helaman 13:30–36; Mormon 2:10; compare the Jaredites; Ether 14:1–2), and a lengthy journey of more than a few weeks on foot would deplete most if not all of the food they were carrying. And what about hostile tribes along the way? Even if they somehow managed to reach a far distant location in New York, suffering minimal casualties from clashes with such tribes, what would they eat when they got there? Hedges suggests that “the battle at Cumorah may have been fueled largely from somewhere outside.” From where? Is it not more logical to suppose that Cumorah was relatively close to the old centers of Nephite settlement in the land northward?

It also seems likely that the Hill Cumorah would need to be large enough that it could provide a view of hundreds of thousands of bodies (230,000 Nephite dead along with those fallen Lamanites), and yet low enough that Mormon and the other wounded survivors could climb it in a few hours during the night to witness the scene from there “on the morrow.” Hedges disputes whether Mormon actually surveyed all the fallen armies from the top of the hill since it says he “did behold” his fallen ten thousand and that of his son Moroni without explicitly stating that he “did behold” the others, but since the Nephite armies with their twenty-three cohorts of ten thousand were camped “round about” the hill it seems reasonable that he saw them as well. A hill, Hedges says, “need not even be particularly large for a large number of people to fight around or near it. Hundreds of thousands could fight around or in the vicinity of a fence post if they were so inclined.” Perhaps, but why would a million men, women, and children choose to march to and fight around a fence post or at a far distant hill?
In addition to the fact that the hill would need to be of such a kind as to provide a place where the many Nephite records could be hidden (see Mormon 6:6), Mormon would have needed to keep the hiding place and its location a secret from most, if not all, of the Nephites, with the exception of his son and possibly another faithful companion or two. With nearly a quarter of a million Nephites, most of them grossly wicked, camped around the hill (see Mormon 6:4, 11–15), how would Mormon keep his endeavor a secret? The hill needed to be large enough that Mormon could accomplish this task in relative secrecy, something that would be especially difficult to do if Mormon’s hill was the one in Palmyra. While such considerations do not prove the Mesoamerican candidate, Cerro Vigia, to be the hill in question, they do suggest that it is a more plausible candidate than the hill in Palmyra.

Basic and central to the contemporary Mesoamerican view of Book of Mormon geography is the idea that the lands and peoples described in the Book of Mormon “were limited in extent” and that in reading the narrative we should “think in terms of hundreds of miles instead of thousands, and of millions of people instead of hundreds of millions.” The proximity of the Jaredite Hill Ramah, later known to the Nephites as the Hill Cumorah, is an intrinsic part of that view. Any thesis that puts the hill thousands of miles away from the narrow neck of land does not do justice to the Book of Mormon text or to reasonable inferences that may be drawn from it. The problems of distances and logistics that would have been involved in such a hypothetical scenario are deeply problematic, if not insuperable. These are difficulties, however, that arise from our own assumptions, rather than from the Book of Mormon itself. On the other hand, a model with Mormon’s Cumorah in Mesoamerica, though not without its own set of questions and challenges, is far more consistent and believable.

Notes


2. Hedges has also challenged the view that early Latter-day Saint leaders abandoned the so-called hemispheric model of Book of Mormon geography in favor of a more limited Central American model (see “Book of Mormon Geography in the World of Joseph Smith,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 8, nos. 1–2 [Spring–Fall 2007]: 77–89). Elsewhere he argues in favor of the Panamanian narrow neck of land over the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which he argues is too wide (see “The Narrow Neck of Land,” *Religious Educator* 9, no. 3 [2008]: 151–60).

3. Hedges wonders if the Adena and Hopewell Cultures of the Ohio and Mississippi regions may have been associated in some way with migrants from Book of Mormon lands. If so, he reasons, “we may need to look farther to the north in some sort of Jaredite and Nephite backcountry,” so “a site in upstate New York should at least be considered a possibility.” This assumes that the possibility in question first passes the test of textual consistency and plausibility.


6. By road it is about 640 miles from Tuxtla Gutierrez to Mexico City.


10. Significantly, this is the first and in fact the only reference in these later chapters to the destruction of “many cities.”


16. Why would he then leave New York and head back another twenty-five hundred miles southward toward the isthmus? If Hedges is correct, all of Coriantumr’s people, now dead, would have already left Mexico with him. The roundtrip journey would have been nearly five thousand miles.


19. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 345. Both Palmer and Sorenson have previously suggested that the land of Moron may have been located in highland
Oaxaca. Sorenson informed me recently that he now rejects this correlation and would place the Jaredite capital somewhere in the vicinity of central or even southern Veracruz. This would be more consistent with my arguments here.


24. This is of course assuming that the narrow neck of land was the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the closest of the proposed Middle American candidates for that isthmus. If we propose a more southerly location such as Honduras or Costa Rica or Panama (Hedges, “The Narrow Neck of Land,” 156–58), the distance becomes even more problematic.


30. Washburn, *Book of Mormon Geography*, 209; Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium*, 451. Based upon our current understanding I think it likely that the hill in New York was named after the site near the narrow neck of land by Moroni or earlier Lehites who migrated to North America during or after Book of Mormon times. The practice of the same name being applied to multiple sites has precedent in both the Bible and the Book of Mormon. In the Book of Mormon, Nephite dissidents and Lamanites built a city which they named Jerusalem, “calling it after the land of their fathers’ nativity” (Alma 21:1). Other Book of Mormon places which were given biblical names include Ephraim, Gilgal, Helam, Jordan, Midian, Judea, Sidon and Ramah. In Syro-Palestine there were as many as five different sites named Ramah. Patrick M. Arnold, “Ramah,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:613–14. In the Book of Mormon there is a hill Manti at Zarahemla and a land and city of that name further south. There is the land and the city of Desolation (Mormon 3:5, 7), and also the “desolation of Nehors” (Alma 16:11). There was a hill called Onidah in the Zoramite lands in Antionum (Alma 32:4) and another Onidah in the land of Nephi (Alma 47:5). Since there is ample precedent in the texts of the Bible and the Book of Mormon for applying
the same name to different sites, it would not be surprising if Moroni or Nephite migrants into the land northward followed this practice and named the New York hill after the earlier one.


32. He disputes the idea that the hill was near an eastern seacoast. “A thousand miles could lie between the hill and the eastern sea as easily as ten,” but as we have seen above, that cannot be the case. The proximity of the hill to the narrow neck of land and the inference that it was on or near a region that had plains, hills and valleys also follows from the same evidence. If we assume also, as most readers do, that the narrow neck of land was somewhere in Middle America, then the point about the hill being in a temperate zone is also a reasonable inference.


37. Washburn, *Book of Mormon Geography*, 268. This does not mean, according to the limited Mesoamerican view, that Book of Mormon peoples did not spread to other regions of the Americas and the Pacific where they may have influenced or become integrated into other cultures. “Their only point is that the record itself does not tell about these things. It is limited to a relatively small area” (Washburn, *Book of Mormon Geography*, 213). “It is possible and quite probable, that sometime during the Book of Mormon history, some adventurous Nephites and Lamanites settled in what is now the western plains of the United States, the Mississippi Valley, and as far north as the Great Lakes region. But, no account of what they did was important enough for Mormon to include it in his abridgment of the Large Plates of Nephi” (Hammond, *Geography of the Book of Mormon*, 151–52). Sperry assumed that the episode involving Zelph was a “fringe battle” involving migrant peoples who were not involved in the activities of Mormon and his people (Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium*, 451).
I would like to thank Matt Roper for taking the time to review my paper. He and I disagree on what constitutes circular reasoning, as well as on a number of different points about how one might understand what the Book of Mormon says about its own geography, but I echo his hope that this exchange will ultimately benefit our inquiries into the questions surrounding Book of Mormon geography.

If I read his response correctly, Roper agrees with the central thesis of my paper—that is, that the text of the Book of Mormon does not absolutely require the final battles of the Nephites and Jaredites to have taken place within approximately a couple hundred miles of the book’s narrow neck of land, near a hill vastly different in nature than New York’s Hill Cumorah. He then says, however, that the point is actually a small one that pales in comparison to the more important question of what scenario for the location of the final battles is more probable in light of the text. Be that as it may, it should be pointed out that the idea that the text required a limited geography has been central to the limited Mesoamerican thesis and has been a large part of the reason why this thesis has enjoyed such popularity over the years. Any concession on this point is hardly inconsequential.

Roper attempts to minimize other important points in my paper, and I would urge readers to keep the suggestions, caveats, and data I
identify firmly in mind as they read his arguments. The issue I would pursue most rigorously, however, is his belief that we are in any sort of a position right now to accurately identify a most probable scenario for the location of the final battles in the first place. To accurately identify the relative probability of an event, one must have a thorough and accurate understanding of everything that affects that event. Any ambiguities, poorly understood variables, or unknown factors that might affect the event will lessen the certainty with which one can identify the probability of that event happening. For example, if I mix five orange disks with five green disks of the same size and texture, I know that a blindfolded person has a one in two chance of drawing out an orange disk. If I have no idea how many green disks are in the pile, though, I really have no idea what the probability is that a blindfolded person will pick out an orange disk, other than that it is greater than zero (since there are orange disks in the pile). As is shown by the long list of surprises, incredible achievements, and strange twists of events that make the study of history so fascinating, history is much more like the pile with an unknown number of green disks than the pile where everything is known. Personalities, natural phenomena, and scores of other variables and factors mix and mingle in incredibly complex ways and often produce very unforeseen results.

One need look no further than the Book of Mormon itself to find examples of such surprises. Based on our current understanding of the ancient world, for example, what are the chances—that is, what is the probability—that a group of men, women, and children could have left Jerusalem shortly before its destruction at the hands of the Babylonians, traveled some 2,500 miles through Arabia, and then built an oceangoing vessel and sailed several thousand more miles to America? Better yet, what is the probability that a similar group could have, or would have, made a similar trip in airtight barges, complete with “flocks and herds” (Ether 6:4), more than a thousand years earlier? Both events were, and continue to be, almost inconceivable for most people, yet they did happen, as have thousands of other unforeseen things over the course of human history. The point of all of this, simply, is that given the ambiguities, variables, and unknowns that play a role in determining historical development, the whole notion of probability is very ill suited for reconstructing the activities and movements of people in the past.

This is especially so for Book of Mormon geography. In a text whose authors repeatedly mention the impossibility of recording even a hundredth part of all that is going on (see Jacob 3:13; Words of
Mormon 1:5; 3 Nephi 5:8; 26:6; Ether 15:33), and whose descriptions of geography and many other things are ambiguous and woefully incomplete, the suggestion that we can accurately determine the relative probability of where something happened or did not happen is highly questionable. With so much up in the air, any pronouncement about the relative probability of something happening can only be based upon one’s own experiences, worldviews, and assumptions, all of which are highly subjective.¹

Even if we could assign accurate probabilities to these different scenarios, Roper’s method works against his efforts to establish the most probable scenario. Like John Sorenson and others, Roper creates long chains of probable events in an effort to arrive at the probable conclusion. That is, after determining the most probable first step in a sequence of events, these scholars then try to determine which of the next round of options is most probable, and so on. The result is a long chain of probabilities, each following and somewhat based on the previous one but also independent of the earlier decisions at its own level. Rather than leading to the most probable conclusion, however, such a method actually leads to an increasingly improbable scenario. This is because the probability of multiple separate events each happening is the product of the individual probabilities. If the probability of something happening is 3 out of 5 (or 60 percent), for example, and the probability of something else happening is also 3 out of 5, the probability of them both happening is $\frac{3}{5} \times \frac{3}{5}$, or $\frac{9}{25}$ (36 percent)—well below the 60 percent probability of each event happening singly. If we add another event with a $\frac{3}{5}$ probability to the chain, the chance of all three happening drops to $\frac{27}{125}$ ($\frac{3}{5} \times \frac{3}{5} \times \frac{3}{5}$), or little more than 20 percent. What this means is that the conclusions based on the long and convoluted lists of “probable,” “likely,” and “more reasonable” events that greet us at every turn in Roper’s and Sorenson’s analyses are very unlikely to hold much water—again, assuming such individual probabilities could be accurately determined in the first place.

Rather than deceiving ourselves with fuzzy notions of probability, I would advocate an approach to Book of Mormon geography that begins by identifying, from the text, what the possibilities are. The next step, as I urge in my paper, is to explore these possibilities from all possible angles—archaeology, linguistics, ethnography, and so on. Only then can we begin to eliminate the unknowns and variables that currently face us. None of this is to suggest that we abandon the limited Mesoamerican thesis altogether—I would be the first to admit
that time may eventually prove it correct, although I confess that right now I find several of its fundamental assertions extremely problematic. Even without these problems, though, it is still only a possibility; there are simply too many unknowns and ambiguities at this point to rank it any higher than that. Other possibilities also exist that are perfectly consistent with the text, and we would do well to start exploring them seriously.

Notes

1. Roper, for example, made an involved argument for the state of Coriantumr’s health. Considering the limited data available to us and the caution and innumerable tests that modern physicians employ before making a diagnosis in a complex case, the diagnosis of a historical figure’s health is highly speculative.

“Where Is Thy Glory?”
Moses 1, the Nature of Truth, and the Plan of Salvation

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While the first chapter of the book of Moses is often understood as introductory to the rest of the book, the chapter itself is an inclusive text centering on Moses’s transformation through three separate encounters with supernatural beings. In each encounter he is taught something of the meaning of truth and experiences the power that the comprehension of truth brings. His example is particularly instructive in light of the doctrine that “truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come” (D&C 93:24).

The first section of Moses 1 contains Moses’s encounter with God (see vv. 1–11). Second is his confrontation with the adversary (see vv. 12–23). The third and final section records his meeting with God (see vv. 24–41). In these three encounters, Moses becomes a type for all who seek to understand things as they really are.

The First Encounter: Moses and God

“The glory of God was upon Moses.” The chapter opens with Moses experiencing a change in both time and space as he is transported to an exceedingly high mountain, where we are immediately informed that the glory of God is upon Moses (see v. 2), allowing him to stand in God’s presence.

Though not explicitly mentioned as such, the glory of God is a central theme in each encounter.¹ The term comes from the Latin gloria, which describes the physical manifestation of light around an
The Greek word *doxa*, translated as *glory* in the New Testament, also describes the nimbus or halo of light surrounding an object or person. Similarly, the Hebrew term *Shekinah* describes the divine nimbus of light experienced in the presence of God.

In this dispensation, the Prophet Joseph Smith describes the glory of God as “a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun” (Joseph Smith—History 1:16). Later, at the Kirtland Temple dedication, people outside the temple witness what seems to be fire and light falling upon the building just as the Shekinah fell upon other sacred edifices in the Old Testament.

While Shekinah describes perfectly the physical manifestations associated with the presence of God, it by itself is not the glory of God. According to Doctrine and Covenants 93:36, the glory of God is intelligence, “or, in other words, light and truth.” The inclusion of truth as part of God’s glory is understood in connection with the definition of truth provided twelve verses earlier: “Truth is a knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come” (v. 24). Similarly, in Jacob 4:13, we are told that truth is “things as they really are, and of things as they really will be.” In both cases, truth is defined as a sure state of being, and because of their emphasis on the reality of truth, these definitions declare that a difference exists between truth, the way things really are, and the way things seem to be. Thus, God’s glory includes both the physical light represented by the Shekinah-type experience and also truth, the conscious awareness of the way things really are, the latter being especially to Moses in this chapter.

“Thou art my son.” The first truth taught by God to Moses is in verse 4 of Moses 1, God tells Moses, “Thou art my son.” This may seem to be a basic revelation, but it is the foundation upon which the other truths given to Moses are built. This declaration emphasizes the familial relationship between Moses and God and in so doing summarizes the entire plan of salvation. It speaks not only of his divine heritage but also of his potential to be like God through exaltation and as such highlights his covenantal relationship with God.

While the terms *father* and *son* often refer to genetic, biological relationships, our own modern legal system recognizes that biology is not the only manner in which one can be a son or daughter. The principle of adoption is one that recognizes these designations have nothing to do with a genetic relationship. The terms are used throughout the ancient Near East to refer to political and social relationships. In ancient Israel they are used to describe the covenantal relationship between God and Israel.
The Apostle Paul teaches similar doctrine in Romans 8:14, 16–17:
“For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God, . . . the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ.” Our designation as children of God is not determined by just our genetic lineage but by our covenantal worthiness. Being worthy of and following the Spirit determines whether or not we are his sons and daughters, which in turn signifies our right to receive, by covenant, the inheritance of God.9

By affirming that Moses is his son, God acknowledges Moses’s faithfulness and status as an heir, worthy to be in his presence. The irony of the passage is that, according to tradition, Moses was raised in the royal courts of Egypt where the concept of the divine nature of man was taught in apostate fashion is the pharaoh, was understood to be literally the son of Deity. As a result, Moses is confronted early on with the power of truth, learning of the true nature of man, something he “never had supposed” (v. 10).

“Wherefore look!” Another truth is found in verse 4: “Wherefore look, and I will show thee the workmanship of mine hands.” The word wherefore designates an important relationship to the following clause. Because Moses is God’s son, he has the right to behold the workmanship of his Father. Though the statement by the Father is literally fulfilled a few verses later as Moses sees in vision the physical limits of this earth as well as all the inhabitants that would dwell on it, visions are only one means by which revelation may be received. The larger meaning to God’s declaration and invitation is that Moses has the right to receive revelation.

This truth suggests that all God’s sons and daughters have the right to acquire truth through revelation. In fact, the exhortation to seek and acquire knowledge from God is one of the most common exhortations in the scriptures. Moreover, like the first truth, this principle also encapsulates the plan of salvation. In John 17:3 we read, “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.” The process by which one gains this saving knowledge is described in Doctrine and Covenants 42:61: “If thou shalt ask, thou shalt receive revelation upon revelation, knowledge upon knowledge, that thou mayest know the mysteries and peaceable things—that which bringeth joy, that which bringeth life eternal.”

Of course, this knowledge is not given without effort. Alma states that knowledge is given based both on one’s worthiness to receive it and on the manner by which one uses the knowledge: “And he that will not harden his heart, to him is given the greater portion of the
word, until it is given unto him to know the mysteries of God until he know them in full” (Alma 12:10). The acquisition of truth thus is determined by our closeness to the Spirit. The more worthy we are of the Holy Ghost, the more likely we are to receive truth.

Yet simply being worthy of receiving revelation does not necessarily mean that one is actually receiving revelation. Thus the scriptures stress the need for us to ask and seek. To become a son or daughter of God, we must exercise our right to think and know as he does, which Moses learns to do.10

“Thou art in the similitude.” A third truth that Moses learns is found in verse 6: “I have a work for thee, Moses, my son; and thou art in the similitude of mine Only Begotten.” This truth, like the second, is founded upon the understanding that he is God’s son. It is apparent in this verse that there is a relationship between Moses’s work and Christ’s work. Christ “is and shall be the Savior for he is full of grace and truth.”11 This suggests then that like Christ, Moses is to be a savior, thus one who needs to be full of grace and truth.

What exactly is meant by the phrase “grace and truth” is unknown since the original text of Moses is not available, yet similar clauses are found in the Old Testament of the King James Bible. At least five word pairs ending with truth can be found: mercy and truth, kindness and truth, goodness and truth, peace and truth, and faithfulness and truth.12 Of these pairs, mercy and truth is the most common, referred to ten times.13 The Hebrew text from which this translation is received is hesed and emet. While the common Hebrew word emet is understood to be the equivalent of our word truth, the Hebrew term hesed is much harder to translate. Found over fifty times in the Old Testament, it is a word that appears unique to the Hebrew language and can be translated as mercy, goodness, and kindness. What is known about hesed is that it seems to be related to the other unique feature of ancient Israelite religion—the covenantal relationship with God.14 The term is used as a characteristic of the nature of God, specifically referring to his works in our behalf.

It is possible that “grace and truth” is equivalent to hesed and emet, suggesting that the concept of grace was understood in the Old Testament as hesed. If Christ does the work of the savior because he possesses both hesed and emet, then Moses learns that he must possess these same traits if he too is to work. Through his prophetic leadership, Moses is meant to be a spiritual savior. Thus, he too, must cultivate the traits of hesed and emet if he is to prepare his people to enter into
God’s rest, do all that he can to sanctify his people to see God’s face, and provide the law which is to lead to spiritual transformation.15

“And it came to pass that Moses looked.” Moses next is shown a vision of the earth and its inhabitants. The reasoning behind this vision is given in verse 7: “This one thing I show unto thee, Moses, my son, for thou art in the world.” This one thing is, in actuality, two scenes: (1) the world and the ends thereof and (2) all the children which are and were created. According to God, it is because of Moses’s mortality that he is shown these things, yet Moses is also reminded of his divine heritage as God reemphasizes his status as a son of God. The visionary presentation also fulfills the second and third truths, in that Moses’s sonship gives him the right to receive needed revelation, which is also a demonstration both in the transmission and in the content of God’s hesed.

After Moses sees this incredible vision, “he greatly marveled and wondered: . . . And as he was left unto himself, he fell unto the earth . . . for the space of many hours” (vv. 8–10). Yet the effect of the vision is much more than merely physical. As Moses himself states, “Man is nothing, which thing I never had supposed” (v. 10). This vision, and the truths that led to the presentation of the vision, has so altered the suppositions that had structured his thinking that it leads to a conscious reality he “never had supposed.” Interestingly, Moses will be shown the exact same scenes in his second encounter with God, but his perspective and understanding will have changed again. The differences between the two encounters will reflect the new understandings of the vision Moses gains through his confrontation with the adversary.

The Second Encounter: Moses and Satan

After God’s withdrawal, Moses is confronted with the adversary, who immediately commands Moses to worship him. Moses’s response comprises the next thirteen verses. Importantly, Moses is unaware that the entity confronting him is Satan. Unsure as to who is addressing him, Moses begins his response with truths he learned earlier from God: “Who art thou? For behold, I am a son of God, in the similitude of his Only Begotten; and where is thy glory, that I should worship thee?” (v. 13).

This last question becomes a rhetorical one as Moses recognizes that whatever or whoever is before him, it is clearly not God because of the being’s lack of glory: “For behold, I could not look upon God, except his glory should could upon me . . . but I can look upon thee in the natural man” (v. 14). Though Moses does not know all things, the
knowledge gained through his early experience now becomes useful when confronted with the unknown. Moreover, he is able to discern differences through the added revelatory power of the Holy Ghost: “Blessed be the name of my God, for his Spirit hath not altogether withdrawn from me, or else where is thy glory, for it is darkness unto me?” (v. 15). His perception of the darkness comes not from his physical senses but from the discernment provided by the Spirit. In other words, Moses suggests that what he sees with his eyes and what he understands may, in fact, be two different things.

This discrepancy is better understood by reviewing the second half of the encounter in verses 19–23 as Satan reveals a powerful, vengeful, and destructive persona. Though this event is often characterized as a temper tantrum on the part of the adversary, to view it this way belittles the experience. Instead, this is a calculated presentation meant to terrify Moses into inaction: “And it came to pass that Moses began to fear exceedingly; and as he began to fear, he saw the bitterness of hell” (v. 20). Similarly, Joseph Smith describes this aspect of the adversary in his own account, where he felt to give himself up to utter destruction. In both cases, Satan’s attack was meant to terrify the individual in the hope that they would give up their attempt to engage with God. That the ploy fails in both accounts does not take away from the efficacy of this approach. Fear is one of Satan’s most prominent and powerful tools of persuasion.

This second persona must contrast with the earlier persona he first presented before Moses since the terrible, frightening persona comes after Moses and satan have already engaged in communication. Satan’s demand that Moses worship him suggests that his appearance would have been awe-inspiring. Moses’s statement in verse 15, that the darkness is perceived only through the spirit and not the physical eyes, suggests that Satan had appeared in a form in which light was discernable physically. We are told elsewhere that Satan can take the form of an angel of light, counterfeiting the glory of God by surrounding himself in a mantle of light. For those who rely on only their physical senses, they would see a being remarkably similar to other divine beings. This deception creates a pattern of response for other deceitful situations in which one reacts to the way things seem instead of the way things are.

Satan’s desire that we not recognize truth is reflected in his desire that Moses worship him. Though the Hebrew word translated as worship in the Old Testament refers to the physical activity of bowing down before someone, the English word is made of the root worth and
the suffix *-ship*. The suffix denotes the state of an object or individual; *worth* means the value recognized for an object or person. The noun *worship*, then, is a state of worth, the reverence offered to one in a state of worth; while the verb *to worship* means to recognize the value of the individual. Certainly, worship brings about the recognition of God’s worth regarding our own salvation. He is deemed worthy because of what he is able to provide for us. Yet as we worship God, we recognize God’s own intrinsic worth, regardless of what he provides for us.

In Alma 33:3, the prophet Zenos states that worship is prayer. This describes not only the rite that is often associated with the concept of worship but also the means by which the recognition of God’s worth is realized. As we pray and enter into a personal relationship with God, we recognize both his value in our salvation and his personal worth as an individual being. Moreover, because prayer is the primary, fundamental means of receiving personal revelation, it is the primary means by which any truth, particularly the truth of one’s intrinsic worth, is given. As such, prayer becomes the principle means by which we realize that God discerns our own individual worth as well.

This is exactly what Moses suggests in verses 15 and 16 as the relationship between worship and the truth of our being is highlighted: “And I can judge between thee and God; for God said unto me: Worship God; . . . Thou art after the similitude of mine Only Begotten.” Moses recognizes that it is because he is in the similitude of Christ, a son of God, that God desires him to worship and to recognize his worth, thereby demonstrating our ability to gain and comprehend truth. The commandment to worship is directly tied to our understanding of who we really are.

At this point, Moses synthesizes the truths given earlier and extrapolates upon the causal relationship between glory and revelation. Because God’s glory has rested upon Moses, he can discern between God and Satan, and he desires further communication with God: “And again Moses said: I will not cease to call upon God, I have other things to inquire of him: for his glory has been upon me, wherefore I can judge between him and thee. Depart hence, Satan” (v. 18). It is God’s glory, particularly the truth revealed by the Holy Ghost, that gives Moses the means to see through Satan’s superficial light to the darkness beneath.

Moses worships God by seeking him out to learn more truth and becoming more like him. Recognizing that Satan cannot do this, Moses commands him to depart. By worshipping God even while being threatened, Moses demonstrates that he not only knows truth,
but he also knows how to utilize truth and therefore how to exercise real power. In this, then, he demonstrates his divine heritage as one who knows truth and changes things by the power of truth.

The Third Encounter: Moses and God Again

Following his confrontation with the adversary in which he learned to recognize the difference between truth and deception, Moses again experiences the glory of God: “And it came to pass that when Satan had departed from the presence of Moses, that Moses lifted up his eyes unto heaven, being filled with the Holy Ghost, which beareth record of the Father and the Son; And calling upon the name of God, he beheld his glory again, for it was upon him” (vv. 24–25). Though Moses has experienced the glory of God before, his experience with the adversary prepares him to receive even greater truth.

“Blessed art thou.” God begins by declaring that Moses is blessed because he has been chosen: “Blessed art thou, Moses, for I, the Almighty, have chosen thee” (v. 25). Earlier Moses was told he could receive revelation because he was a son; now he is told that he is blessed because he is chosen. Though the term is used to describe a general state of being in the Lord’s favor, it is also used to describe those who have obtained a promise of exaltation by exhibiting the same qualities as God. The Beatitudes, for instance, outline the promises leading to exaltation based on a set of individual qualities that must be acquired.22

One such individual who obtains this blessed state by exhibiting divine qualities is Nephi, who is told: “Blessed art thou, Nephi, for those things which thou hast done; . . . And now, because thou hast done this with such unwearyingness, behold, I will bless thee forever” (Helaman 10:4–5). Andrew C. Skinner points out that this blessed state refers to Nephi’s calling and election having been made sure, receiving the promise of eternal life as a result of his personal righteousness.23 Moreover, because he has exhibited divine characteristics, Nephi is given power reminiscent of God’s own: “I will make thee mighty in word and in deed, in faith and in works; yea, even that all things shall be done unto thee according to thy word” (Helaman 10:5).

Like Nephi, Moses obtains a state of blessedness characterized by his reception of the power of God: “Blessed art thou, Moses, for I, the Almighty, have chosen thee, and thou shalt be made stronger than many waters; for they shall obey thy command as if thou wert God” (v. 25). This blessed state comes about only after the trial with the adversary when Moses proved himself and exercised the divine gifts of
revelation. His personal righteousness is demonstrated in his worthinesst to receive and then to follow the Holy Ghost; thus he, like Nephi, is blessed with the power of God to control water. While Moses’s use of this power readily reminds the reader of the parting of the Red Sea, God’s power over water is also demonstrated in the Creation of the earth, as will be explained later, thereby beginning the means by which Moses can truly understand his work.

“Thou shalt deliver my people.” With the power to accomplish the work assigned to him, Moses is given more detailed instructions concerning that work: “And lo, I am with thee, even unto the end of thy days; for thou shalt deliver my people from bondage, even Israel my chosen” (v. 26). Earlier, he had simply been told there was a work for him and that the work was somehow connected to the fact that he was in similitude of Christ. Now the work is explained, and he can begin to understand how his work is in similitude of Christ. To the reader, it becomes immediately apparent that it is in the work of deliverance that Moses and Christ truly reflect one another. Moses seeks to transform God’s children through deliverance from the forces of sin and uncleanness like Christ, and, like Christ, Moses’s work continues through later dispensations.

Associated with this work is a promise in which God declares that he will be with Moses always. Significantly, this promise is given after Moses experienced a separation from God’s presence and learned that even though the physical presence of God may have withdrawn and the glory was no longer visible, God was still present through his Spirit. Thus, the true meaning of this promise can now be fully appreciated by Moses. President Boyd K. Packer, speaking on the subject as to whether Apostles literally see God, says that the witness of the Spirit is stronger than anything witnessed physically. As we see with Moses, physical senses can be deceived and knowledge gained from that deception is flawed. The Spirit, on the other hand, testifies of truth, revealing the way things really are, not as they seem to be. It is in this manner that Moses now comprehends God’s statement, “Lo, I am with thee” (v. 26).

One last truth is revealed to Moses within the description of his work. Like Moses, Israel too is given the designation of “chosen.” Israel comprises the sons and daughters of God with all the attendant blessings and rights. However, the biblical record suggests that Israel rarely lives up to these rights and blessings. Still, Moses must know this truth, that Israel is of “chosen” status, or has the potential of being such, to perform his work of deliverance correctly. Like Christ, who
performs the Atonement because he knows who we really are, Moses is able to deliver Israel by knowing who they really are.

“There was not a particle of it which he did not behold.” Following the presentation of the above truths, Moses again experiences a vision of the earth and its inhabitants, but with a significant difference: “Moses cast his eyes and beheld the earth, yea, even all of it; and there was not a particle of it which he did not behold, discerning it by the spirit of God” (v. 27). The information that Moses encounters at this point is staggering. Research shows that the human brain is capable of receiving only a limited amount of information before either getting rid of the information or ignoring the stimuli. The human body simply cannot handle that much sensory input, thus the significance of Moses’s account: not only does he perceive the earth, but also every particle that makes up the earth while retaining his consciousness, which suggests he is not just seeing, but comprehending and internalizing this vast amount of information.

Moses is able to experience this vast amount of information by “discerning it by the spirit of God” (v. 27). We have already seen that the Holy Ghost plays an important role in the reception of truth, now it is shown here to be the means by which Moses is able to experience the very way in which God sees truth. Moses’s capacity to learn and understand has increased, as well as the physical stamina needed to experience such revelations. Unlike before, Moses is able to retain his consciousness, though greater knowledge is given. His increased capacity allows him to comprehend an amount of information that only God can comprehend. In other words, Moses, having been told that he would have power like God, is now given the opportunity not to just know but also to think and discern as God does. He is given insight not only to the knowledge but also to the very manner in which a divine being perceives and comprehends the cosmos. In so doing, Moses gains the power of such a being.

The relationships between knowledge, salvation, and godhood are best described by Joseph Smith who tells us that “in knowledge there is power.” Elsewhere he tells us that “a man is saved no faster than he gets knowledge.” Finally, Joseph Smith teaches that “God has more power than all other beings, because he has greater knowledge.” Thus, the final step to Moses truly comprehending his relationship with God and the manner in which he is in a similitude of Christ is by experiencing not just the knowledge but the way in which such knowledge is perceived or understood. Moses learns how God sees and thus can exercise the power of God.
“For behold, this is my work and my glory.” This change in perception so affects Moses that it leads him to ask, “Tell me, I pray thee, why these things are so, and by what thou madest them?” (v. 30). The question is made up of two requests: (1) the purpose behind the Creation (“why are these things so”) and (2) how the Creation came about (“by what thou madest them”). God’s answer makes up the remainder of the chapter, indeed the rest of the book of Moses.

God’s response begins in verse 31: “For mine own purpose have I made these things. Here is wisdom and it remaineth in me.” Though God does not explain here in detail why the Creation happened, he does reveal that it happened “for mine own purpose.” Moses will get a better understanding of this answer later on in the conversation. The second request is also answered: “And by the word of my power, have I created them, which is mine Only Begotten Son, who is full of grace and truth” (v. 32). This response resonates in Moses since similar language was used to describe both him and his assigned work. Like Christ, Moses is God’s son; like Christ, he possesses the power of God; like Christ, his work is creative in purpose; and finally, like Christ, it is because he is God’s heir that he is given the work of creation and deliverance.

God then states that these truths concern not just this world but all of the creations God has been involved with: “And worlds without number have I created; and I also created them for mine own purpose; and by the Son I created them, which is mine Only Begotten” (v. 33). Though similar to the declaration concerning this earth, this statement reflects the unfathomable number of God’s creations. The same concept is repeated in verse 35: “There are many worlds that have passed away by the word of my power. And there are many that now stand, and innumerable are they unto man.” God states again in verse 37, “The heavens, they are many, and they cannot be numbered unto man.” In each case, the vastness of God’s creations is emphasized and, if left by itself, leaves the impression of an incomprehensible separation between both our experience and our existence and God’s.

This apparent gulf was recognized by Moses in the first encounter with God as he realized his own insignificance, his own nothingness, in light of God’s power. Though he was told that he was God’s son, that sense of smallness and nothingness is what registered when the glory of God withdrew. Now in the second meeting with God, Moses is again confronted with this gulf. But Moses can make sense of the paradox between the vastness of God’s creations and God’s individual awareness of every little thing because he had experienced something similar
when he viewed the entirety of this earth while perceiving every single particle. So it is with his own experience that Moses can understand God’s claim following each declaration of uncountable creation: “All things are numbered unto me, for they are mine and I know them. . . . They are numbered unto me, for they are mine” (vv. 35, 37).

With this, God now goes back and adds insight to the first answer: “For mine purpose.” In verse 39 he tells Moses, “For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.” By now, the cumulative effect of truth upon truth allows Moses to understand the implications of this statement. The endless nature of the creations and the awareness of all things are to bring to pass the exaltation of man. This is his purpose behind the Creation, to bring others to the same state as himself. This work culminates in recognizing that all mankind, like Moses, can become chosen and blessed sons and daughters of God. By knowing this, Moses can understand how the work of God does not differ, except perhaps in scale, from his own work. By experiencing the manner in which truths build upon one another in his encounters, Moses comes to understand exactly what it means to be a son of God.

And it is at this point that Moses 1 becomes applicable for us today as it provides a pattern of experiences in gaining and understanding knowledge that leads to salvation. It begins with the reception of basic truths, namely who we are and what we are to do, followed by the experiences with adversity and trial where those truths are tested and we are challenged as to the way things seem versus the way they are. In this manner, our salvation is worked out through our acquisition of knowledge. During this process, we understand that God’s promise that he is always with us is true and that he is ready to provide revelation for us at any time if we remain worthy. Finally, the successful passing of the trials of mortality allows us to experience eternal life and godhood by knowing who we really are and what our work really is. There we find that the work we have been performing is in fact the same work that God himself is engaged in. Thus, one of the more important legacies of Moses is that all can come to comprehend God and the truths that define this existence and, in so doing, understand our own glory.33

Notes

Lake City: Randall Book, 1985), 44: “Its central theme is the glory of God—the Father’s continuing increase in it, his desire to endow his children with it, and Satan’s efforts to rob men of it.”

2. The Hebrew word translated as “glory” is kabod, which means “weightiness” or “heaviness” and is also used to describe the physical light associated with God’s presence.

3. Exodus 40:34–38; 1 Kings 8:10–11. In Isaiah 6, the prophet describes the cloud or smoke that fills the temple denoting God’s presence. In light of this, it is possible the smoke from the incense lit on the altar standing before the veil in the temple may have represented the Shekinah. See Kjeld Nielsen, Incense in Ancient Israel, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 38 (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1986), 82–83.

4. In Acts 2, the presence of the Shekinah falls on the disciples of Christ and marks the beginning of the public ministry after Christ’s Resurrection. It is possible that this physical manifestation of the Shekinah on the Apostles may have led to the three thousand individuals joining the Church. Recognizing the Shekinah on these men instead of on the temple, the pilgrimaging Jews would have physical evidence that God rested on these men, not at the temple.

5. This event has been discussed numerous times in many different sources. For an excellent review see Milton J. Backman Jr. and Robert L. Millet, “Heavenly Manifestations in the Kirtland Temple,” in Studies in Scripture: The Doctrine and Covenants, ed. by Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Randall Book, 1984), 417–22.

6. In his analysis of this chapter, Turner recognizes that “glory” is much more than the mere physical phenomenon, but immediately following this, he discusses the manifestations of glory as light. He concludes his discussion with “glory, being pure divine energy” (49). In other words, glory becomes associated only with the manifestation of light and radiance; the aspect of glory with truth, while recognized, is not discussed; see Turner, “The Visions of Moses,” 46–49.

7. See J. David Schloen, The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol: Patrimonialism in Ugarit and the Ancient Near East (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2001), 255, 258: “Familiar household relationships provided the pattern not only for governmental authority and obedience but also for the organization of production and consumption and for the integration of the gods with human society. . . . At all levels in the political hierarchy, from the smallest city to the largest empire, political superiors were the ‘masters’ and ‘fathers’ of their subordinates, who were their ‘servants’ and ‘sons’; similarly political equals were ‘brothers.’”


9. The same pattern for sonship is reflected in Moses 6, where Adam’s covenantal worthiness leads to God’s recognition of Adam as a son: “And thou art after the order of him who was without beginning of days or end of years, from all eternity to all eternity. Behold, thou art one in me, a son of God; and thus may all become my sons” (vv. 67–68).
10. The right to revelation by virtue of our relationship to God was addressed at the April 2007 general conference: “Speak with the Lord in prayer. Cultivate kinship with Him” (Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, 64).

11. Jerald R. Johansen, *A Commentary on the Pearl of Great Price: A Jewel among the Scriptures* (Bountiful, UT: Horizon Publishers, 1985), 36: “Moses must have been told a great deal about the Savior, Jesus Christ, and about his mission on earth, and how faithfully Christ would fulfill this work, for when the Lord reminded Moses that he was in the ‘similitude of mine Only Begotten,’ Moses seemed never to forget this great concept. As the Savior does and will do his work, so Moses could also fulfill his assignment.”

12. Though the phrase “grace and truth” is found in the New Testament (John 1:14, 17), the phrase in Moses 1 would have been written in biblical Hebrew; thus to begin to comprehend the phrase, it is necessary to understand the original biblical Hebrew.


14. See Nelson Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1967), 68–69: “The relationship between God and people was one of mutual rights and duties with *hesed* as the norm of conduct. It was a covenant-alliance based on *hesed* and existing because of *hesed*. . . . The *hasidim* fulfill their covenantal obligations in that they practice *hesed*. . . . They can be, and remain, *hasidim* only as long as they comport themselves according to the sacred covenant concluded at Sinai and as long as they practice *hesed*.”

15. The relationship between Christ’s work and Moses’s work may be reflected in the only prophecy we have of Moses in the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 18:15, Moses prophesies that “the Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken.” Then again in verse 18, Moses recounts the Lord telling him, “I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him.” This prophecy was understood to have been fulfilled by Christ according to the prophets and apostles of the New Testament dispensation. In John 1, John the Baptist is asked whether he is the Christ, Elijah, or “that prophet” prophesied by Moses (v. 21). Later, in John 6:14, following the feeding of the five thousand, those who had gathered and partaken of the miracle said, “This is of a truth that prophet which should come into the world.” (Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII*, The Anchor Bible 29 [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966], 234: “The Prophet who is to come into the world. Most likely this a reference to the expectation of the Prophet-like-Moses, for in vs. 31 these people draw a connection between the food supplied by Jesus and the manna given by Moses” [234].) In Acts, the prophecy is referred to twice. In chapter 3, Peter quotes the Deuteronomic verse suggesting that the prophecy had been fulfilled in Christ, and in Acts 7, Stephen also quotes the prophecy in order to demonstrate that the Moses as recorded in the scriptures was not understood by the Israel of his day, nor of Stephen’s since Stephen’s Israel did not recognize the fulfillment of the prophecy (see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Anchor Bible 31 [New York: Doubleday, 1997], 289–90, 379–80). Joseph Smith himself confirms that this prophecy refers to Christ. In Joseph Smith—History 1:40, he recounts the scriptures quoted by Moroni, including Acts 3:22–23: “In addition to these, he quoted the eleventh
chapter of Isaiah, saying that it was about to be fulfilled. He quoted also the third chapter of Acts, twenty-second and twenty-third verses, precisely as they stand in our New Testament. He said that that prophet was Christ.”


17. Joseph Smith—History 1:16: “But, exerting all my powers to call upon God to deliver me out of the power of this enemy which had seized upon me, and at the very moment when I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction.”

18. See Richard D. Draper, S. Kent Brown, and Michael D. Rhodes, *The Pearl of Great Price: A Verse-by-Verse Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 27: “The actions of Satan betray one of his methods to achieve his way: that of intimidation. It worked—momentarily—when ‘Moses began to fear exceedingly’ (Moses 1:20).” A relationship exists between fear and ignorance; it is lack of knowledge that leads to the paralysis often associated with fear.

19. See 2 Nephi 9:9; D&C 128:20; 129:8. See also Turner, “The Visions of Moses,” 53: “At times the prince of darkness ‘transformeth himself nigh unto an angel of light’ in an effort to deceive with simulated glory. By such means he has duped the world.”

20. Massimo Polidoro, “The Magic in the Brain: How Conjuring Works to Deceive Our Minds,” in *Tall Tales About the Mind & Brain: Separating Fact from Fiction*, ed. Sergio Della Sala (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 36–44: “Some of the most formidable illusions rely on the human tendency to reach a conclusion with insufficient data. ‘Seeing is believing’ is an old truism. ‘I saw it with my own eyes’ is an expression of confidence about the reality of what was experienced. People learn to trust their sensory experiences, and usually that is a practical approach. Their interpretation of the world, based on analysis of incoming sensory information, is accurate enough for most purposes. But how can anyone know that what he sees or hears is ‘reality’? Our brain is not blank or passive. . . . As experiences multiply, they set up certain expectancies in terms of what is valued and what is rejected. Past experiences bias the brain toward experiencing the world in a certain way. We learn to perceive things in certain ways which allows us to function appropriately in the physical world around us. This, however, can also lead us to wrong conclusions” (38). Part of the problem is not just what is observed, but how that observation is stored within memory. It has been well attested that what one witnesses is not necessarily what one remembers.

21. See Turner, “The Visions of Moses,” 53–54: “A knowledge of the genuine enables us to more easily recognize its imitations. Lacking this knowledge, we have no reliable basis of judgment. Being ignorant of true glory, most of mankind is, therefore, easily deceived by the devil’s counterfeits. . . . Moses could discern Satan’s veiled darkness because he had experienced true light. To a lesser degree, this same ability extends to all who ‘have received the truth, and have taken the Holy Spirit for their guide.’”

22. See John W. Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 59: “In ancient sources of this genre, the word blessed ‘designates a state of being that pertains to the gods and can be awarded to humans postmortem. In ancient Egyptian religion the term plays an important role in the cult of Osiris, in which it refers to a deceased person who has been before the court of the gods of the netherworld, who has declared there
his innocence, and who has been approved to enter the paradise of Osiris, even to become an Osiris himself.”


24. See Johansen, Commentary, 39.

25. Not only was Moses a deliverer physically, but he also sought to prepare his people spiritually to enter into God’s rest, doing all that he could to sanctify his people to see God’s face and providing the law which was to lead to spiritual transformation (see Doctrine and Covenants 84:19–24).

26. In the New Testament, Moses is one of the individuals present during the Mount of Transfiguration, along with his fellow servants Elijah and Elias. Though the scriptures are silent as to what his purpose was exactly at the mount, in this dispensation Moses was one of three beings who were responsible for restoring priesthood keys. Doctrine and Covenants 110 records his appearance to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, again in the company of Elijah and Elias, committing to them the “keys of the gathering of Israel from the four parts of the earth, and the leading of the ten tribes from the land of the north” (v. 11).


28. Richard F. Thompson and Stephen A. Madigan, Memory: The Key to Consciousness (Washington DC: Joseph Henry, 2005), 27–28: “Actually, all of us possess a high-capacity, high-resolution visual memory, one that holds a lot more information. . . . This is the good news. The bad news is that for most of us, our visual short-term memory lasts only about a fifth of a second. . . . Visual information enters a sensory register or ‘iconic’ memory where it is held in detail for a brief period. Some of this information is transferred to a short-term memory store if it is attended to, and some may even get transferred to a more permanent long-term memory; but much information from sensory memory is not attended to, is not stored, and is simply lost.” See also, Alan Parkin, Memory: A Guide for Professionals (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1999), 17–18: “Given that there is not an infinite capacity to expand the brain there has inevitably been pressure on space which, in turn, has meant that mental processes must be organized efficiently. From this perspective a memory system that stored everything away would be inefficient because of the large amount of space it would take up storing away information that we would never need.”


30. Smith, History of the Church, 4:588.


32. In Moses 2:2, Moses is shown the creation of the earth in which the unorganized matter from which the cosmos was made is symbolically represented as “the deep” and “the water.” This “chaos” is what was transformed into a cosmic state through the creative power of God. Thus, Moses’s reception of such power would have been reminiscent of God’s creative power. Like God, he too would have been involved in a creation. The relationship between the Creation account and the deliverance of Israel is explored in Frank Moore Cross, Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 87–88: “The overthrow of the Egyptian host in
the sea is singled out to symbolize Israel’s deliverance, Yahweh’s victory. Later, an equation is fully drawn between the ‘drying up of the sea’ and the Creator’s defeat of Rahab or Yamm; the historical event is thereby given cosmic or primordial meaning. . . . It is highly likely that the role of the sea in the Exodus story was singled out and stressed precisely because of the ubiquitous motif of the cosmogonic battle between the creator god and [the] sea.” See also Bernhard W. Anderson, *Creation versus Cosmos: The Reinterpretation of Mythical Symbolism in the Bible* (New York: Association Press, 1967), 37: “It is not accidental that the Second Isaiah, whose message recapitulates the Exodus tradition, speaks of Yahweh as Israel’s creator, and recalls the time when, at the Red Sea, he acted to create.”

33. Smith, *History of the Church*, 6:308: “Having a knowledge of God, we begin to know how to approach him, and how to ask so as to receive an answer. When we understand the character of God, and know how to come to him, he begins to unfold the heavens to us, and to tell us all about it. When we are ready to come to him, he is ready to come to us.”
A roundtable discussion on *The Joseph Smith Papers* and the Doctrine and Covenants

Courtesy of Richard B. Crookston
Holzapfel: Several of you are editors on the Joseph Smith Papers Project. What do you see as the major contributions of this project?

Woodford: The Joseph Smith Papers Project will not only provide these core documents—these essential documents transcribed with annotations—but also explain the impact of the revelations in their context. In other words, the Joseph Smith Papers Project provides not only a narrative history but also a documentary that will allow narrative to be written.

Underwood: Our particular volumes in the Documents series include the first hundred revelations dictated by Joseph Smith. Our assignment has been to make all the documents we deal with, including the revelation texts, understandable in their 1830s context. Often when people talk about using history to understand the Doctrine and Covenants, it boils down to, “Let’s talk about the setting of the revelation. What was the immediate context and setting?” Much less is done to actually interpret particular passages within the revelation in a historically nuanced way. Some of that is done in these volumes; some of it will be new and fresh and interesting. There is still more that can be done in the aftermath.

Holzapfel: Could you each tell us a recent discovered insight that you gained regarding the Doctrine and Covenants, something fresh that you have come to realize or started to investigate?
Woodford: One thing I have noticed while going through the papers is that we are able to date a lot of the revelations with a greater precision than ever before. Not that the dates are off a great deal, but we are able to put them in their historical context, and we have made some great strides. I think there are thirty or forty sections of the Doctrine and Covenants that we can date more precisely.

Holzapfel: Is that because the revelations themselves are mentioned in documents, so you can put a window on the revelation—in other words, it has to be at least by this date or it cannot be before this date?

Woodford: Yes. We now have the manuscript book of revelations that John Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery took to Missouri in order to publish the Book of Commandments. We also have numerous other manuscripts from various collections. These have aided us immeasurably in dating the revelations.

Underwood: A specific example is the word we did on the Law, now section 42 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Because of his apostasy, Simonds Ryder bears a black mark for most Latter-day Saints, but there was a brief period where he was in good standing, and during that period he copied a number of revelations, including what we call section 42. The theory arose that he stole the revelations while Joseph was gone, but the best analysis now is that his copies were made when Ryder was in good standing. His copy of D&C 42 includes a little paragraph that is most revealing. It shows that the Law proper was given on February 9 and essentially includes up through what is now verse 73, while the rest of the revelation, verses 74–98, includes a series of instructions received on February 23 about “how to act upon the points of the Law.”

Indeed, if you go back and scrutinize verses 74–98, you can see that these do not really enunciate new Law, they clarify how to act upon it. What do we do with people who have committed fornication or murder or violated this or that aspect of the Law? How do we handle someone who has abandoned or divorced their companion? Or how do we handle public confession or administer public reprimand? All of that is how to act upon the Law. Presently there is only the single date of February 9 attached to section 42, so readers have no awareness that the latter segment was written on February 23. Prior to February 23, section 43 was given, in which a phrase that was subsequently modified or revised invites the elders then present to meet together about how to act upon the Law and to “write with a pen” what they decided on and that this would become a law unto them. Shortly thereafter, presumably in direct response to that now-lost phrase out of section 43,
seven elders met on the 23rd to ascertain how to now implement and act upon the Law. So this is one example of the kind of enrichment that has come by engaging these early manuscripts closely.

**Holzapfel:** For a long time, biblical scholars have been very interested in trying to get back to the original text, comparing manuscripts for variations. That is what New Testament studies is per se. We are now at the point in the Doctrine and Covenants where we have the sources and the skills to be able to do the same, which will not only enrich but also help us better apply the principles, because if we do not have the context we miss a lot.

**Underwood:** I would direct folks to the number of the interesting articles in the Sperry Symposium book [*The Doctrine and Covenants: Revelations in Context*]. Bob summarizes many of the insights in his chapter, laying them out one after another. The chapter that I wrote on section 42 likewise grows out of the research that we have collectively done in recent years. So while individual names are tagged to these, it reflects the kind of collective and consensual work over a number of years and is well worth consulting.

**Holzapfel:** Steve, what is something that you have learned?

**Harper:** Well, I think if I had to single out one insight that the Doctrine and Covenants gives me, it would be the way that it shows that God uses his omniscience to preserve agency. Most theologians have thought that if God is all-knowing, then there is no such thing as what Latter-day Saints would call individual agency. Calvinists would reject it. Luther would reject it. And the idea there, the presumption is that if God knows everything in advance, then how can anybody be acting, in any way, of his own volition—individual actions are just extensions of God’s will. Speaking in Washington DC, Joseph Smith said, “I reject the notion that foreknowing is the same as fore-causing.” It is a profound insight, especially for Joseph Smith, who was so much less learned than the world’s greatest theologians, but it was an insight from the revelations. And in Joseph Smith’s revelations, we have a God who clearly foreknows—he foresees. Instead of using that foreknowledge to limit our choices, this is a God who seems infinitely capable and anticipates endless permutations. He uses that foreknowledge to preserve individual agency, to make sure that his children can act for themselves independently of his will and to choose of their will, whether to obey or disobey.

Now, the example that most comes to our attention may be the loss of the 116 pages and the way section 10 reveals that God thought that might happen and had Nephi prepare an alternative source of
knowledge. God inspired Mormon to include that alternative source of knowledge, and he elaborated the whole thing to Joseph Smith in section 10. My favorite line, I think, is in verse 43 where he says, “My wisdom is greater than the cunning of the devil.” In fact, he says, “I will show unto them,” speaking of these conspirators who have tried to undermine the Book of Mormon project by taking those pages and waiting to see if Joseph would retranslate them, “I will show unto them.” This revelation is remarkable for the way it illustrates that God foreknows and that because he foreknows he can preserve and protect individual agency. He doesn’t have to limit people to narrow options. He is a great God. He is vast. Sometimes, as humans, we limit God to our limitations, but the God that Joseph Smith reveals to us is an infinite God.

Fluhman: In my research, I examine how members of other faiths perceived the revelations in Joseph Smith’s day. For example, one day I came across a Universalist newspaper editor’s response to “the Vision,” now section 76 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Universalism was a movement, not a fully realized church, that came together in the time of Joseph Smith. It had long been an approach to Christianity—to some in New England, a heretical approach. Joseph Smith’s father and some of his family had been influenced by this approach to Christianity that was essentially a rejection of Calvinist orthodoxy. This Universalist newspaper editor briefly noted the reception of the section 76 of the Doctrine and Covenants and added a comment like, “Heaven help us if the Mormons are now in our camp.” The way he perceived the revelation as reflecting Universalist views changed the way I saw section 76. Other historians had noted that section 76 rather dramatically reoriented Latter-day Saint perceptions of the afterlife, but this comment made me wonder how that revelation would have been viewed at the time.

Today my students typically focus on the three degrees of glory in section 76, but that Universalist’s comment made me wonder what he agreed with. It made me wonder, in what sense would a Universalist latch onto it? Rather than being surprised by the idea of a multitudinous heaven, he may have become enthused that the Mormons believed that salvation was more widespread than most people believed and that the sons of perdition were “the only ones on whom the second death shall have any power” (v. 37). “All the rest,” says verse 39, “shall be brought forth by the resurrection of the dead.” In other words, those early Saints may have been surprised by the vast reach of Christ’s saving power. For me, that has become the new core of the section, the extent
to which Jesus saves. Verses 40–44: “This is the gospel . . . , that he came into the world, even Jesus, to be crucified for the world, and to bear the sins of the world, and to sanctify the world, and to cleanse it from all unrighteousness; that through him all might be saved whom the Father had put into his power and made by him; who glorifies the Father, and saves all the works of his hands, except those sons of perdition who deny the Son after the Father has revealed him. Wherefore, he saves all except them.” For me, this middle part of the section sums up the scope of Christ’s saving mission: he saves more, redeems more, sanctifies more than many of those formerly traditional Christians had thought, and I think that was the real radicalism in the section.

Underwood: Yes, I think your historical context helps. It shows how early LDS views had more in common with Universalism (the idea of universal salvation) than with traditional Christianity. Most Latter-day Saints today do not have any awareness of Universalists, but back then Joseph Smith and others were part of a dialogue, so to speak, about the extent of salvation. Joseph’s grandfather Asael Smith had Universalist leanings.

Harper: You can see similar dialogues throughout section 20. There is a clear response to Calvinism; for example, the Calvinists believe in the perseverance of the Saints, or as they say, “once saved, always saved.” Section 20 flatly rejects that idea even as it agrees with part of the terminology of Calvinism to some degree. We believe in sanctification through the blood of Christ, we believe in justification, but we reject the perseverance of the Saints. So it behooves Latter-day Saints to know Christianity, to know doctrine well enough to see what the fruits of the Restoration are and to see that we have a lot in common with a lot of good folks out there, even as we differ in some ways.

Underwood: Section 19 also clearly engages Universalism and redefines “eternal punishment” or “endless punishment” as not interminable but simply of divine origin and execution. It is a wonderfully sensitive move that positions the Saints much closer to a Universalist sentiment—actually, a subdivision of Universalism called Restorationism, which refers to being restored to God’s favored grace. And there was a subdivision of Universalism where the traditional Universalists would have said, “All suffering for sin takes place in mortality. It is the natural consequence of disregarding divine law. There is no postmortal punishment.” The Restorationists believed there is enough in the Bible to indicate something about afterlife punishment, but they could not envision it lasting forever, so after a period of punishment, the sufferer would be restored to salvation and God’s presence.
Harper: Some members of the Knight family were Restorationists. Those ideas were in the air, and they were in the minds of several Latter-day Saints.

Underwood: It’s probably human nature, but we can be very myopic. We try to apply every revelation to ourselves and think *me* or *my*. Sometimes we forget that actually the people who receive the revelations themselves had their own issues. Quite honestly, God wasn’t just speaking to somebody living in the year 2009; he was speaking to people living in the 1830s. When we read prophecies from Isaiah, sometimes we think they are all about our day. God speaks through his prophet to real people who live in a real world, and he is in dialogue with them, and they are learning and adjusting their thinking and seeing new insights.

Fluhman: To build on your point, it becomes helpful, then, to a modern Latter-day Saint to see what was being rejected and what was being validated, lest we think that the Restoration, as we understand it, is just an utter rejection of everything that came before. That is simply not the case, so it helps us both see what people believed and then the new revelations, such as the distinctive doctrine of exaltation and a multitiered heaven in section 76.

Harper: Section 10 was revealed before the Church was restored. And the Lord, in section 10, talks about his Church. He essentially says, “I am not bringing forth the Book of Mormon to destroy my church. I am doing it to build up my church.” It seems to me that he is referring to Christianity. If, as Latter-day Saints, we have the impression that there is nothing useful in Christianity and that the Restoration is starting from scratch, then perhaps we are not thinking along the same lines that the Lord is thinking. He’s trying to save Christianity by restoring the Church. I heard a beautiful metaphor the other day. It drew on the idea of restoring a house. When you restore an old house, you do not demolish the thing and start over, you preserve the wonderful parts. You keep as much of it intact as you can. You do not want to throw the whole thing away, and the restoration of the Church does that with Christianity.

Holzapfel: *That brings up a good point. Let’s talk about the words elder and apostle, which are ubiquitous through the revelations. Today we use these terms in a certain way, but their meanings were not always so specific. In New Testament times, for example, the term apostle was initially used as a Greek secular word with a specific meaning, but then the Church appropriated it, sanctified it, and created a new meaning for the*
office. So let’s talk about elder and apostle. How do you discuss these terms so we do not see them through the lens of today’s terminology?

Underwood: Let’s take elder to begin with. In the Restoration, understanding clearly came line upon line. One of the really delightful dimensions of engaging the Doctrine and Covenants in its context and the manuscripts and the early version and changes and clarifications is that you see so repeatedly and powerfully the principle of line-upon-line disclosure. One of the matters that we have spent many conversations wrestling with in our work on *The Joseph Smith Papers* has been this interesting dimension of a deepening, ever-broadening understanding of priesthood. Naturally these early leaders began with the knowledge they brought in to the kingdom—their understandings, perceptions, and conventional usages. In that sense, elder was a synonym for a minister, a church leader. The modern distinction that an elder is an office in the Melchizedek Priesthood took a few years to come into play. So in the earliest revelations, in the early months of the Restoration, there was the sense of elder as a Church leader or minister, but they had not yet created the taxonomy—the kind of priesthood organizational chart that makes elder a subset of the Melchizedek Priesthood. That came a few years later and has blessed us ever since, but it was not there in the very first months of the Church’s history, when the term had a more conventional meaning as an ordained minister or also, more generically, as the ministry of the Church.

Fluhman: The word apostle was often used this way in the earliest revelations, in the earliest usage in the Church. John Whitmer’s license to preach has him listed as an apostle. For modern Saints who have a very specialized sense of what apostle meant, the more general usage of the word apostle can be very confusing. Many of those early brethren were called apostle in a more informal way that is often equated with elder. I think in several early documents, apostle and elder are used virtually synonymously. So it is important to recognize that the specialized meanings that we come to attach with these terms were not entirely clear. For example, it took some years to sort out the Protestant definition of priesthood as a group of priests to the more general sense that it is the power or authority given to man.

Woodford: The Prophet equates elder with apostle in section 84: “You are mine apostles, even God’s high priests.” So it gets elevated until eventually we get a Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

Underwood: The priesthood, in the way that Latter-day Saints now understand it, was a new concept that took time to understand. The word priesthood was not the initial term used to describe this
power, this force, this divine empowering. It first appears in that sense in section 84 in the fall of 1832. In the original ordination certificate, terms like power or liberty or license were used. The word authority appears once in a while, but it is not the dominant term. The word priesthood in the Book of Mormon refers to the office of high priest, just as it did in the early months of the Restoration. It was also used to refer to those men who held the office of high priest.

In the twentieth century, Church members began to emphasize that you do not refer to a group of men as “the priesthood.” Priesthood is a thing—it’s a power. There was a period in the twentieth century when we were trying to make that distinction and preserve priesthood solely for that power, force, gift, authorization, and not have it represent a group of men, which was its original connotation both in the Bible and early LDS usage. By 1832 we see the beginnings of our modern usage. In 1832 it had not yet become common to use the terms Melchizedek and Aaronic. We began to talk about priesthood, yes, but as the “greater” or “lesser” priesthood, and in the period between 1832 and 1835, those concepts were refined and clarified so that by the revelations in 1835—the classic section 107, for instance—we have clearly in place the nomenclature of Melchizedek and Aaronic or Levitical Priesthood.

**Harper:** Kingdom is an interesting term. The revelations are political, largely.

**Underwood:** You had better define political.

**Harper:** Well, the revelations are political in the sense that they deal in power. When these revelations were received and Joseph Smith was received by people as a prophet, he became a political figure. Now, his goal in life was not to become a political figure, but he gained a following, and, in that sense, he gained power. Among other things, he gained economic power. When he received the revelation that said, “Gather to Ohio,” people gathered. It’s remarkable, the power in these revelations. When he received one that said, “Gather to Missouri,” within three years the Latter-day Saints controlled the balance of political power on the western edge of the state of Missouri. That means that these revelations are political. Now, I am not trying to say that was their primary value, but to understand them historically is to recognize that they had powerful influences and still do. We still are trying to obey these revelations, and it makes a huge difference in our lives that we try to act on them, so they are extraordinarily influential, including in political ways. And you can think of that in economic terms too. These are economic documents, a lot of them, and power-
fully so. Section 119 may be the least understood and poorest obeyed of Joseph’s revelations, and still it is extraordinarily powerful in the way it generates revenue and loyalty to the Church.

**Underwood:** Let me give you one other word that does have a different nuance, too, and that is the word *wicked*. There are several places in the Doctrine and Covenants where the phrase “congregations of the wicked” is utilized. To the modern mind, that humorously invokes a question like, “What? A church in the red-light district?” Originally the term *wicked* had a much broader, generic connotation as anyone who was not responding to the will of God. Now, a subset of that would be the degenerate, the morally bankrupt, but that is only a tiny subset. That is what the word has shrunk to mean today, but one must look very sensitively at that in these revelations and not assume that when the Lord talks about the congregations of the wicked in Cincinnati or in some other place, that he is saying these are all morally degenerate people. That was often just a synonym for an unbeliever.

**Harper:** “Unrepentant” is another close reading of it.

**Woodford:** And there is one definition in *Webster’s Dictionary* that suggests slight or little blame. People used to say “a wicked child.” Well, the “wicked” were people who did not understand the truth. I have often wondered if that was how he used it with Martin Harris, that he just did not understand the program.

**Harper:** And notice these are people to whom the Lord is *sending* his word. He was not saying, “Oh, they’re wicked—stay away from them.” He was saying, “Go give them the good word.”

**Fluhman:** The upshot of this portion of our discussion is that students of the Doctrine and Covenants have the opportunity to watch their own preconceptions at work as they’re reading. Sometimes we will read a word and assume that we know exactly what it means, only to find that the word is more powerful or it has multiple meanings or it has shades of meaning that bring the revelations even more to life, even more vivid, more palpable.

This discussion could keep going. The word *seal* is that way. The concept of sealing is bigger, grander, more complicated than we ever thought. The word *salvation* in the Doctrine and Covenants is the same way. Sometimes it’s equated virtually with *exaltation*. In other times it’s got a much more general meaning. Section 76 is a good example. *Salvation* in that section does not mean exaltation as we’ve come to understand it. And so I think it’s a good call to action for any student of the Doctrine and Covenants just to be aware that these words are diamonds. They are multifaceted.
Woodford: Emma Smith is ordained.

Fluhman: Another great example—ordained has all sorts of meanings.

Harper: There is a list of synonyms that grows out of sections 84, and especially 88 and 93, that we can probably spend the rest of our lives profitably thinking about: light, truth, life, power, intelligence, glory. There is something deep and interesting there. I am sure I have not plumbed the depths of it yet, but it is a useful way to study the Doctrine and Covenants, to think about the meanings of these words.

Fluhman: A practical point, and all of our students have recognized this at one point or the other, because we all have, and that is to slow down. You have to slow down—as a student, as a seeker with these revelations. You cannot browse these particular documents. They are unbrowsable. You can’t do it. They demand more of us.

Underwood: You know, something that keeps coming up here is the question of interpretation. When a student asks a teacher, “What does this verse mean?” the teacher has to ask, “What are you fishing for? Would you like a discussion of the original historical meaning, would you like us to try to reconstruct what that text, what that verbiage, probably meant to Joseph Smith and those immediate recipients of the revelation? Or would you like us to explore the much larger arena of modern application—using Nephi’s words, “the likening unto us”? (see 1 Nephi 19:23). I think that that leads to an important point. We are all historians of one kind or another. We cherish, love, and have devoted years of our lives to trying to reconstruct what the historical meaning likely was. But the reality is—talking devotionally, behaviorally, personally, spiritually—historical discussion should never trump the modern application, or likening the scriptures unto us. It may tether but should never trump the modern application because modern prophets and apostles, under inspiration, can find meaning in those words that was not available to the early audience or that was not of value or interest to the early audience.

One simple example of that is in section 59, where the Lord says, “Thou shalt not . . . kill, nor do anything like unto it” (v. 6). As historians explain, that Missouri society was rough-and-tumble, a violent frontier society. Thou shalt not kill or do any violent, maiming thing. What was not discussed by Joseph Smith or does not appear in any surviving contemporary document is that the passage was understood to have any reference to abortion. At about the middle of the twentieth century, the Brethren begin to see something new and important in
that phrase, “nor do anything like unto it.” For the last fifty years, we have been blessed and enriched by the further light and knowledge that sees in those words a contemporary problem and what to do about it. So we do not want to close off meaning-making to the 1830s. It really does not matter if the Brethren, under inspiration, are construing a text, or discerning something in it, that was not noticed or emphasized in the early years. That is why we affirm continuing revelation, so that we can benefit from this much broader and much richer application of the text, under inspiration, to modern circumstances.

**Woodford:** The Lord says, “What I say unto one I say unto all” (D&C 93:49). I use a pond analogy. You throw a rock in it and the rock hits at a specific time and place. If I want to come back in ten to fifteen years, I’d better look where the impact was, because that is where it is going to be. But, as soon as it hits that pond, emanating from it are these wakes that go over time and space, and that is the application. The other thing I think is important—and I agree with you about not trumping—is to distinguish those two. Because when a student says, “What does it mean?” what do you mean what does it mean? You want to know what they meant at that time? Which is an important endeavor, and I think the Lord challenges us to try to reconstruct this world, to appreciate it, because I think of all the things we have said so far, in the original context, we do appreciate the marvels of the Restoration. It allows us to make connections that enrich our own current spirituality, but then also apply those words to our own time.

**Harper:** As I listen to you speak, it strikes me that section 68 has this definition of scripture embedded in it, which is radical. Compared to orthodox definitions of scripture, the revealed definition sounds radical by contrast, but this is the definition of scripture, “Whatsoever they shall speak when moved upon by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture, shall be the will of the Lord, shall be the mind of the Lord, shall be the word of the Lord, shall be the voice of the Lord, and the power of God unto salvation” (see D&C 68:4). If you speak under the influence of the Holy Ghost, you can’t but help to speak the mind, the will, the power of God. And that is a distinctive doctrine—that is a doctrine revealed to us through Joseph Smith the Prophet. That is the restored definition of scripture, which is alive. Isn’t that a wonderful idea? The scriptures are *alive.* They can certainly be alive in our lives.

**Fluhman:** And those verses connect the Doctrine and Covenants with the later prophetic and apostolic interpretive tradition that Grant talks about. That passage in the Doctrine and Covenants is the bridge
between the two endeavors, to understand both moments of interpretation—both then and since. We are called to do it by that very verse.

Woodford: That is a great point, Spencer, because sometimes our students say, “Why haven’t we had a pile of revelations since the early period?” Well, we do not need a pile of additional canonical scriptures—we are receiving living scripture all the time. Does everything have to become canonical, printed on paper, and sewn into the triple combination? No. We should be wise and attentive to all utterances under inspiration—from those made in Sunday School class to those made in general conference. If we are disciples, we want to attend to whatever will bring us into discipleship with the Lord and take it from whoever speaks under that inspiration. In a very real sense, we receive new scripture each time we have general conference.
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Editorial Board Member

Jack Rushton has led an active life of service and education. He holds a master’s degree in counseling from BYU and a doctor of education degree from USC. He was a teacher and administrator in the Church Educational System for twenty-five years. While serving as president of the Irvine California Stake, he suffered a severe accident at the beach that left him paralyzed from the neck down and respirator-dependent. He has adjusted to a new way of life and continues to be active and to give service as a patriarch, teaching Gospel Doctrine in his ward, and speaking to groups both within and without the Church.

Because of wonderful computer technology and voice recognition software, Jack is able to profitably spend hours each day, reading, researching, writing, and corresponding with family and friends all over the world. Jack and his wife, Jo Anne Stuart Rushton, are the parents of six children and have sixteen grandchildren. The Rushtons have lived in Tustin, California, since 1974.

Student Editorial Intern

Julia Toone Manning hails proudly from Mesa, Arizona. She graduated with a major in humanities in April 2009 because she couldn’t decide what area of the arts she loves best. She enjoys literature, music, art, and traveling to all the places she learns about. She studied abroad in Paris, France. Julia enjoyed working at the RSC as team lead of the student interns where she put her editing minor to good use with editing and indexing. She met her husband, Burke, at the Hill Cumorah pageant in college—he was Moroni, and she was a Lamanite warrior dancer. She is having fun as a stay-at-home mom to their son who arrived in March.

Student Editorial Intern

Rachel Morris grew up in American Fork, Utah. Rachel enjoys reading, playing sports (especially volleyball), studying languages, and playing games with her family. From 2005 to 2007 Rachel served a mission for the Church in Los Angeles, California, speaking both English and Spanish and serving at the Los Angeles Temple Visitors’ Center. Rachel has been working at the Religious Studies Center since March 2008. In August 2009, after returning from a study abroad in the British Isles, Rachel will graduate from BYU with a major in English language and a minor in editing.
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