

Book of Mormon – Ascension Text

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I grew up in the LDS church, and throughout my life there has always been a big focus on follow the prophets, specifically the current leader of the Mormon Church. There was never any questioning whether these men actually were prophets or not, you were told to do what they said, so I did. I never really questioned this until a few years ago. At that point, I realized I didn't really understand the word 'prophet'. So then I had to question, was Joseph Smith really a prophet of God? Were the current leaders of the LDS church prophets of God? I took a page from Joseph's example and I took it to God in pray and the answer I received was that I needed to search out the answer. So I looked up various definitions of the word prophet, I searched the scriptures, both the Bible and Book of Mormon, to see what prophets did and common themes amongst them. Then I prayed again, and told God what I had learned about prophets, and my answer then was "What are their fruits?" And it finally dawned on me, that a prophet will prophecy; a revelator will reveal; a seer will see. And the things they prophecy and reveal and see will come to fruition, and will be full of light and truth. I looked at the fruits of Joseph Smith, or what he said and wrote, and I saw prophecy and revelation and they were good, they were full of light and truth. I did not see the same in the current prophets of the LDS church.

Through the years I have come to know of history surrounding Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon and the restoration, not just the watered down version given to me when I was growing up. History is tricky, however, because it is dependent on those giving the history. It is going to be tainted, blurred or biased according to those who are giving it, and those who are searching it out and receiving it. But it is important to have a knowledge of history and circumstances.

President Stephen Veazey said:

"[Historians should be free to draw their own conclusions after thorough consideration of evidence. Through careful study and the Holy Spirit's guidance, the church is learning how to accept and responsibly interpret all of its history.]

We need to create a respectful culture of dialogue about matters of history. We should not limit our faith story to one perspective. Diverse viewpoints bring richness to our understanding of God's movement in our sacred story. Of course, historians will come to different conclusions as they study. Therefore, it is important for us to create and maintain a respectful culture that allows different points of view on history. Most important, we should remain focused on what matters most for the message and mission of the church [and for ourselves] in this time.

We must keep our hearts and minds centered on God's revelation in Jesus Christ. As God's Word alive in human history, Jesus Christ was and is the foundation of our faith and the focus of the church's mission and message.

Sound history informs faith, and healthy faith leads to insights about history. Theology and faith, guided by the Holy Spirit, must play important roles in discovering the enduring meaning of such events as well as the deeper truths found in them. Our understanding of our history affects our faith and beliefs."

My belief that Joseph Smith is a prophet of God as evidenced by the fruits he produced informed my faith. And that faith led to greater insight into what Joseph Smith was truly trying to do in his day, but it

was I believed it was misinformed and misconstrued by those who did not have the same faith or understanding.

One of Joseph's fruits was the Book of Mormon. I know there is, yet again, a lot of questions surrounding the Book of Mormon and its historicity, but I look at the message and the fruit that message produces. And I have found the message to be good.

This past November, Bryce, Denver and I spoke at a small conference at Graceland University. In my talk I discussed the Book of Mormon and how it is the message of Shalom. The spiral in the Community of Christ's temple here in Independence symbolize many things to many people. To me it symbolizes our journey, or ascension towards Shalom, or the perfect love and peace that is only in Christ. I see the spiral as a perfect representation of the message contained within the Book of Mormon. In my talk given at Graceland, I discussed how each prophet within the Book of Mormon teaches the Doctrine of Christ, then adds more information. Each prophet is given, by God, a message to teach to their people. [As a side note, each prophet is given that message in a way that fits their own gifts and in words that they can understand. I would receive a message from God differently than you, because we are different people, and so God will speak to us differently. We also understand things in different ways. God will talk to us in our own language, in the way that we speak to ourselves. So I would not receive the exact same words as you, because we think differently and have different understandings, given our backgrounds. But the overall message would be the same. This is the same with the Book of Mormon prophets. They are each teaching the same thing, but each in a different way with different wording, according to how God gave it to them.] As the book progresses, so does the message.

In 2 Nephi we are taught about the Doctrine of Christ. "For the gate by which ye should enter is repentance and baptism by water, and then cometh a remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost. And then are ye in this straight and narrow path which leads to Eternal life." Nephi explains that this is the Doctrine of Christ, because it is what Christ himself did. In order to follow Christ, we must follow the doctrine He himself not only gave to us, but showed to us by His example. "And now, my beloved brethren, I know by this that unless a man shall endure to the end in following the example of the Son of the living God, he cannot be saved...And now my beloved brethren, this is the way, and there is none other way nor name given under Heaven whereby man can be saved in the kingdom of God." Nephi continues with "And now my beloved brethren, after ye have gotten into this straight and narrow path, I would ask if all is done? Behold, I say unto you, Nay, for ye have not come thus far save it were by the word of Christ with unshaken faith in him, relying wholly upon the merits of Him who is mighty to save. Wherefore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men."

In Mosiah, King Benjamin reiterates to his people the doctrine of Christ, although in different wording. He then picks up where Nephi left off and expands on what it means to "press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men". He says "And behold I say unto you that if ye do this, ye shall always rejoice and be filled with the love of God and always retain a remission of your sins. And ye shall grow in the knowledge of the glory of him that created you, or in the knowledge of that which is just and true. And ye will not have a mind to injure one another but to live peaceably, and to render to every man according to that which is his due. And ye will not suffer your children that they go hungry or naked, neither will you suffer that they transgress the laws of God...But ye will teach them to walk in the ways of truth and soberness; ye will teach them to

love one another and to serve one another. And also, ye yourselves will succor those that standeth in need of your succor. Ye will administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need and ye will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain, and turn him out to perish...For behold, are we not all beggars? Do we not all depend upon the same being, even God, for all the substance which we have...? And now for the sake of these things which I have spoken unto you – that is for the sake of retaining a remission of your sins from day to day, that ye may walk guiltless before God – I would that ye should impart of your substance to the poor, every man according to that which he hath, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally according to their wants. And see that all these things are done in wisdom and order.”

In 3 Nephi, Christ speaks to the people of Nephi. He reiterates the doctrine of Christ as well as the words given by Mosiah. He then gives to the people the same words he himself spoke at the Sermon on the Mount. This sermon is the higher principles that underlie the commandments. We are given the commandments in order to help us discover the principles they are based upon. Our goal is to begin living the higher principles, as Christ did. These higher principles bring about godliness and holiness, because they are His words. Words that allow us to ascend.

Nephi starts the journey by giving a broad, yet foundational description of the Doctrine of Christ, describing how to enter into this straight and narrow path. As the book progresses, we circle back to the message of the Doctrine of Christ, then the message narrows in scope, or becomes slightly more specific, giving more information on how to grow and progress. [I imagine people falling off this path at this point, because it becomes more difficult, there is more required of them; much like in Lehi’s vision of the tree of life, they start on the path, holding to the iron rod/word of God, but it becomes difficult to remain, so they let go of the iron rod]. This cycle happens over and over again within the Book of Mormon, narrowing each time, but allowing more growth or ascension each time. Like a spiral, circling upwards towards the Heavens. Line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little. We are given a foundation to build upon, then as we abide by the words of God, and live every precept given, we are slowly given more. But we first circle back to the foundational doctrine to re-center ourselves. As we continue this process, we slowly ascend as the word ascends. And as the book progresses, we ascend with it, if we abide by the words given.

In Community of Christ’s temple, there is the worshipper’s path that allows you to ascend up into the sanctuary where you can see the spiral from the inside. On this path, you experience belief or faith, repentance, and baptism or the waters of life. The doctrine of Christ is all present within the worshipper’s path as you ascend up into the sanctuary. There is also a cross that casts a shadow onto the path, where you must pass through. Yet again, there might be much symbolism here, but I see it as us taking upon us the cross of Christ-taking up our mission or call to serve him-much like what King Benjamin asks the people to do, or what Christ in 3 Nephi asks his people to do. There is so much of the message of the Book of Mormon present in the Community of Christ temple. But there is still so much left to embrace in order to achieve your own personal Shalom and ascension or Shalom and ascension as a people. And Zion can never be obtained without embracing the fullness of the gospel of Christ as contained in the Book of Mormon.

The Book of Mormon is so much more than just a book to me. It’s my own personal ascension text. Joseph Smith was given the gifts and abilities to see and translate this book. The power to do so was

given to him from God. Joseph Smith and Emma knew this book was important and they both sacrificed a lot to bring it about for the sake of all of us.