

Book of Mormon: Ascension Theology

Bryce Bartel

We have essentially two talks from the Bartels and one from Denver. I was going to go first because it essentially leads into Megan's talk. We are really excited. Let me give you a quick background about us. We grew up LDS. I grew up in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. I did the whole jazz there. I was an eagle scout there. I went through all the programs. I went on a mission. I absolutely loved my mission. I served on another campus, a lot bigger, I served UNC – University of North Carolina campus. They had a quad, I know many universities have a quad, we would put tables for the LDS Church. We would sit there and feel like we were doing something. It was a lot of fun.

After my mission, I went to LDS Business College. I went that route. I went to BYU after that. I was introduced to a number of things which changed my paradigm about God, religion, and the Book of Mormon and that led me out of the LDS Church last year.

I wanted to share first a parable which leads into the topic I want to talk about today. The parable is called Hope and Tarwater. It talks about different paradigms. Two towns bordered a woodland. Each of the towns had a tradition about the woods. In one it was said: "the woods were dangerous and many things there can hurt you. The animals include the mountain lion and wild boar, which have to be known to injure many a man; and the bear, which has killed many a man."

As the course of civilization develops the woods are always subdued and tamed. The wild things are domesticated and dangerous are killed. In time the woods become a backyard, no longer threatening to humanity.

In the other it was said: "the woods are beautiful and many things there can surprise you with their loveliness. The animals include the bluebird and chipmunk, which have been known to sing for hours: and the wild deer, which has inspired many a painter and poet."

As the course of civilization develops, the woods are always subdued and tamed. The wild beauty is domesticated, and many lovely creatures are killed. In time the woods become a backyard, no longer providing humanity with rare scenes of wild beauty.

The first town was named Tarwater for an explorer who had survived there against all odds. He came in winter, and had to find warmth, food and shelter while battling the elements. He felled trees, built a cabin, and burned trees for warmth which he cleared from around his homestead. He slew animals to eat and kept their hides for clothing.

The second was named Hope for a woman who raised her children there against all odds. She came in the summer, settled in a meadow, and found everything she needed to survive in or on the land. She placed her tent beside a hot spring, which provided her warmth in the cold weather. She ate berries and wild fruit and found pine nuts plentiful. She was able to weave the flax growing wild beside her stream and make linen clothing for herself and her children.

The children of Tarwater never entered the woods unarmed. They expected to find danger and were prepared to meet and oppose it.

The children of Hope never entered the woods without a basket or bag. They expected to find food and flowers and were prepared to gather them in gratitude.

Lance was a son of Tarwater. James was a son of Hope. The parable then goes into Lance and James. Lance the son of Tarwater has a journey in the woods where there is a bear. He is creeping along in the forest. Because he is expecting danger in the forest, of course he finds danger. There is a harrowing story of him escaping the bear and then coming back to Tarwater to tell everyone how scary and frightful the forest was.

The other story is about James who because his town Hope entered the forest frequently there were no bears. Bears don't like people. He found a meadow in the middle forest. He had a wonderful experience of finding a fawn and bring it back to Hope. It then it finishes with him coming back to the town. It says, When Lance entered Tarwater many had gathered to see what taken him so long. He told them the tell of his days in danger and flight in the woods. Tarwater was reminded again that the woods are dangerous, and many things there can hurt you. The wild still needs to be subdued, and its dangers overcome.

When James entered Hope many gathered to find out what had taken him so long. He showed them the fawn and told them the story of his walk. Hope was reminded again that the woods are beautiful, and many things there can surprise you with their loveliness.

When I started my spiritual exploration a number of years ago, there were preconceived notions about how I should view the world. In the LDS tradition, we have experienced this as a family, our extended family has been happy, mad or sad; there has been a whole spectrum of emotions. Now we have two Thanksgivings and two Christmases because of family. We come to things with a preconceived notion. The whole point of Hope and Tarwater is we come into things with baggage frequently. Baggage can be positive, or it can be negative. In Tarwater, as I think if the parable, it gives a foundation of how Tarwater was built, it was in winter, it was rough conditions and it was a struggle. That whole foundation continued afterward. It influenced everyone's opinions and behaviors.

On the other hand, Hope, they built a foundation that was different. They approached the woods very differently.

That leads me to the discussion about the New Covenant. The topic today is "Remembering the New Covenant." One of my favorite people here in Lamoni is Joseph Smith III. I have a lot of admiration. I have read his biography. I have been to his house. I love his memoirs. One of my favorite stories of Joseph Smith III in his memoirs that helped be rethink and reframe the restoration is a story of Emma.

Emma is in St Louis and she is getting supplies. Joseph Smith has accepted into his house Porter Rockwell from escaping Missouri. Porter wants to start a business. He wants to open a barbershop and tavern. I don't know why in the 1800s those two things connected, but that is what he wanted to do. To help him out, Joseph allowed Porter to put his liquor in the Mason House.

Emma comes back from St Louis. She sees all this liquor in the Mason House. Emma goes to Joseph Smith and tells him that the liquor cannot be in the Mason House. She told Joseph that he was a religious leader and people were going to look at him. Joseph told Emma it was only for a short amount of time, just to help Porter get his business started. Emma goes back to Joseph and says, "It is

either the liquor or it is me. You choose.” Joseph takes the liquor out of the house. That to me is the epitome of the spine and integrity of Emma.

As I started reframing the restoration in a different light. In LDS Mormonism, this is how it is and you really can't question how it is. This is the way it was supposed to be. I also got that from The Book of Mormon. I started relooking at the Book of Mormon. I was able to view it in a different light. It reframed the entire Book of Mormon for me. I want to give a couple of examples. One of the things that caught my attention was that in the Book of Mormon there are two times where Zion is really talked about. One is when Christ comes to the Americas and the other is with Ether.

I am going to read one or two verses from Ether. Ether is from the Jaredites.

“And that a New Jerusalem should be built up upon this land, unto the remnant of the seed of Joseph, for which things there has been a type.

For as Joseph brought his father down into the land of Egypt, even so he died there; wherefore, the Lord brought a remnant of the seed of Joseph out of the land of Jerusalem, that he might be merciful unto the seed of Joseph that they should perish not, even as he was merciful unto the father of Joseph that he should perish not.

Wherefore, the remnant of the house of Joseph shall be built upon this land; and it shall be a land of their inheritance; and they shall build up a holy city unto the Lord, like unto the Jerusalem of old; and they shall no more be confounded, until the end come when the earth shall pass away.”

Ether 13: 6-8

You have this example of Ether talking about the New Jerusalem. And then you have Christ talking about the New Jerusalem.

“And behold, this people will I establish in this land, unto the fulfilling of the covenant which I made with your father Jacob; and it shall be a New Jerusalem. And the powers of heaven shall be in the midst of this people; yea, even I will be in the midst of you.”

3 Nephi 20: 22

It goes on and talks about the prophesy. What was interesting to me is that both of these stories are very close to an ascension story. You have the Brother of Jared in the Book of Ether, where the Brother of Jared has an ascension experience. Where he is meeting Christ face to face. The Brother of Jared has an ascension story. What is interesting is that in 3 Nephi, you also have an ascension story.

As I was trying to reframe the Book of Mormon, I couldn't divorce the New Jerusalem from personal ascension. I saw this and had to say these two things are related. They aren't different from each other. Personal ascension and the covenant of a coming Zion are related to each other. So from

there, I had to start from the beginning of the Book of Mormon. From the beginning, the stories were very consistent. You start with Lehi.

“And it came to pass that he returned to his own house at Jerusalem; and he cast himself upon his bed, being overcome with the Spirit and the things which he had seen.

And being thus overcome with the Spirit, he was carried away in a vision, even that he saw the heavens open, and he thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels in the attitude of singing and praising their God.”

1 Nephi 1: 7-8

Then you have Nephi just a few chapters later where he goes through the same experience.

“And it came to pass after I, Nephi, having heard all the words of my father, concerning the things which he saw in a vision, and also the things which he spake by the power of the Holy Ghost, which power he received by faith on the Son of God—and the Son of God was the Messiah who should come—I, Nephi, was desirous also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things, by the power of the Holy Ghost, which is the gift of God unto all those who diligently seek him, as well in times of old as in the time that he should manifest himself unto the children of men.”

1 Nephi 10:17

Then you have this great theophany where Nephi is brought back into the presence of God. As I was looking at that, I could divorce the other stories found in the Book of Mormon as well. You go into Jacob, you go into Enos, you go into King Benjamin, you go into what this city is named after Lamoni which is one of my favorites. Lamoni has an experience with Ammon and then my personal favorite to finish off is King Laman, Lamoni's father.

“O God, Aaron hath told me that there is a God; and if there is a God, and if thou art God, wilt thou make thyself known unto me, and I will give away all my sins to know thee, and that I may be raised from the dead, and be saved at the last day. And now when the king had said these words, he was struck as if he were dead.”

Alma 22: 18

Many times when you come from different religious traditions, the question is, “Why do we even have the Book of Mormon? Doesn't the Bible solve all of our problems? Doesn't it say everything?”

When I reframed the Book of Mormon and I understood there were covenants that needed to be kept. For example, a Zion, a New Jerusalem. That is something that needs to happen. And that

personal ascension is essentially the recipe for Zion. Instead of thinking of it this way. If I was going to create a professional soccer team, it wouldn't be the most effective thing to just grab anyone out there. You probably won't succeed if you simply grab whoever to join your team.

But self-election through years of development and training and looking at David Beckham and going to the different soccer games and really working on it would produce an individual who would be qualified to be on a team which would be successful against Manchester United. That personal ascension is very similar to the desire and covenant of Zion.

This is why as I was reframing the Book of Mormon, I had to say, this is the message of the Book of Mormon. This is the instruction manual. This is the recipe book. It tells you in very clear details the pathways and walks people take to achieve the blessings God has offered to us.

I wanted to finish with one of my favorite quotes:

“You can't understand Christ's gospel without understanding Christ's Zion.”

If you flip that around. If you understand Christ's Zion. You understand Christ's gospel.

My pathway over the past seven years has been very surprising to me. I wouldn't have even imagined not being in the LDS Church. I was straight arrow. I was the quintessential Pharisee. You couldn't get more Pharisical than me.

My wife and I have been at the Community of Christ for the past 25 months and really enjoy it. We love the warmth. We love the mission of peace. I went with my daughter and we lit the candle for the prayer for peace. They were praying for the native peoples. We got a drum song from some native Americans. It was very neat.