

# The Christ of the Book of Mormon

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President Oaks and fellow students, I am honored by the invitation to be here today. If the Lord will give me utterance and grant his spirit to help me and all of us, in the spirit of Brother Hickman's prayer, I would like to address a few words to you about the Christ of the Book of Mormon.

The word "Christ" is the past participle of a Greek verb and "Jesus" is a Hebrew-Jewish proper name. Both mean "the anointed one." Together they represent the greatest name in earthly human history. Critics and partially informed, well-meaning humanists may criticize the Christian movement—pointing out, for example, that despite the descriptions in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke there is no peace nor goodwill on earth; and that despite "two thousand years" of Christianity, things are in a mess. Why, they say, if he was such an all-powerful God, have he and his Almighty Father not made things better? The answers lie in two considerations. Both are made more clear in the Book of Mormon than in any other scripture.

The first consideration is that the Father's plan, executed by the Son, is based on the free agency of man. As Lehi explained to his son Jacob in that great passage of 2 Nephi 2:25–27—which to my way of thinking puts in small compass the essence of the gospel as well as any phrases we have—

*Adam fell that men might be; and men are that they might have joy.*

*And the Messiah cometh in the fullness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day, according to the commandments which God hath given.*

*Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great mediation of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil; for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself. [emphasis added]*

The wars, contentions, and social miseries of mankind are a consequence of man's freedom, God-guaranteed, to choose for themselves their conduct and their use of power and influence.

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Only by freedom of choice can man enjoy life and improve himself by self-help and service to others.

The second consideration is that the critics of Christ and Christianity overlook such facts as this: that the influence of Jesus' teachings, especially since the Advent, have penetrated the globe—not completely, to be sure; yet Christmas is noted, if not celebrated, nearly everywhere. The calendar and airline schedules in world use are reckoned in terms of Anno Domini—A.D.—the year of our Lord, wherever one goes. Even communism, according to Arnold J. Toynbee, is a page torn from the pages of Christianity, inverted, and misread (see D. C. Somerville's abridgment of Toynbee's *A Study of History* 1:203–5, 399–400, 446–47; 2:148, 184, 216, 315, 339–40).

The Book of Mormon promotes the fuller and clearer meaning in history of Jesus Christ. As the title page declares, "it is an abridgment of the record" of the people of the American continent, "of the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that JESUS is the CHRIST, the ETERNAL GOD, manifesting himself unto all nations."

### Why So Much Mention of Christ in the Book?

Many may ask, despite the title page's express purpose, how and why there is so much explicit mention of Christ's coming and his redeeming role in the Book of Mormon. Why, specifically, is there so much recorded about his birth, life, and mission before his actual birth in Bethlehem of Judea took place? Are these repeated references made six, five, four, and other centuries B.C. not clear evidence that Joseph Smith, between 1823 and 1829, invented the book, inserting his biblical understanding and the prevailing Christian thought of the early nineteenth-century American frontier? Let us consider.

Joseph Smith brought forth the Book of Mormon before Edgar Allan Poe invented the detective story, before Sir Arthur Conan

Doyle created the complicated schemes which Sherlock Holmes unraveled, long before Agatha Christie. To presume that Joseph Smith invented the character Mormon as an editor, compiler, and abridger nearly 400 years after Christ who could then refer to records kept from the preceding thousand years is a great compliment! Then to have this Mormon produce a digest or abridgment of these thousand years of records, written by more than a score of official historians, would represent one of the most complicated literary inventions ever seen at that time. H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* or Jules Verne's invention of Captain Nemo appears to me to be much less complicated. And Wells and Verne were stimulated by a much more complicated generation than western New York was for the Prophet Joseph Smith in the 1820s. The correct answer, of course, is given on the title page:

THE  
BOOK OF MORMON  
*An Account Written by*  
THE HAND OF MORMON  
UPON PLATES  
TAKEN FROM THE PLATES OF NEPHI

*Wherefore, it is an abridgment of the record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites . . . to come forth in due time by way of the Gentile—The interpretation thereof by the gift of God. . . .*

### The Role Explained

How explain, then, the role of Christ as so widely portrayed in the Book of Mormon even before the Advent? I believe that there are three simple, *prima facie* reasons: (1) the influence of the brass plates of Laban; (2) the historical impact of Christ's personal ministry in the Americas, and (3) the consequent perspective from which Mormon made his abridgment.

Of course we realize that the expedition led by Lehi had with it the brass plates of Laban (see 1 Nephi 3, 4, and 5). This record contained

(1) the five books of Moses; (2) “a record of the Jews from the beginning, even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah;” (3) “the prophecies of the holy prophets, from the beginning, even down to the commencement of the reign of Zedekiah;” (4) “many prophecies . . . by . . . Jeremiah;” and finally, (5) a genealogy of Lehi’s father, through Joseph “who was the son of Jacob” (see 1 Nephi 5:11–16).

Nephi recorded that “it was wisdom in the Lord that we should carry them with us, as we journeyed in the wilderness towards the land of promise” (1 Nephi 5:22). Later, showing the influence of this record, Lehi and his son Nephi taught continually from the brass plates; especially wrote Nephi, “that I might more fully persuade them to believe in the Lord their Redeemer I did read unto them that which was written by the prophet Isaiah” (1 Nephi 19:23). Some fifteen chapters of Nephi are reproductions of the prophecies of Isaiah (1 Nephi 20, 21; 2 Nephi 12–24).

It should be recalled that Isaiah’s prophecies are very potent and very influential. For example, they constitute much of George Frederick Handel’s masterpiece, *Messiah*. Isaiah certainly from the brass plates influenced Book of Mormon religious thought and practice. The Essenes, as the Dead Sea Scrolls revealed, practiced baptism by immersion before Christ; Book of Mormon peoples, guided by the brass plates and revelation (which their religious leaders earnestly sought), did likewise. This Mormon’s abridgment clearly portrays.

The people of Lehi had the prophetic words of Isaiah, chapter 7, for example: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and shall bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (2 Nephi 17:14). Another one, from Isaiah, chapter 9: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given and the government shall be upon his shoulder and his name shall be called, Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (2 Nephi 19:6).

Nephi thought it important to include in his small plates these prophecies, and Mormon chose not to disturb the small plates of Nephi, but to include them in the legacy of his abridgment. As Nephi himself wrote: “And now I write some of the words of Isaiah, that whoso of my people shall see these words may lift up their hearts and rejoice for all men” (2 Nephi 11:8). So the brass plates had their impact, as reflected in the Book of Mormon before Christ.

Then we have to consider the tremendous impact of the personal ministry of the resurrected Lord in the Americas. Mormon, we believe, lived from about A.D. 311 to 385. He had before him the records made by “Third Nephi,” the son of Nephi, who was the son of Helaman; also the records by this man’s son and grandsons whose names were Amos, Amos, (see 4 Nephi 19, 21) and Ammaron (see 4 Nephi 47). And these records, abridged by Mormon and organized as 3 and 4 Nephi, report: (1) the signs of the Savior’s birth (3 Nephi 1:19); (2) his appearance (following his resurrection) in the land Bountiful (3 Nephi 11:3–11); (3) an extensive account of Christ’s ministry in America (3 Nephi 11–28), including the establishment of his church, something that we do not find clearly in the four Gospels; and finally, (4) the record of marvelous results and effects which followed, particularly the nearly two centuries when “there was no contention in the land, because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people” (4 Nephi 15). For Mormon, the reluctant chief captain in the wars that destroyed his people, in the midst of their wickedness (“and,” he wrote, “there never had been so great wickedness among all the children of Lehi” [Mormon 4:12]), this period of Christian love and peace must have struck him with unusual force. This factor alone would have influenced his selection of gospel influence or neglect, in his abridgment, and explains why we hear so much of the pre-existent Christ, the antemortal

Christ, in the early records, before his appearance in the land Bountiful.

Finally, Mormon made his abridgment with clear perspective of the influence of the brass plates. He had knowledge of Christ's coming because he lived after the fact, and he had knowledge of the awful consequences of the carelessness and evil into which the Nephites had drifted thereafter. He wrote in his own book, "*I write a small abridgment . . .*" (Mormon 5:9; emphasis added). That he would include in his "small abridgment" all that he could possibly glean of the Messianic hope, influence and doctrine, even before Christ, is natural. He was keenly aware of the stark contrasts that exist between human choices based on Christian doctrine and the choices made in ignorance of, or contrary to, Christ's teachings. In the explanatory Words of Mormon, that little book inserted between the books of Omni and Mosiah, he engraved this:

*And now I, Mormon, being about to deliver up the record which I have been making into the hands of my son Moroni, behold I have witnessed almost all the destruction of my people, the Nephites.*

*And it is many hundred years after the coming of Christ that I deliver these records into the hands of my son; and it supposeth me that he will witness the entire destruction of my people. But may God grant that he may survive, that he may write somewhat concerning them, and somewhat concerning Christ, that perhaps some day it may profit them. [Words of Mormon 1–2; emphasis added]*

He also stated in verse 4 that he placed the small plates of Nephi with his abridgment "because of the prophecies of the coming of Christ" contained therein, "knowing that many of them have been fulfilled"; he knew them as facts when he wrote centuries later. Said he, "Wherefore, I chose these things, to finish my record upon them . . .; and I cannot write the

hundredth part of the things of my people" (Words of Mormon 5).

Thus Mormon's purpose was clear in abridging what came to us through Joseph Smith as the Book of Mormon. He chose and selected these portions of the accumulated record that testified of the Christ who was to come. Significant portions of Christ's teachings that he was unable to include in 3 Nephi—which he abridged himself—his son Moroni, inspired by his father's example and instruction, included in his final book, the book of Moroni.

What emerges, then, from Mormon's abridgment—the Book of Mormon—of the Lord Jesus Christ?

First, he is seen as the Son of the Father, the Only Begotten of the Father, and—a point not made clear in the Bible—the Organizer and Creator of the Earth which rejoiced (at least in the Americas) with radiant light at his mortal birth and was rent in travail at his death.

Second, the premortal Christ is revealed as Jehovah, the Creator, the Lord, the directing intelligence, under the Father, of his world.

Third—and I got this from Edgar Goodspeed's book *How to Read the Bible*, which impressed me—Goodspeed says that Mark records the doer, Matthew the teacher, Luke the compassionate Savior; and John, who wrote forty or fifty years after the others and had time to reflect on the significance of his association with Christ, reveals him as the universal Lord—not just someone for Judea or the Middle East, but the *universal* Lord. The Book of Mormon extends that description and portrays Christ as the living head and organizer of his church, as well as being the universal Lord of light, life, and salvation for all mankind. The first principles, ordinances, and spirit of the Church are clearly specified: how to baptize, how to confer the priesthood, how to confer the gift of the Holy Ghost, how to administer the sacred emblems—the bread and wine—all of which are mentioned in the four Gospels but

not specified. Thanks to Mormon and Moroni, we have in the Book of Mormon specific help on how the church of Christ should be organized as he organized it himself, and a description of the spirit which should characterize it. There should be no contention in it—a very difficult standard to attain. But these great principles and ordinances and spirit are clearly specified. In addition, some guidelines for the Church are clearly recorded, against which future Church practices might be measured.

And finally, from beginning to end, the Book of Mormon provides for the glorious doctrine that the gospel of Jesus Christ is for all mankind, in all nations, extending the injunction that we find in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

It is a privilege to come to this University, this community of intellect and faith, where

you have the marvelous privilege and opportunity to reflect upon spiritual things in connection with your mathematics, your physics, your sociology, or whatever field you may be entering. I would like to give you my testimony that the privilege you are enjoying on this campus is one of the great privileges of your life. President Oaks was kind enough to say that I know something about universities, and I believe I do, having spent my life in universities and colleges for more years than I am willing to admit. But I would like to say that you are unusually privileged to be at this particular university at this particular time. Make the most of it! Demonstrate in your lives the vitality of that system of truth, the gospel of Jesus. May it be so, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.