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KnowWhy #222 - Why Is 3 Nephi Sometimes Called the “Fifth Gospel”?

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Published by: Springville, UT; Book of Mormon Central, 2016

Abstract: For more than 100 years, some Latter-day Saints have discussed how 3 Nephi might be considered a “fifth gospel” alongside Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The account in 3 Nephi does indeed have much in common with other gospel accounts, both canonical and non-canonical. Similarities include its opening with signs of Christ’s birth, its description of a forerunner who baptizes (Nephi), its signs confirming Christ’s death, and the recording of similar teachings. As a post-resurrection account, it provides a powerful witness of the most central gospel truth: that Jesus Christ lives and that He is the Son of God.

- Much like Matthew and Luke, 3 Nephi begins with the fulfillment of prophesied signs of the Savior's birth (3 Nephi 1; cf. Matthew 1–2; Luke 1–2).⁸
- Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all mention John the Baptist, the forerunner sent to prepare the way for Christ in the Old World (Matthew 3; Mark 1; Luke 3; John 1). 3 Nephi likewise records the ministry of a forerunner who baptized among the Nephites—the prophet Nephi, son of Nephi (3 Nephi 7:15–26).⁹
- Just as Jesus did, Nephi cast out devils, healed the sick, and even raised his brother from dead. As the Savior's New World forerunner, Nephi performed his miracles “in the name of Jesus” (3 Nephi 7:19–22). Thus, as New Testament scholar Krister Stendahl put it, 3 Nephi “transposes the ministry of Jesus into a ministry of Nephi, a man of miracles in the name of Jesus.”¹⁰
- Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record the Father bearing witness of the Son,¹¹ as does 3 Nephi (3 Nephi 11:7).
- Just as all four Gospels document the death and crucifixion of Jesus,¹² 3 Nephi records the fulfillment of prophesied signs confirming the Savior's death and three days in the tomb (3 Nephi 8–10).¹³ The 3 Nephi account may even help clarify the timeline of Christ's entombment, since the account of the destruction adds information about the timing and duration of Christ's death.¹⁴
- Just as the New Testament Gospels record the teachings of the Savior during His earthly ministry, 3 Nephi records the teachings of the resurrected Lord.¹⁵ This includes the Sermon at the Temple (3 Nephi 12–14),¹⁶ which parallels the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) and Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17–49), the clarification of teachings recorded in John about His “other sheep,”¹⁷ and the institution of the sacrament.¹⁸
- The Nephite record stands as a fifth witness of the bodily resurrection of Christ (3 Nephi 11), in a way that exceeds the all other Gospels, canonical¹⁹ and non-canonical.²⁰

Several more points of comparison could be made.²¹ Yet just as the New Testament Gospels have key differences that ought to be noticed, 3 Nephi is different from the other four Gospels in important respects. As LDS gospel scholar Andrew C. Skinner noted, the Savior “said and did things of which the four Gospels have no record, and for which 3 Nephi is our treasured source.”²²

Key among these are the post-resurrection nature of the Savior's ministry, and the emphasis on the temple in Christ's teachings.²³

The Why

Many have attempted to imitate the Gospels, and have failed miserably.²⁴ Yet 3 Nephi offers an authentic fifth Gospel which “complements and supplements the four biblical Gospels.”²⁵ As Skinner pointed out, it is unique among Gospel accounts in possessing material “reviewed and edited by the Savior himself.”²⁶

In the October 2016 General Conference, Brother Brian K. Ashton similarly taught, “Jesus's visit to the Nephites after His Resurrection was carefully organized to teach us the things of greatest importance.”²⁷ Thus, disciples of Christ can be confident that “3 Nephi contains those matters that the Savior himself felt were and are most important.”²⁸

In July 1838, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the apostles and prophets concerning Jesus Christ, that he died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended up into heaven.”²⁹

President Ezra Taft Benson taught that the Book of Mormon “is the keystone in our witness of Christ,”³⁰ a point Elder Gary E. Stevenson reiterated recently.³¹ While the entire Book of Mormon is saturated with various testimonies of Christ, the Gospel of 3 Nephi is the preeminent reason that the Book of Mormon stands as a keystone witness of Christ's divinity.

By detailing the post-resurrection appearance and ministry of Jesus Christ in the Americas, “3 Nephi stands as an independent witness of the linchpin doctrine of the entire Christian faith—the bodily Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.”³² It is a Gospel, not of the mortal Jesus, but of the risen Lord.³³ In a time of ever-increasing skepticism about who Jesus was and who He claimed to be, the Book of Mormon, as LDS author Michael R. Ash observed, “is a unique second witness to the divinity of Christ and the reality of the Resurrection.”³⁴

“Truly, 3 Nephi is worthy of the designation Fifth Gospel—the capstone of all Gospel accounts,” Skinner concluded.³⁵ It is a Gospel the world desperately needs now—a Gospel which has the potential to soften hearts,

change minds, and convert people unto the Lord. Skinner resolved, “For this Fifth Gospel we should be forever grateful and perhaps much more active in filling the earth with its contents.”³⁶

Further Reading

Andrew C. Skinner, *Third Nephi: The Fifth Gospel* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2012).

Monte S. Nyman, *Book of Mormon Commentary*, 6 vols. (Orem, UT: Granite, 2003), volume 5.

John W. Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and Sermon on the Mount* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999).

Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Volume 8 (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 407–434.

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Notes

1. President Gordon B. Hinckley, “Four Cornerstones of Faith,” *Ensign*, February 2004, online at lds.org. See also President Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Cornerstones of Our Faith,” *Ensign*, November 1984, online at lds.org.

2. See B. H. Roberts, Conference Report, April 1904, 16.

3. Gaye Strathern and Andrew C. Skinner, “Introduction,” in *Third Nephi: An Incomparable Scripture*, ed. Gaye Strathern and Andrew C. Skinner (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2012), viii: “All five Gospels testify that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. They are Gospels because they all declare the ‘good news’ that the atonement of Jesus Christ makes salvation available to all who come unto him with faith, repentance, baptism, the sanctifying power of the Holy Ghost, and by enduring to the end (3 Nephi 27:13–21).” Interestingly, according to Christopher M. Tuckett, “Within first-century Christianity, the term ‘gospel’ was used to refer to the Christian kerygma centering on in the death and resurrection of Jesus.” See Christopher M. Tuckett, “Introduction to the Gospels,” in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 989. In 3 Nephi 27:13–15, Jesus likewise defined *gospel* as centering on His death and resurrection, thus making the Book of Mormon usage

authentic to the first-century AD. See also Andrew C. Skinner, “Jesus’s Gospel-Defining Discourse in 3 Nephi 27:13–21: Doctrinal Apex of His New World Visit,” in *Incomparable Scripture*, 281–307.

4. See Tuckett, “Introduction to the Gospels,” 990–993. See also Christopher Tuckett, “Gospel, Gospels,” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 522–524; Mark Allan Powell, “The Gospels,” in *Harper-Collins Bible Dictionary*, revised and updated, ed. Mark Allan Powell (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2011), 338–340.

5. Tuckett, “Introduction to the Gospels,” 989–990 mentions some of these. Literature on the post-resurrection ministry of Christ in the Old World is frequently considered to be a genre unto itself, called the 40-day literature, since Christ’s post-resurrection ministry was 40 days. See Hugh Nibley, *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Volume 4 (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987), 10–44. A listing with information about each of these documents is available at fortydayministry.com.

6. Hugh W. Nibley, “Two Shots in the Dark,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1982; reprinted by FARMS, 1996), 123; reprinted in Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, Volume 8 (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 409.

7. Tuckett, “Introduction to the Gospels,” 990: “Thus the Gospels which were finally placed in the [New Testament] canon are rather different in kind from the ones that were not.”

8. Andrew C. Skinner, *Third Nephi: The Fifth Gospel* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2012), 5–9. See also, Book of Mormon Central, “How was There a Night without Darkness? (3 Nephi 1:15),” *KnowWhy* 188 (September 15, 2016).

9. See Book of Mormon Central, “How was Nephi, Son of Nephi, Similar to John the Baptist? (3 Nephi 7:23–24),” *KnowWhy* 196 (September 27, 2016).

10. Krister Stendahl, “The Sermon on the Mount and

- Third Nephi,” in *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaean-Christian Parallels*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), 141.
11. See Matthew 3:17; 17:5; Mark 1:11; 9:7; Luke 3:22; 9:35.
 12. Matthew 27; Mark 15; Luke 23; John 19.
 13. See Skinner, *Fifth Gospel*, 9–19; Book of Mormon Central, “What Caused the Darkness and Destruction in the 34th Year? (3 Nephi 8:20),” *KnoWhy* 197 (September 28, 2016).
 14. David B. Cummings, “Three Days and Three Nights: Reassessing Jesus’s Entombment,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007): 56–63, 86; Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “Dating the Death of Jesus,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (2015): 135–191, esp. 183–188.
 15. Stendahl, “The Sermon on the Mount and Third Nephi,” 141.
 16. See Book of Mormon Central, “Why Did Jesus Deliver a Version of the Sermon on the Mount at the Temple in Bountiful? (3 Nephi 12:6),” *KnoWhy* 203 (October 6, 2016).
 17. See John 10:16; cf. 3 Nephi 15:17–24. See also Skinner, *Fifth Gospel*, 74–77; Book of Mormon Central, “Why Did Jesus Say That There Were ‘Other Sheep’ Who Would Hear His Voice? (3 Nephi 15:21; cf. John 10:16),” *KnoWhy* 207 (October 11, 2016).
 18. See 3 Nephi 18:1–10; 20:3–8; cf. Matthew 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–24; Luke 22:19–20. See Skinner, *Fifth Gospel*, 108–110; Book of Mormon Central, “Why Did the Savior Emphasize His Risen Body in the Nephite Sacrament? (3 Nephi 18:7),” *KnoWhy* 211 (October 18, 2016).
 19. See Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20–21.
 20. See Skinner, *Fifth Gospel*, 21–27; Book of Mormon Central, “Why Did the Savior Emphasize His Risen Body in the Nephite Sacrament? (3 Nephi 18:7),” *KnoWhy* 211 (October 18, 2016).
 21. For the most detailed treatment of 3 Nephi as a gospel, see Skinner, *Fifth Gospel*. See also Monte S. Nyman, *Book of Mormon Commentary*, 6 vols. (Orem, UT: Granite, 2003), volume 5.
 22. Skinner, *Fifth Gospel*, 20.
 23. See Skinner, *Fifth Gospel*, 37–47; John W. Welch, *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and Sermon on the Mount* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999).
 24. For a discussion of modern imitation gospels in comparison with 3 Nephi, see Richard Lloyd Anderson, “Imitation Gospels and Christ’s Book of Mormon Ministry,” in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints*, ed. C. Wilfred Griggs (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1986), 53–107.
 25. Skinner, *Fifth Gospel*, 2.
 26. Skinner, *Fifth Gospel*, 3. In support of this, Skinner cited 3 Nephi 23:7–8.
 27. Brain K. Ashton, “The Doctrine of Christ,” *Ensign*, November 2016, online at lds.org.
 28. Skinner, *Fifth Gospel*, 3.
 29. *Elder’s Journal*, July 1838, p. 44, online at josephsmithpapers.org, grammar standardized.
 30. Ezra Taft Benson, “The Book of Mormon: The Keystone of Our Religion,” *Ensign*, November 1986, 5.
 31. Gary E. Stevenson, “Look to the Book, Look to the Lord,” *Ensign*, November 2016, online at lds.org.
 32. Skinner, *Fifth Gospel*, 3.
 33. Strathern and Skinner, “Introduction,” viii: “It is not the account of the mortal Christ but the account of the resurrected, glorified Christ.”
 34. Michael R. Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome: Strengthening One’s Testimony in the Face of Criticism and Doubt*, 2nd edition (Redding, CA: FairMormon, 2013), 125.
 35. Skinner, *Fifth Gospel*, 3.
 36. Skinner, *Fifth Gospel*, 20.