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## When Did Jesus Visit the Americas?

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**Abstract:** Conflicting views exist about when Jesus appeared to his New World disciples. Did he appear directly after his ascension to the Father? Some believe that his appearance followed the forty days with his disciples in Palestine, while others believe that an entire year had passed after the resurrection when he appeared in the Americas. Observations from the text suggest that he mercifully waited for the people to recover from the destruction that attended his crucifixion. Compelling details help us approach an answer to this puzzling question.



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## When Did Jesus Visit the Americas?

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*Conflicting views exist about when Jesus appeared to his New World disciples. Did he appear directly after his ascension to the Father? Some believe that his appearance followed the forty days with his disciples in Palestine, while others believe that an entire year had passed after the resurrection when he appeared in the Americas. Observations from the text suggest that he mercifully waited for the people to recover from the destruction that attended his crucifixion. Compelling details help us approach an answer to this puzzling question.*

Even in the bright light of written commentary and artistic depiction, a question persists about the dating of the risen Jesus' visit to the Americas. One view holds that approximately one year had passed following the severe destruction that attended Jesus' death.<sup>1</sup> A second view suggests that the Savior's visit occurred in connection with or soon after his initial appearance to his disciples in Jerusalem following the resurrection (see Luke 24:28–43; John 20:11–18).<sup>2</sup> A third view, which stands between these two, maintains that the Savior's manifestation occurred only following his forty-day ministry (see Acts 1:3–4).<sup>3</sup>

Among those who either avoid the question or take an ambiguous stand are George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, who wrote, "Some time after the terrible events which denoted His death, exactly how long we know not, a multitude assembled near the temple, which was in the land Bountiful."<sup>4</sup> Daniel H. Ludlow did not attempt a solution but simply stated that he was aware of the three views.<sup>5</sup>

Among artistic representations that depict Jesus as arriving directly after the destruction of the Nephite cities and the sub-

sequent period of total darkness is Arnold Friberg's well-known painting, now reproduced in virtually all inexpensive copies of the Book of Mormon and once featured on the cover of the Gospel Doctrine manual for 1967–68. The original painting was part of a series done during 1952–57, now hanging on the lower floor of the South Visitors' Center on Temple Square in Salt Lake City. We note especially the portrayal of recent destruction in the right foreground and the fallen posture of some of the people—as if they were struggling to their feet just after spending the past three days in darkness (see 3 Ne. 8:23).

A painting by Ronald Crosby exhibits a similar posture toward the question of whether a substantial period of time had elapsed. From 1967 to 1991, the Joseph Smith Building on the Brigham Young University campus was home to Crosby's painting of Jesus' visit to the Nephites. In that painting Crosby has depicted recent destruction, particularly in the left background. In a telephone conversation, the artist said that he had tried to capture the scene of Jesus' appearing to the Nephites "as soon after" the destruction and darkness as possible.

### Calendar Issues

In seeking a solution to the question, we must first review two passages in 3 Nephi that seem to chronicle the relative timing of Jesus' death and subsequent visit. The first passage informs us that "in the thirty and fourth year, in the first month, on the fourth day of the month, there arose a great storm" which brought the destruction and period of darkness (8:5). We note particularly that it was at the beginning of the thirty-fourth year by Nephite calendrical reckoning that these events occurred.

The second key passage observes that "in the ending of the thirty and fourth year . . . soon after the ascension of Christ into heaven he did truly manifest himself unto them [Nephites and Lamanites]—showing his body unto them, and ministering unto them" (10:18–19). Here we note that it was apparently at the end of the same year, the thirty-fourth, that Jesus appeared to those assembled at the temple in the land of Bountiful (11:1).

But much depends on how we understand the meaning of the phrase "the ending."<sup>6</sup> The calendrical system that the Nephites used at Jesus' visit dated from the ninety-first year of the reign of

the judges (3 Ne. 1:1; 2:8), the year of the appearance of the sign of Jesus' birth (1:15–21). In this connection at least two problems of the Nephite calendar remain unsolved: (a) whether the Nephites employed a solar or a lunar calendar, and (b) whether the new calendrical sequence dated from the very day, night and day when the sign appeared, or whether the Nephites merely retained the existing annual cycle, renumbering it from ninety-one to one.<sup>7</sup> In any case, it is evident from 3 Ne. 2:4–8 that they may have used as many as three calendars concurrently during the years immediately following the sign of Jesus' birth.

Thus far, the chronology seems clear. According to the Book of Mormon, the destruction and associated darkness had occurred at the opening of the year, and the subsequent appearance of the risen Jesus evidently came at its closing. But as we mentioned above, this chronological sequence has not been accepted everywhere. To date, discussion has focused on two items—chronometrical notations and circumstantial evidences. Let us now examine these two matters.

### Expressions of Time

Concerning the chronological notes, the first potential difficulty arises from the fact that the prophet Mormon, while abridging the record of 3 Nephi, interrupted his work for an indefinite period just before copying the report of Jesus' visit: "An account of his [Jesus'] ministry [among Nephites and Lamanites] shall be given hereafter. Therefore for this time I make an end of my sayings" (3 Ne. 10:19). We must ask whether the interruption of Mormon's work could have impaired his sense for the timing of this most important moment for his people. Joseph Fielding Smith noted the interruption in Mormon's work, as did Sidney Sperry.<sup>8</sup>

It seems highly unlikely that Mormon became careless—even with the interruption in his editing—in handling an event that he chose to place at center stage in his abridgment. We have only to recall that Mormon's work exhibits throughout a thorough care in treating details of sequence and place.<sup>9</sup> In reviewing Mormon's huge effort represented in the Book of Mormon, we have to be impressed with his consistent attention to detail as he rewrote large segments of the material that came into his hands, particularly the large plates of Nephi. These sections have always exhib-



ited a steady consistency. If we were to urge that Mormon erred in his chronological note in 3 Ne. 10:18, we would have to accept the consequent view that he committed a totally unexpected blunder while introducing the risen Jesus' ministry, the major event narrated in his literary work.

Consequently, since we can fault none of Mormon's efforts at chronological accuracy, there is no reasonable cause for questioning his remarks regarding the events associated with the beginning and the ending of the Nephites' thirty-fourth year.

The second chronometrical issue concerns Mormon's note that the Lord's special manifestation came "soon after the ascension of Christ into heaven" (10:18). The ascension itself has been understood variously as that which took place on the day of Jesus' resurrection or that which followed his forty-day ministry (see Acts 1:3).<sup>10</sup> Whichever the case, Mormon's notice that Jesus' manifestation fell "soon after the ascension" would seem to place the event earlier rather than later. The reply consists first in pointing to Mormon's single chronometrical observation—doubtless trustworthy, as noted above, and made in the same verse—that the visitation occurred at "the ending of the thirty and fourth year," that is, well into its latter half. This position is the one taken by Elder Bruce R. McConkie in *The Mortal Messiah*: "Then 'in the ending' of that [thirty-fourth] year (see 10:18–19), several months after the Ascension on Olivet, Jesus ministered personally among the Nephites for many hours over many days."<sup>11</sup> An earlier view expressed by Elder McConkie seems to indicate a belief that Jesus' visit to the Nephites occurred simultaneously with his forty-day ministry among his disciples in Palestine,<sup>12</sup> a position which he later abandoned. Additionally, Mormon's expression "soon after" (10:18), especially when compared to his rather clear chronological remark about "the ending" of the year, may lack sufficient precision upon which to build a firm case one way or the other.

In this connection we must consider one further chronological notation in a passage far removed from the action of 3 Nephi. Although it may shed little light on our topic, we read in a note made by Moroni several hundred years after the fact that "Christ showed himself unto our fathers, after he had risen from the dead; and he showed not himself unto them until after they had faith in him" (Ether 12:7).<sup>13</sup> This passage seemingly points to a rather substantial period between the Savior's resurrection and his ap-

pearance in America; but undue weight should not be placed upon it. The primary purpose of Moroni's statement in Ether 12:7 was to illustrate his prior instruction to his readers: "Dispute not because ye see not, for ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith. For it was by faith that Christ showed himself unto our fathers, after he had risen from the dead" (12:6-7).

In dealing with chronometrical statements in the Book of Mormon, nothing has so far impelled us to abandon the literal meaning of Mormon's statement concerning "the ending" of the thirty-fourth year. We now turn to evidence that is largely circumstantial in character. We can rely upon such features only to tell us whether the drift of our interpretation is tending in the proper direction.

### Circumstantial Evidences

On behalf of the view that Jesus came early to the Nephites, the most compelling observation is that the Savior would not have caused those faithful Nephites and Lamanites to wait an entire year for his appearance, especially because his instructions—momentously—brought the era of the law of Moses to a close.<sup>14</sup> This view possesses an interesting merit. Even the response that one year does not represent much time may seem a bit weak. We might suggest, however, the likelihood that the people, having just suffered through severe destruction and loss of loved ones, may not have been physically and emotionally able to receive the Savior. Is it not reasonable to suppose that the Lord knew the Nephites' spiritual and physical state following such a calamity and thus delayed his visit so that their minds would be relatively free of pain and anxiety? While we cannot speak with certainty, this seems to be a reasonable assumption.

The second view is less strong. It is apparently based on the remark that, just before the Savior appeared at the temple, the survivors "were marveling and wondering one with another, and were showing one to another, the great and marvelous change which had taken place" (3 Ne. 11:1). It may be natural to suppose that this verse described a scene not one year after the destruction, by which time the alterations in the landscape would have become somewhat familiar, but reported a situation directly following the great catastrophe. The answer to this interpretation is rather

straightforward. In the first place, the usual human response to catastrophe is not to gather quickly to discuss the changes resulting from the event. Instead, people are thrown immediately into deep mourning for the lost (cf. 8:23–25; 10:8). Second, we must surmise, the able-bodied survivors went straight to work not only to rescue others buried in the debris of buildings<sup>15</sup> but also to recover the bodies of loved ones in order to provide them with proper burial. Next must have come the tremendous efforts required to rebuild and refurbish in order to protect self and loved ones both from natural elements and from enemies. Such a process would slowly return life to a level of normalcy. It is difficult, therefore, to imagine people conversing in groups at the temple, as described in 3 Ne. 11:1, if the catastrophe had occurred but recently. Moreover, discussions concerning the changes in life and circumstance would have been fittingly natural—especially if an entire year had passed since the destruction—simply because people had to respond to the tremendous human problems posed by the catastrophic events and would not likely have found an earlier opportunity to gather at the temple. This lack of opportunity would certainly have been the case if travel there involved significant distances for many. Consequently, when people finally did congregate, they had a lot to discuss. Thus it is reasonable to assume a lengthy period between the destruction and the gathering at the temple if only because the conversation was rather casual.

Buttressing the view that substantial time had passed and life had returned to some normalcy is the remark that, at the end of the Savior's first day among the Nephites, all the people went to their homes and were able to contact friends and discuss the day's events (19:1–3). Such a "settled condition could scarcely have existed immediately following the great destruction at the time of the Savior's death."<sup>16</sup> But there is more. The evidence now takes the form of seemingly tiny points in the account of Jesus' appearance. We refer to several small but significant details of circumstance that stand together to demonstrate that a long time had passed before the Savior's manifestation.

The first two particulars form an integral part of Jesus' introduction of the sacrament of bread and wine. We note with considerable interest that, during the first day of his visit, "Jesus commanded his disciples that they should bring forth some bread

and wine unto him" (18:1). Later, after "the disciples had come with bread and wine" (18:3), Jesus hosted a banquet in which those present were filled (18:3–9)—all of this taking place on the same day. Where, we naturally ask, did the disciples obtain the bread and wine, especially on such short notice? The answer, I suggest, bears directly on our question.

In the case of the wine, while it is possible that some jars and skins survived the three destructive hours described in 3 Ne. 8:5–19, it is more likely that virtually every storage facility and instrument suffered damage, if not total ruin, since according to the account the desolation was severe.

While "there was a more great and terrible destruction in the land northward" (8:12)—implying less severe damage in the south—and while "there were some cities which remained" (8:15), even in the areas least affected "the damage thereof was exceedingly great, and there were many [of the inhabitants] in them who were slain" (8:15). The catastrophe was so widespread that "the face of the whole earth became deformed" (8:17). Moreover, if we assume a recent collapse of buildings and homes, could anyone be expected to dig through tons of rubble in a matter of minutes in order to find sufficient uncontaminated, unspilled wine for a large crowd? One may argue, of course, that the wine stored in the temple at Bountiful miraculously escaped harm. But such a suggestion lacks substantiation from the text. Rather, in the passage we clearly sense that Jesus' request for wine was not extraordinary and did not require an extensive search for a cache unexpectedly preserved. This conclusion is strengthened by the simple observation that it was not until the second day of his visit that Jesus' own supernatural powers came into play when he miraculously provided the wine and bread: "Now, there had been no bread, neither wine, brought [on the second day] by the disciples, neither by the multitude; but he truly gave unto them bread to eat, and also wine to drink" (20:6–7). We are thus led to deduce that the ready accessibility of wine on the first day points not to a moment almost directly after the destruction but rather to a time substantially later when people had tended and harvested the remaining vineyards and refurbished the means to store the processed wine.

While the previous point is essentially circumstantial in character, the following tightens the knot. It concerns the bread and



its ready availability on the first day. We note that the Nephites and Lamanites must have made bread daily, as did all known ancient cultures, because of the lack of preservatives. Consequently, the fact that bread was within reach on request illustrates the likelihood that, on the day that Jesus appeared, bread had been baked—unless it was Sabbath. From all indications, that day began like any other day—without any special expectations on the part of those assembling at the temple.<sup>17</sup>

If we were to insist, in this connection, that Jesus had come almost immediately after the destruction, we would need to explain how kilns and ovens used for baking escaped the terrible ruination that devastated the whole society. The answer, in my view, lies in a different direction. The bread blessed by the risen Jesus and then consumed during the ensuing meal had probably been prepared and baked in the early-morning hours of the first of Jesus' three-day ministry. Bread could not have been prepared from contaminated water and scattered flour supplies—if any survived—nor baked in crushed ovens. Once again, if we were to hold that Jesus' appearance followed almost directly after the wreckage, we would have to argue for a miraculous preservation of supplies of water and flour as well as kilns, in addition to an amazingly rapid return to normality in the daily routines of those who had suffered so severely.

A third passage sheds further light on the chronometric issue. When the risen Jesus turned to the matter of "other scriptures . . . that ye should write, that ye have not" (23:6), he specifically drew his disciples' attention to a prophecy of Samuel the Lamanite concerning "many saints who should arise from the dead" (23:9). For our discussion, the following exchange between Jesus and his disciples is key: "And Jesus said unto them [the Twelve]: How be it that ye have not written . . . that many saints did arise? . . . And it came to pass that Jesus commanded that it should be written" (23:11–13). In addition, the text affirms that "Nephi remembered" when Jesus recalled that many had arisen and had appeared "unto many and did minister unto them"—probably comforting the survivors of the destruction at their loss (23:11–12). These events were obviously associated with Jesus' own resurrection and thus must have followed almost immediately after the lifting of the darkness (10:9). Clearly, Nephi the record keeper had simply forgotten to include in his account this notable proof of the resur-

rection. In correcting this oversight, Jesus reminded both him and the rest of the Twelve that such an important feature was to be recorded. Moreover, Jesus' remarks indicate that enough time had passed to make this notation in the record. To summarize, then, the language of the passage plainly leads us to conclude that Jesus was referring to an unrecorded series of events in the reasonably distant past rather than to recent occurrences.

Finally, Daniel H. Ludlow has suggested two more convincing evidences for Jesus' appearance several months after his resurrection. When the Savior selected his twelve disciples on the first day, all twelve of them were present in the congregation of twenty-five hundred people. Such a circumstance would have been highly unlikely unless the meeting were an important gathering of the Church, or at least a meeting of the faithful from throughout the whole land. Such a meeting could not have been called and held immediately after the great destruction. The roads and terrain were then simply impassible (8:13, 17). Further, when the Savior commanded the multitude to gather the remainder of the people together on the following day, his hearers knew exactly where to go—that is, they knew which cities had been destroyed and which had not—and people were able to gather back the next day. Thus, the roads must have been repaired.<sup>18</sup>

### Conclusion

The cumulative evidence reviewed here weighs in the direction of the Savior having come to the Nephites only after a substantial period of time. That period must have extended well into the latter half of the year—presumably between October and April—if we correctly understand Mormon's chronological notations concerning the timing of both the destruction (3 Ne. 8:5) and the manifestation of the Savior (10:18). The one serious consideration that weighs in favor of only a brief interlude is the supposition that the Lord would not have left his faithful followers so long without a personal visit. But it is at least as reasonable to hypothesize that, given the situation following the destruction, it was more timely that the Savior delay his visit. Moreover, in terms of the internal evidence from the text, the heft of the documentation suggests that life had returned to some normalcy. This conclusion derives from a series of notations in the text, including remarks

that, after the first day of the Lord's ministry, people returned home and discussed the events of the day with friends (19:1–3) and that bread and wine were readily available at Jesus' request (18:1–3). Implied in the concept of a substantial period is the notion that enough time had probably passed to allow a new harvest, which would resupply stores both of grain and of produce from the vine lost in the catastrophe. Thus, Mormon's chronological note that the risen Jesus appeared "in the ending" of the thirty-fourth year is confirmed by particulars connected with Jesus' first day among Nephites and Lamanites in the Americas.

*This article has been revised from its first appearance as "Jesus among the Nephites: When Did It Happen?" in A SYMPOSIUM ON THE NEW TESTAMENT (Salt Lake City: Church Educational System, 1984), 74–77.*

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## NOTES

1. See Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Studies* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union Board, 1947), 101; *The Book of Mormon Testifies* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), 294; *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 401; Joseph F. McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987–92), 4:50; see also J. N. Washburn, *Book of Mormon Lands and Times* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon Publishers, 1974), 186.
2. See Milton R. Hunter, *Christ in Ancient America* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1959), 97–98.
3. Reid E. Bankhead and Glenn L. Pearson, *The Word and the Witness: The Unique Mission of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1970), 34; James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 3d ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1916), 724. On Jesus' forty-day ministry, see S. Kent Brown and C. Wilfred Griggs, "The Postresurrection Ministry," in *Studies in Scripture, Vol. 6: Acts to Revelation*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 12–23.
4. George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1955–61), 7:133.
5. See Daniel H. Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 260.
6. In the other two instances wherein Mormon employs the phrase "in the ending of the [such and such] year," the context points to the very end of the

year since Mormon notes events of the following year immediately thereafter (Alma 52:14–15; Hel. 3:1–2).

7. These complexities are noted by John L. Sorenson, "Seasonality of Warfare in the Book of Mormon and in Mesoamerica," in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 445–77, especially 448–53; and by John P. Pratt, "Book of Mormon Chronology," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. D. H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 169–71.

8. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957–66), 4:27; Sperry, *The Book of Mormon Testifies*, 295; *Book of Mormon Compendium*, 401.

9. See Eldin Ricks's summary of Mormon's literary work in *Story of the Formation of the Book of Mormon Plates*, 3d ed. (Salt Lake City: Olympus Publishing, 1966); Grant R. Hardy speaks of "Mormon's honesty as a historian"; "Mormon as Editor," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1991), 15–28.

10. See also Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Book of Mormon*, 260; Bankhead and Pearson, *The Word and the Witness*, 34; Ora Pate Stewart, *Branches over the Wall* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1950), 129; and Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 724.

11. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Mortal Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 4:307.

12. See Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 52.

13. See also Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium*, 401.

14. Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions*, 4:28–29.

15. The collapse of buildings during the devastation was foreseen by Nephi (2 Ne. 26:5; cf. 1 Ne. 12:4).

16. Sperry, *The Book of Mormon Testifies*, 294, n. 4; repeated in Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium*, 401, n. 4.

17. The question has to be asked why the people had gathered. Was it a festival? We can speculate that if the end of the thirty-fourth year had indeed come, then the occasion for assembling may have been a New Year festival. But we lack evidence from the text.

18. Report of the Church Correlation Committee, 5 April 1984.