



Type: Magazine Article

Theology—The Book of Mormon Idea of the Hereafter

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Source: *Relief Society Magazine*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (April 1932), pp. 240–244

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Abstract: No abstract available.

Lesson Department

Theology and Testimony

(First Week in June)

THEOLOGY—THE BOOK OF MORMON IDEA OF THE HEREAFTER

Select Readings: Alma, chapters 36-42 inclusive. Note the separate ideas here. Summarize the teachings of Alma the younger.

It is time now to sum up, to take account of our findings with respect to the value of the *Book of Mormon* as an evidence of the divine mission of the Prophet Joseph Smith. First of all, as to the ideas it contains.

(1) There is the idea of God in his dealings with sinners in hell. The ideas in the Nephite Record, we found, were not at all in agreement with those that were current at the time of the Prophet, either in Palmyra or throughout the Christian world.

(2) There is the doctrine concerning man. Joseph Smith gave us what amounts to a new definition of immortality, in the *Book of Mormon*. Man not only is now and will continue a conscious individual after death, but he is co-eval with God. And this new immortality, so far as we know, had never been advanced as a Christian doctrine before the Prophet's time.

(3) There is the emphasis on man's life here. While this is not altogether new, being found in the *Gospels*, yet it was new in his time, first, in the stress on the Now and the Here and, secondly, in the attention to the near-end of human life instead of the remote. As a matter of fact, it is only now, when people have become disgusted with the older emphasis, that this idea has taken on a new meaning.

These ideas were put out by Joseph Smith. But Joseph Smith was

uneducated; he had had no training in theology; and he was young, besides, not yet twenty-five. It is hardly credible that he alone was responsible for a set of ideas like these. That is why critics of the *Book of Mormon* have spent a full hundred years in trying to find out whether any other man helped him in the literary work involved. No competent critic, however, now believes that either Sidney Rigdon or Solomon Spaulding had anything to do with writing the Record.

The Prophet always maintained that God revealed the *Book of Mormon* to him, through Moroni, a resurrected man. This we have seen in the testimony he gives in his *Autobiography*. We submit that it is easier to believe that he was divinely inspired in this work than that he did it unaided of man or of God.

And there is the whole case, so far as the *Book of Mormon* is concerned.

But there is at least one bit of external evidence that we must touch upon here. It is the testimony of the three and the eight witnesses to the existence of the plates from which the Prophet claims to have translated the *Book of Mormon*. And the three witnesses bear testimony also to the fact of the heavenly messenger.

The reader should here turn to

these testimonies, for there is not space here for them.

The eight witnesses declare that, in addition to seeing the gold plates, they also "hefted" them. Here are the two most dependable of the five senses involved in this testimony—sight and touch. The three witnesses declare that they saw the angel and heard his voice and that they saw the plates in his hands. Here are the senses of sight and hearing involved in the situation. Oliver Cowdery elsewhere states that he "handled" both the plates and the urim and thummim, with which the book was translated.

It is customary with us to show that these eleven men were not deceived by the Prophet and that they were not lying, because they had no motive to do so either as to wealth or fame. But really this is not necessary any more, for the reason that the ground of belief in human testimony has shifted during recent years.

At one time no testimony was thought credible that was "improbable." This test depended on the opinion of the critic. If he looked upon it as improbable, he threw it out; but if he believed it probable, he accepted it. Hume, an English philosopher and historian, declared flatly that "the miraculous is the impossible," and he refused even to consider it, no matter how many persons testified to it. But Professor Ihne, a German historian who deals with source material, says that the test to be applied to any witness is whether he is "able and willing to tell the truth." (See his work on *Ancient Rome*.) And some of our own historians in America believe this test applicable to witnesses to the miraculous as well. Indeed, as Professor Ihne tells us, every historical event rests ultimately on hu-

man testimony; and since the miraculous is an event that happens, it may be supposed that it, too, must of necessity rest on testimony.

This, at all events, is the modern way to test the witnesses to the *Book of Mormon*. The positive, undeviating testimony of these twelve men, if we include that of the Prophet, ought to be sufficient to enable one to trust in the divine origin of the *Book of Mormon*.

Perhaps it ought to be said at this point that even the testimony of these twelve men is not enough to give us a knowledge of the divine origin of the Nephite Record. At best that testimony is but evidence. A knowledge of the divine origin of that work can come only through our own experience, our own individual contact with the spiritual source of spiritual knowledge. Moroni, in the Record itself, tells us how that is to be done.

"When ye shall receive these things," he says, speaking of the time we are in, "I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost."

Having this assurance that Joseph Smith really did have spiritual contacts, through which he received visions and revelations concerning the *Book of Mormon*, we may now proceed with our last point in the study of the Nephite Record: the ideas it gives us about heaven, to which we shall add what the Prophet himself furnishes us on the same subject.

The *fact* of another life, if we must discriminate at all, is perhaps the outstanding thing in the *Book of Mormon*. Everything r e v o l v e s

around this point. It is of a piece with the Record itself. All the writers of the volume make this a central point in their work. All the prophets before Christ looked forward to his coming, as all those after him looked back to his advent. But the main thing about Christ, to them, was the fact of his redemption. In it they took glory; of it they were never tired of speaking and writing. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that in the Nephite Record we get a more substantial *feeling* as to another life than even in the pages of the *New Testament*.

That is the first thing we get—an idea and feeling that heaven is a reality and not a “fabrication,” an escape from disagreeable things here, as some have tried to make out after consulting their ignorance on the point.

A second thing we get from the *Book of Mormon* is a deep feeling concerning the resurrection from the dead.

To the Nephite prophets heaven was not a place where disembodied spirits lived an inactive life. They believed in a literal raising of the body. The quotation already given from Alma, in another lesson, shows this. Their heaven, therefore, was in reality but a continuation of this life—except that there man would be immortal, whereas here he is subject to death.

As an instance of this literalness we have, in addition to the Christ of the Nephite appearances, the case of Moroni; and here we touch the times of this heavenly messenger and also the times of Joseph Smith—thus connecting two important dispensations.

The Moroni of the *Book of Mormon* was a man, in no essential sense different from his contemporaries. He was born as they were; he ate, wore clothing, and slept much as

they did; he took up arms against enemies, as they did, and led hosts to battle; he spoke and wrote the language of his people; and finally he died after the fashion of his people, although we do not know when or how.

But the Moroni that Joseph Smith knew was different. In what respects? Not in his mental and spiritual qualities, it would appear. For he manifested about the same interest in human welfare that he had done in his mortal body. He was extremely patient with the boy Joseph; he was anxious over him, to see that he had the necessary instructions for his work; and, although he reproved him on occasions and punished him for his transgressions, yet he exhibited great love and compassion for him.

But he was different in his tabernacle. That was now immortal, incapable any more of death and suffering. Moreover, it could appear and disappear at a moment's notice, as we saw on the first visit Joseph made to the hill Cumorah. And then, too, it was like our sound waves, the ones that carry into our radios; what we know as lumber and brick and stone was no hindrance at all to the resurrected Moroni, any more than they were to our Savior in Palestine after his resurrection. He appeared to the disciples when they were in the house, the “doors being shut.” So Moroni did to the young Prophet on the twenty-first of September, 1823.

If then, we would ask to know something about the condition of those who are raised from the dead, our answer is clearer through what we have in connection with the *Book of Mormon* than it is from any other source that antedates that Record.

A third point about heaven that we get from the *Book of Mormon* coincides with what we get from the *Gospels*. It is that "the meek shall inherit the earth." Nor does the *Book of Mormon* add anything of importance to what Jesus said to the Jews and to the Nephites about the meek.

But the Mormon Prophet, building on the foundation of the *Book of Mormon*, makes some very illuminating comments in revelations which he received after those connected with the Nephite Record.

The earth was created for man. It is to be his permanent home. But, as there is to be a new man, just so is there to be a new earth for the abode of the new man. That also is the doctrine of John the Revelator, in the twenty-first chapter of "Revelations" (verse 1): "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea."

The Prophet tells us not a few things about the conditions under which we shall live hereafter.

For one thing, family ties will continue there—provided arrangements have been made before then. That means love, the most fruitful source of joy on the earth. "Would you think it strange," he said once in Nauvoo (Vol. V, *History of the Church*, pp. 361-2, "if I relate what I have seen in vision in relation to this interesting theme? Those who have died in Jesus Christ may expect to enter into all that fruition of joy when they come forth, which they possessed or anticipated here. So plain was the vision, that I actually saw men, before they had ascended from the tomb, as though they were getting up slowly. They took each other by the hand and said to each other, 'My father, my son, my moth-

er, my daughter, my brother, my sister'."

And, for another thing, we shall progress eternally in the hereafter, much as we might here if we were permitted to live and enjoy our powers. That is far preferable to the old sectarian notion that we would spend our time in heaven singing psalms before the great white throne. Infinite possibilities will be open to us for the development of the powers for good which we possessed on the earth in our mortal bodies.

And, for still another thing, there are different degrees of glory there to match the different capacities for progress and enjoyment and character in this life. These fall into three groups—the celestial, the terrestrial, and the telestial. This is a distinct advance over the notion that still prevails in the Christian churches that differences are all obliterated in heaven—even differences between those who were sinners and saints here. The "Mormon" doctrine on this subject is expressed in the seventy-sixth section of the *Doctrine and Covenants*.

These views, and others we have no space for in these lessons, were revealed to Joseph Smith, the Prophet, through his spiritual contacts—contacts that included, not only such personages as Moroni, John the Baptist, Moses, Elijah, the ancient apostles, Peter, James, and John, but also God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son. And that these spiritual contacts gave him positive and clear ideas, and deep conviction, on the subject, is evident from the following quotation—which forms a fitting conclusion for the present series of lessons on the *Book of Mormon*:

"More painful to me are the thoughts of annihilation than death. If I have no

expectation of seeing my father, mother, brothers, sisters, and friends, my heart would burst, and I should go down to my grave. The expectation of seeing my friends in the morning of the resurrection cheers my soul and makes me bear up against the evils of life. It is like their taking a long journey, and on their return we meet them with increased joy.

"God has revealed his son from the heavens and the doctrines of the resurrection also; and we have a knowledge that those we bury here God will bring up again, clothed upon and quickened by the Spirit of the great God; and what mattereth it whether we lay them down, or we lay down with them, when we can keep them no longer? Let these truths sink down in our hearts, that we may even here begin to enjoy that which shall be in full hereafter.

"Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna to Almighty God, that rays of light begin to burst forth upon us even now. I cannot find words in which to express myself." (*History of the Church*, Vol. V, p. 362.)

Questions

1. State briefly the main ideas considered here from the *Book of Mormon* concerning (a) the char-

acter of God as relates to his treatment of sinners in hell, (b) the immortality of man, and (c) man's duties here and now.

2. Show, from the testimony of the *Book of Mormon* and that also of the eleven witnesses to its divine origin, that it is more reasonable to believe that Joseph Smith was inspired than that he made up all these ideas.

3. What was once the test of a witness? What is that test now? Which appeals to you as the more reasonable? Why?

4. State the additions which the modern Prophet made to the ideas of the hereafter as given in the *Book of Mormon*. Give the substance of the quotation from the Prophet Joseph.

5. What has impressed you most in this course in the *Book of Mormon*? In what ways, if any, has your testimony to spiritual truth been increased?

Teachers' Topic

Watchword: "And into whatsoever house ye enter, first say, Peace be to this house."—Luke 10:5.

Text: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."—Matthew 5:48.

From the earliest Biblical times, the perfection of the Father has been held up as an example for his children to follow.

"And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God: walk before me, and be thou perfect."—Genesis 17:1.

"And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying,

"Speak unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say unto them, Ye shall be holy: for I

the Lord your God am holy."—Lev. 19:1-2.

Likewise the apostles of the meridian dispensation supported the teachings of the Master in enjoining perfection as the ultimate attainments of the disciples. The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Colossians speaks of Christ: "Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus."—Col. 1:28. The Apostle James also advises: "But let patience have her perfect