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Source: *The Book of Mormon: 3 Nephi 9-30, This Is My Gospel*

Editor(s): Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr.

Published: Provo, UT; Religious Studies Center, 1993

Page(s): 195-209



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Neal E. Lambert

Any study of the Book of Mormon must acknowledge the remarkable complexity and sophistication of this unique book. We must assume that the selection and arrangement of the words and events are not random or accidental, but rather ordered and intentional, giving to the text an integrity that invites careful consideration and analysis, even when it may not follow our usual expectations. Careful textual analysis helps the reader in the ongoing process of having the pages reveal their remarkable directions. To put the matter in other words: the book is not only remarkably complex, but also remarkably efficient. There are patterns of words and events throughout the book which are intentional and purposeful, and which give extraordinary unity and coherence to it and its message.

Let me illustrate this design and coherence with some examples. One of the most oft-quoted verses in the Church is Nephi's response to his father when given the difficult task of returning to Jerusalem to obtain the brass plates:

And it came to pass that I, Nephi, said unto my father: I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them (1 Nephi 3:7).

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But these familiar words do not stand alone, rather they are echoed and re-echoed throughout Nephi's writings. For instance, Nephi's mother, rejoicing over her sons' return, reiterates that she knew "of a surety . . . that the Lord hath protected my sons, and delivered them out of the hands of Laban, and given them power whereby they could accomplish the thing which the Lord hath commanded them" (1 Nephi 5:8). And Nephi himself, recounting the reasoning behind the commandment to make a second set of plates, repeats: "But the Lord knoweth all things from the beginning; wherefore, he prepareth a way to accomplish all his works among the children of men; . . . And thus it is. Amen" (9:6). And again as the family journeys through the wilderness, Nephi repeats the theme: "And thus we see that the commandments of God must be fulfilled. And if it so be that the children of men keep the commandments of God he doth nourish them, and strengthen them, and provide means whereby they can accomplish the thing which he has commanded them; wherefore, he did provide means for us while we did sojourn in the wilderness" (17:3). The effect is, of course, to reinforce the idea that obedience enables and empowers the obedient. But it is not enough simply to say it once; rather, the repetition draws our attention, underlines the significance, and impresses upon the reader that the Lord does "provide means."

Examples of this sort of repetition and patterning are multiplied many, many times in the pages of the Book of Mormon, not only in the ordering of words and ideas, but also in the selection and arrangement of events. And this unity is especially striking in 3 Nephi, where we can speak of an impressive architecture in the details of the account of the Savior's ministry on this continent. For instance, Christ's first day's visit may be subdivided in three major segments: first, his appearing and establishing his doctrine; second, his preaching, in which he articulates the application of that doctrine; and third, his demonstrating the blessings of his gospel. It is interesting to note that Christ concludes each of these three major sections of

his first day's visit with essentially the same rhetorical figure—building upon the rock.

At the end of his initial appearance and instruction on baptism and doctrine, he says: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, that this is my doctrine, and whoso buildeth upon this buildeth upon my rock. . . . And whoso shall declare more or less than this, and establish it for my doctrine, the same cometh of evil, and is not built upon my rock; but he buildeth upon a sandy foundation” (3 Nephi 11:39–40). Then again, almost like a punctuation mark, he concludes his sermon at Bountiful with: “Therefore, whoso heareth these sayings of mine and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, who built his house upon a rock . . .” (14:24–27).

And then finally, as that first day rises to its spiritual conclusion, Jesus finishes with essentially the same metaphor:

And I give unto you a commandment that ye shall do these things. And if ye shall always do these things blessed are ye, for ye are built upon my rock. But whoso among you shall do more or less than these are not built upon my rock, but are built upon a sandy foundation; and when the rain descends, and the floods come, and the winds blow, and beat upon them, they shall fall, and the gates of hell are ready open to receive them. (3 Nephi 18:12–13)

While these parallel statements suggest the possible sections or divisions of the day, they also invite us to look for other parallels and patterns in the material itself. A careful reading suggests that parallels and patterns are clearly there.

Let me demonstrate my point further with one rather limited example: Christ's use of the metaphor of children and childlike submission to describe the Christian convert. Third Nephi is replete with references to children: “children of the covenant,” “children of the prophets,” “children of Israel,” and especially “children of men” to describe the particular group or company Christ or his prophet is addressing. And in his earliest words to the surviving Nephites, the Savior makes special emphasis of this childlike relationship with his thrice-repeated metaphor of himself as being like a hen willing to gather her

“chickens” under her wing (3 Nephi 10:3–6). But even more pointed is his direct, unequivocal, and repeated promise: “Therefore, whoso repenteth and cometh unto me as a little child, him will I receive, for of such is the kingdom of God. Behold, for such I have laid down my life, and have taken it up again; therefore repent, and come unto me ye ends of the earth, and be saved” (9:22). Then again: “And again I say unto you, ye must repent, and become as a little child, and be baptized in my name, or ye can in nowise receive these things. And again I say unto you, ye must repent, and be baptized in my name, and become as a little child, or ye can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God” (11:37–38).

What does that mean—that “a little child” is to “inherit the kingdom”? As Nephi said to the Spirit when queried about the meaning of Lehi’s tree of life and the condescension of God, “I do not know the meaning of all things” (1 Nephi 11:17). The answer in many places in the Book of Mormon is simply to *look*. In 3 Nephi the Lord shows us a vivid demonstration of the appropriate consequences of that verbal injunction to become like a little child in one of the most moving scenes of the whole book—the children’s communion with heaven.

Following a swelling crescendo of spiritual experiences, one building upon another, we come to those climactic moments of a fulness of joy, for the Savior and for the converts:

And he took their little children, one by one, and blessed them, and prayed unto the Father for them. And he spake unto the multitude, and said unto them: Behold your little ones. And as they looked to behold they cast their eyes towards heaven, and they saw the heavens open, and they saw angels descending out of heaven as it were in the midst of fire; and they came down and encircled those little ones about, and they were encircled about with fire; and the angels did minister unto them. (3 Nephi 17:21–24)

In that dramatic experience we learn the meaning of the Savior’s earlier instructions. We literally see what it means to “receive these things,” to “inherit the kingdom of God” as heaven and children become, for a few brief mortal moments, one.

This is one of many strands and patterns that inform and give coherence and unity to 3 Nephi. Of course there are many more complex and continuing designs and patterns: moving from death to life, from darkness to light, chaos to order, laments to hosannahs, sickness and suffering to health and wholeness, dispersion and anxiety to order and peace, and so on. By listing and examining the details this way, we can perhaps see better that the whole account of 3 Nephi is a complex pattern of metaphors detailing the progress of the conversion which everyone must go through as they come unto Christ. As we watch the events of the Christian community in 3 Nephi, we see reflections of our own individual experience as well, even to the destruction of our old carnal world in preparation for the new one to come.

This is not a new pattern. Indeed it almost seems as though the account in 3 Nephi reflects in important ways a much older text, Psalm 60:1–5:

O God, thou hast cast us off, thou hast scattered us, thou hast been displeased; O turn thyself to us again. Thou hast made the earth to tremble; thou hast broken it: heal the breaches thereof; for it shaketh. Thou hast shewed thy people hard things: thou hast made us to drink the wine of astonishment. Thou hast given a banner to them that fear thee, that it may be displayed because of the truth. That thy beloved may be delivered; save with thy right hand, and hear me.

One could also argue that the familiar (to us at least) patterns of 3 Nephi informed and shaped religious instructions years *after* the events as well. Consider the particularities, for instance, of Mormon's prayerful list of benedictions pronounced upon his son. After recounting the chaos and destruction that has its parallels only in the events of 3 Nephi, Mormon writes to Moroni,

My son, be faithful in Christ; and may not the things which I have written grieve thee, to weigh thee down unto death; but may Christ lift thee up, and may His sufferings and death, and the showing his body unto our fathers, and his mercy and long-suffering, and the hope of his glory and of eternal life, rest in your mind forever. (Moroni 9:25)

The key words are there: (1) *suffering and death*, ended by being lifted up by Christ; (2) the *showing His body* followed by the mercy and hope of his ministry; and (3) suggestions of *glory and eternal life*. Again it is a familiar pattern.

We can see just how strong this pattern is as we examine the actual presentation of these dominant experiences. For instance, the movement from darkness to light is a representation of individual change. The account in 3 Nephi 8 is very specific and comprehensive; the darkness was palpable, total, and complete:

All these great and terrible things were done in about the space of three hours—and then behold, there was darkness upon the face of the land. And it came to pass that there was thick darkness upon all the face of the land, insomuch that the inhabitants thereof who had not fallen could feel the vapor of darkness; And there could be no light, because of the darkness, neither candles, neither torches; neither could there be fire kindled with their fine and exceedingly dry wood, so that there could not be any light at all; And there was not any light seen, neither fire, nor glimmer, neither the sun, nor the moon, nor the stars, for so great were the mists of darkness which were upon the face of the land. And it came to pass that it did last for the space of three days that there was no light seen; and there was great mourning and howling and weeping among all the people continually; yea, great were the groanings of the people, because of the darkness and the great destruction which had come upon them. (3 Nephi 8:19–23)

This total, thorough, tangible darkness on the one hand marks the nadir of sinful humanity's experience—a physical type of the utter darkness alluded to so often in scripture. It is contrasted with joy and rejoicing, the experience of fire and light associated with the ministrations of Christ. I have already mentioned the angelic fires of the first day. Let me mention also the similar and familiar experiences of the second day:

And it came to pass when they were all baptized and had come up out of the water, the Holy Ghost did fall upon them, and they were filled with the Holy Ghost and with fire. And behold, they were encircled about as if it were by fire; and it came down from heaven, and the multitude did witness it, and did bear record; and angels did come down out of heaven and did minister unto them. And it came

to pass that Jesus blessed them as they did pray unto him; and his countenance did smile upon them, and the light of his countenance did shine upon them, and behold they were as white as the countenance and also the garments of Jesus; and behold the whiteness thereof did exceed all the whiteness, yea, even there could be nothing upon earth so white as the whiteness thereof. (3 Nephi 19:13–14, 25)

A similar bracketing can be found in the balance between the lament and mourning with which the destruction ends and the shout of Hosanna with which their first testimony of Christ culminates:

And in another place they were heard to cry and mourn, saying: O that we had repented before this great and terrible day, and had not killed and stoned the prophets, and cast them out; then would our mothers and our fair daughters, and our children have been spared, and not have been buried up in that great city Moronihah. And thus were the howlings of the people great and terrible. (3 Nephi 8:25)

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And when they had all gone forth and had witnessed for themselves, they did cry out with one accord, saying: Hosanna! Blessed be the name of the Most High God! And they did fall down at the feet of Jesus, and did worship him. (11:16–17)

Of course, all of this culminates in the figure of the risen Christ himself. For instance, it is not just that the Savior's visit is bracketed by darkness changing to light: he *is* the light! As he tells the people: "Behold I am the light; I have set an example for you. . . . Therefore, hold up your light that it may shine unto the world. Behold I am the light which ye shall hold up" (3 Nephi 18:16, 24). It is his physical presence among the people which gathers up all of these figures into one great typological representation of the experience of salvation. As Nephi taught us "all things which have been given of God from the beginning of the world, unto man, are the typifying of him" (2 Nephi 11:4). And if all things are a typifying of him, then he is a type of all things. The meanings move both ways. As the light of the sun should remind us of the light of the Savior, so

the light of his countenance should remind us of the light of the sun for which he is the source.

So Christ is not only the source of our salvation, but in his physical body he is the figure of our salvation. Our own salvic history as Christians is not only explained by him, but it is also imaged forth in his very flesh and bones—that body that was baptized, violated by cruelty, subjected to rulers and magistrates, its spirit disjoined finally on the cross, then subjected to the darkness of the tomb, then reborn out of darkness into the light of a new life of ministering. All of this represents and repeats the path which every convert must tread. As Christ says, “I am the way” (John 14:6). Such is the hopeful history of all true Christians.

But as Jesus figures forth our individual histories, he also makes possible that history, for he is the source of our salvation. He was wounded for our transgressions, and suffered death in the flesh, that he might bring us life and heal us—the physical and the spiritual coming together in one great emblem. This is perhaps why the spiritual healing of the Atonement itself is so often associated with the physical healing of the body. This helps us understand the appropriateness of Christ’s physical ministrations and healings coming as they do in the process of the spiritual healings and transformations of his first appearance. Thus he could say to the Nephites: “O all ye that are spared because ye were more righteous than they, will ye not now return unto me, and repent of your sins, and be converted, that I may heal you?” (3 Nephi 9:13).

Have ye any that are sick among you? Bring them hither. Have ye any that are lame, or blind, or halt, or maimed, or leprous, or that are withered, or that are deaf, or that are afflicted in any manner? Bring them hither and I will heal them, for I have compassion upon you; my bowels are filled with mercy. For I perceive that ye desire that I should show unto you what I have done unto your brethren at Jerusalem, for I see that your faith is sufficient that I should heal you. (3 Nephi 17:7–8)

This is neither a matter of satisfying curiosity nor a display of power for entertainment or wonder. This manifestation is—and this is the point I am trying to make—intimately connected with faith and salvation. The physical healing means nothing except as it is literally connected to the spiritual healing that the Savior has also brought about. This is certainly the sense in which the Savior instructs the leaders of his Nephite church regarding sinning and healing, as it applies to the unworthy member: “Nevertheless, ye shall not cast him out of your synagogues, or your places of worship, for unto such shall ye continue to minister; for ye know not but what they will return and repent, and come unto me with full purpose of heart, and *I shall heal them*; and ye shall be the means of bringing salvation unto them” (3 Nephi 18:32; emphasis added).

All of this complex pattern of meaning comes together most dramatically in the physical act of stepping forward and kneeling before the Savior, the experience of literally coming unto Christ, of touching and being touched. That the physical and the spiritual are intertwined should come as no surprise to members of a church that places extraordinary emphasis on ordinances—those small occasions and gestures that allow all of us to participate in the great drama of salvation. To collapse the whole matter of our purpose in this life into one symbolic act would bring us an experience very close to that of the Nephites’: “And they did all, both they who had been healed and they who were whole, bow down at his feet, and did worship him; and as many as could come for the multitude did kiss his feet, insomuch that they did bathe his feet with their tears” (3 Nephi 17:10). Isn’t this truly what it means to come unto Christ, to “close with him” (as the Puritans used to say), to be invited to come forth, and, because of the preparations of both the Savior and the saved, to be accepted, literally and completely *doing*—acting out what the words themselves describe?

Given the nature of ordinances and the ceremony-like experience of the Nephites, it seems to me such actions as these

are not just an experience for a privileged few, but a necessary part of the process of salvation. Touching the Savior and kissing his feet are succinct dramas of life, ceremonies that rehearse for us in a compact gesture the whole plan of salvation. They carry profound meanings and are meant as part of the process of engaging the gospel. That is why the body of Christ is so important to all believing Christians, why it became so central to the Nephites, and why it is so important, protected, and sacred for us now as represented in our observances and ordinances.

Given all this, it is especially interesting to catch echoes of several important words from the early part of Christ's first visit which are repeated near the end of the first day. Earlier he had invited the Nephites to

Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may . . . *feel* the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel. . . . And it came to pass that the multitude went forth, and . . . did *feel* the prints of the nails in his hands and in his feet; and this they did do, going forth one by one until they had all gone forth, and did *see* with their eyes and did *feel* with their hands, and did know of a surety and did bear record, that it was he, of whom it was written by the prophets, that should come. (3 Nephi 11:14–15; emphasis added)

But this experience is something more than an empirical demonstration of the Resurrection. For at the end of that first day's ministry, the Savior—after presenting and explaining the sacrament—repeats several of those key words, but this time generalizing the experience: “I have commanded that none of you should go away, but rather have commanded that ye should come unto me, that ye might *feel and see*; even so shall ye do unto the world.” (3 Nephi 18:25; emphasis added). Those words, “feel and see,” of course allude to the marvelous experience earlier that day when these people had come forward one by one. But clearly the implication of this repetition is that this experience is not exclusive to that first encounter, that just as those present had been commanded to come to the Savior and feel and see and know, even so should all the world have the opportunity to feel and see and know. And certainly, since God

is no respecter of persons, such experiences should indeed be available to all who observe the same protocols of faith and obedience that those Nephites did.

The question that comes to mind, however, is how can *the world* feel and see the resurrected Savior as did those whom Christ was addressing? We can understand that the world is to remember and obey the Savior, but how is it to have not only the intellectual, but also the physical experience implied in “feel and see”?

The answer lies in what was happening at the moment these words were spoken. The Savior had just administered the bread and wine to the multitude. When taken in the context of the occasion, in the presentation of the sacrament and the serious instruction from the Savior about the protocols of worthiness surrounding that ordinance, one senses the extraordinary significance that he intended the experience of the sacrament itself to be. Besides the elements of recollection, the ordinance also inferred an element of intimacy and fellowship with the Savior that went beyond a mere intellectual process. Indeed, it would seem that the Savior intended in *feel and see* the notion that, at least for those who are prepared, imbedded in that sacramental experience are the means of sensing and knowing, of feeling and seeing almost exactly the same as those physical means of knowing with which the Nephite faithful were first privileged earlier that day. Indeed the central focus and the grand pattern of 3 Nephi is the testament that Christ lives and that we can come unto him.

So the grand pattern that pertains here focuses on the resurrected Christ’s body—the physical presentation of that body. It is the factually and typologically *present* Christ that begins and ends that first day, beginning with the tactual sensing of the broken flesh of his hands and feet and side, and ending with the broken bread given in typological reference to that flesh. The dramatic actions and events put the present Christ at the center of all teachings and events so that in both small ways and large we are taught by precept and by dramatic example

what it means to come unto Christ, to confront and experience in actuality the physical emblems of the Atonement. Thus the experiencing of the body of Christ frames the day, encloses the dramatic action of those initial teachings and events in an impressive way, and focuses and dramatizes the doctrine that all are to come unto Christ and be saved.

The point is that 3 Nephi both teaches and shows; it presents us with precepts and doctrines which are also illustrated and elaborated in experiences, practices, ceremonies, and ordinances which compliment, fulfill, and complete the verbal presentations and teachings. There is a remarkable connectedness in both the events and teachings of 3 Nephi. This central book in this Book of Books functions like a grand tapestry—a creation of extraordinarily beautiful and complex design that connects, reiterates, amplifies, and reflects over and over again the great messages of Christ's gospel: "Come unto me and be saved." These are not just a miscellaneous set of events in random order, but a logical sequence of experience that teaches us by precept, as in the Sermon on the Mount, and shows us by example how to enter the gate and move along the way to Christ. It is a reenactment of the *Pilgrim's Progress* in coming from the destruction, darkness, and chaos of the world to the peace, light, and order that emanate from the presence of the physical Savior. In many ways this is the fulfillment of the type of the Christian journey, as those present both metaphorically and literally came "unto Christ," making the occasion an ordinance-like dramatization of their own relationship with the risen Lord.

I can't help but wonder if those fortunate Nephites, as they approached the risen Lord, thrilled as they perhaps consciously realized the coming together of the metaphorical and the literal. They had read the figure of speech in their own prophet Amaleki's injunction, "I would that ye should *come unto Christ*, who is the Holy One of Israel, and partake of his salvation, and the power of his redemption. Yea, come unto him, and offer your whole souls as an offering unto him" (Omni 1:26;

emphasis added). Now they were in fact invited to “Come forth unto me” (3 Nephi 11:14). The Savior’s sacrifice was visibly represented in his wounded body. And touching those marks with their hands, surely they pledged “their whole souls as an offering unto Him,” their sacrifice of the heart and spirit and bowed body—their whole self—literally conjoined in that moment of touching with his sacrifice of his whole godly self for them.

But to return to the beginning question, if this intimate engagement with the Savior is so significant, how is that done? For the Nephites it was obvious and spontaneous: he was there, they could “close with him” by seeing, feeling, knowing. But what about us? What *did* Christ intend when he said “that they may feel and see” for other generations of worshippers? What ceremonial means are available to us that we too might participate? The answer, of course, lies in the experience of the sacrament.

Two things help us understand that this was the Savior’s intent. First is the location of the sacramental experience at the very end of this crescendo of spiritual outpouring of that initial day’s worship. We have already discussed framing experiences and the ordering of events in 3 Nephi. It would not be unreasonable then to expect that the dramatic presentation of Christ’s physical self at the beginning of the day should have some parallel event at the conclusion of that day, some culminating experience which could gather up and reflect all that had taken place. The order and organization of the chapters would suggest that this is exactly what the Savior intended. We can see too why he would be so careful that the unworthy not misunderstand the profound significance of that ceremony and why it should be kept sacred. In addition, we can see why beginning the next day the sacrament should stand at a point of time generally parallel with his appearance on the first day.

But even more important is the Savior’s clear association of his body with the sacramental bread and wine. The level of experience inferred here is certainly not to be confused with

transubstantiation, but neither is it a mere reminder. Christ obviously has something more in mind than that. What Christ is doing here is offering to all his Church, then and now, the same opportunity for spiritual experiences. He intended the experience of the sacramental emblems to carry every bit of the spiritual potentiality of his own presence. As the Apostle John records, this is what gives such disturbing potency to Christ's teachings to the recently fed multitude regarding the experiential intention of his own flesh (John 6:28–41).

Let me quote at length a passage from John's Gospel which reminds us of the Lord's conflation of his own body with the emblematic bread:

Then said they unto him, What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?

Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.

They said therefore unto him, What sign showest thou then, that we may see, and believe thee? what dost thou work?

Our fathers did eat manna in the desert; as it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat.

Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven.

For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world.

Then said they unto him, Lord, evermore give us this bread.

And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst. . . .

And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day.

The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, I am the bread which came down from heaven. (6:28, 35, 40–41)

The point of all this is that feeling and seeing are essential elements of the Christian experience, that the ordinance of the sacrament is in many ways a confirming experience that can bring the true worshipper into an intimate relationship with the Savior. Thus we can in that process put behind us chaos,

darkness, destruction, separation, doubt, and death, and act out in important ceremonial representations our own coming into the divine presence and the concomitant experience of order, light, unity, peace, and the true love of Christ.

The invitation is still there, each time we approach the sacramental experience. If we will in fact remember the real blood and the real body as we partake of the real emblems, we can, if we too are worthy, have the same real spiritual blessings those surviving Nephites enjoyed. That is at least the implication of the Lord's promise to the struggling believers who opened our own dispensation:

Therefore, fear not, little flock; do good; let earth and hell combine against you, for if ye are built upon my rock, they cannot prevail. Behold, I do not condemn you; go your ways and sin no more; perform with soberness the work which I have commanded you. Look unto me in every thought; doubt not, fear not. Behold the wounds which pierced my side, and also the prints of the nails in my hands and feet; be faithful, keep my commandments, and ye shall inherit the kingdom of heaven. Amen. (D&C 6:34–37)