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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): 25-39



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Robert J. Matthews

As this dispensation progresses, the Book of Mormon will continue to play an ever-increasing role and multiply its influence in the Church. As developments continue to occur on earth, and more of Israel is gathered, and nations tumble, and governments change, we will understand more perfectly the prophecies in the Book of Mormon and the testimony that it gives of the work of Jesus Christ. I have a testimony and feel good inside when I read the Book of Mormon. What I have written in this paper are my own views, but they are rooted in the contents of 3 Nephi.

President Ezra Taft Benson had this to say about the importance of the Book of Mormon:

I would like to speak about one of the most significant gifts given to the world in modern times. The gift I am thinking of is more important than any of the inventions that have come out of the industrial and technological revolutions. This is a gift of greater value to mankind than even the many wonderful advances we have seen in modern medicine. It is of greater worth to mankind than the development of flight or space travel. I speak of the gift of the Book of Mormon. (51)

Our topic in this chapter is “Jesus the Savior in 3 Nephi.” What Jesus says and what he does should be of utmost importance to us. As we read the Book of Mormon from the beginning, we find ourselves becoming eager and excited for the birth of the Savior to occur and for him to visit the Western Hemisphere.

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The prophet Alma, speaking to the members of the church in the valley of Gideon about 83 years before the birth of Jesus, dramatically declared that the Savior would soon make his appearance:

For behold, I say unto you there be many things to come; and behold, there is one thing which is of more importance than they all—for behold, the time is not far distant that the Redeemer liveth and cometh among his people. . . .

And behold, he shall be born of Mary, at Jerusalem which is the land of our forefathers, she being a virgin, a precious and chosen vessel, who shall be overshadowed and conceive by the power of the Holy Ghost, and bring forth a son, yea, even the Son of God.

And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people.

And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities.

Now the Spirit knoweth all things; nevertheless the Son of God suffereth according to the flesh that he might take upon him the sins of his people, that he might blot out their transgressions according to the power of his deliverance; and now behold, this is the testimony which is in me. (Alma 7:7, 10–13)

Many of the Nephites wanted to know more about when Jesus would come to them:

And many of the people did inquire concerning the place where the Son of God should come; and they were taught that he would appear unto them after his resurrection; and this the people did hear with great joy and gladness. (Alma 16:20)

It would have been a great privilege and blessing to be one of those who literally saw the resurrected Savior make his appearance. Mormon writes of this:

And it came to pass that in the ending of the thirty and fourth year, behold, I will show unto you that the people of Nephi who were spared, and also those who had been called Lamanites, who had been spared, did have great favors shown unto them, and great blessings poured out upon their heads, insomuch that soon after the ascension of Christ into heaven he did truly manifest himself unto them—

showing his body unto them, and ministering unto them. (3 Nephi 10:18–19)

Many of these people had seen the signs of Christ's birth 33 years earlier, and everyone had recently seen the signs of his death. They had survived the three hours of fierce storm, the winds, the awful shaking of the earth, the terrible tempest, the lightning, and the noises that would accompany such tumult, the crashing down of buildings, the shearing of great rocks, and the tumbling of mountains and inevitable landslides. With the ground underneath their feet shifting so sharply, all of this would have made it difficult or impossible to stand. And they had also endured three days of a thick vapor of darkness and had heard the fearful moanings, groanings, shriekings, and howlings of hundreds of thousands of human beings, many of whom were being crushed and maimed and broken in body. The animals also must have added to the noise and confusion. And there would have been not only the physical pain, but also an enormous amount of emotional stress.

These same people also heard the voice of the Lord himself speaking to them in the darkness, declaring that all this had happened because of wickedness (3 Nephi 9, 10). They also heard the Father's own marvelous, penetrating voice introducing the Son as he descended from the sky and stood before them (3 Nephi 11:1–7).

Those who survived the tumult and witnessed these events were the more righteous ones. The wicked were slain in the destruction (3 Nephi 9:12–13; 10:12–13). Survivors were conditioned and prepared for the appearance of the Son of God among them. After all these things had happened to them, they could not ever be casual or indifferent about the gospel of Jesus Christ and the true purposes of life. They were ready to see, hear, and participate in the personal ministry of Jesus, their Lord and Redeemer.

This strenuous conditioning reminds us of the time when the Lord descended on Mount Sinai with fire, and smoke, and

thunder, and the shaking of the earth. So frightened were the children of Israel that they fled from the scene:

And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off. And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die. And Moses said unto the people, Fear not: for God is come to prove you, and that his fear may be before your faces, that ye sin not. And the people stood afar off, and Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was. And the Lord said unto Moses, Thus thou shalt say unto the children of Israel, Ye have seen that I have talked with you from heaven. (Ex 20:18–22)

As startling as this occurrence at Sinai was, it provides only a hint of the far more widespread, extended destruction in America as told in 3 Nephi.

When I read of the Savior's glorious ministry in America, I think of the contrast to his mortal ministry among the Jews in the Holy Land. There the Son of God himself, the Creator of the earth, the God of Israel, walked and talked and ate among the people. But most of those Jewish people were not prepared and conditioned, neither by cataclysmic tumult nor by obedience to the gospel, so they generally did not appreciate who Jesus was or how great their opportunities were in having him among them day by day.

When the woman at Jacob's well in Samaria, in questioning unbelief, asked Jesus if he were greater than the patriarch Jacob, she did not at that moment realize who he was. She thought he might be a prophet. He explained that he was even more than a prophet, he was the Messiah (John 4). The Jewish rulers mockingly asked Jesus if he thought he was greater than Abraham or the old prophets. He replied that he was indeed greater than they, and that, in effect, he had made Abraham's day (John 8). Jesus told the unbelieving Jews that they did not appreciate him, nor did they realize how great their opportunities were to be able to see and hear and talk with him daily. He reminded them that the city of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah, but "behold, a greater than Jonah is here" (Luke 11:30–32). He reminded

them also that the Queen of Sheba came a great distance to hear the wisdom of Solomon, but “behold, a greater than Solomon is here” (Luke 11:31). Jesus told them that many righteous prophets for ages past had desired to see and to hear him in person but had not been so blessed (Matt 13:16–17). Yet there he was in the flesh, living among them, and most of the Jews did not understand the importance of the situation.

However, as we have already noted, the Nephites and Lamanites in America who survived the cleansing process because of their righteousness were much more prepared and conditioned and ready to receive their Lord and Savior. As a consequence, the Book of Mormon people received teachings, blessings, and experiences that far exceeded those given the Jews:

And it came to pass that he went again a little way off and prayed unto the Father; and tongue cannot speak the words which he prayed, neither can be written by man the words which he prayed. And the multitude did hear and do bear record; and their hearts were open and they did understand in their hearts the words which he prayed. Nevertheless, so great and marvelous were the words which he prayed that they cannot be written, neither can they be uttered by man. And it came to pass that when Jesus had made an end of praying he came again to the disciples, and said unto them: So great faith have I never seen among all the Jews; wherefore I could not show unto them so great miracles, because of their unbelief. Verily I say unto you, there are none of them that have seen so great things as ye have seen; neither have they heard so great things as ye have heard. (3 Nephi 19:31–36)

This greater ability of the Nephites to receive the gospel is shown also in the fact that in the New Testament there are about forty parables which Jesus used because so many of the Jews were slow to perceive spiritual things, whereas in 3 Nephi Jesus used no parables among the Nephites because he was able to give them the gospel in direct and plainly spoken words. Jesus used parables because of the hard-heartedness of the people. Please note his explanation to the Jewish rulers as to *why* he sometimes spoke in parables to the Jews: “And, again, hear

another parable; for unto you that believe not, I speak in parables; that your unrighteousness may be rewarded unto you” (JST Matt 21:34).

Third Nephi records a public demonstration by Jesus of his actual, physical, bodily resurrection from the dead. The resurrection is taught in the New Testament but on a smaller scale. In America 2,500 persons, one-by-one, saw and felt the resurrected body of the Savior and heard him speak. This is in harmony with a revelation that had been given to Enoch, who 3,000 years before had been told that a record (the Book of Mormon) would come out of the ground in the last days “to bear testimony of [the] Only Begotten; his resurrection from the dead; yea and also the resurrection of all men” (Moses 7:62). The Savior’s ministry among the Nephites certainly attests to his bodily resurrection:

Behold, I am Jesus Christ, whom the prophets testified shall come into the world.

And behold, I am the light and the life of the world; and I have drunk out of that bitter cup which the Father hath given me, and have glorified the Father in taking upon me the sins of the world, in the which I have suffered the will of the Father in all things from the beginning.

And it came to pass that when Jesus had spoken these words the whole multitude fell to the earth; for they remembered that it had been prophesied among them that Christ should show himself unto them after his ascension into heaven.

And it came to pass that the Lord spake unto them saying:

Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also 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 the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world.

And it came to pass that the multitude went forth, and thrust their hands into his side, 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.

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. (3 Nephi 11:10–17)

After visiting the Nephites, Jesus went to another Israelite group, the lost ten tribes, to show them his body (3 Nephi 16:1–3; 17:4). Their record will no doubt contain a “showing” similar to that which is in the Book of Mormon.

The realization of Jesus’ visit to ancient America, ministering among a branch of the house of Israel, broadens our understanding of the work of Jesus Christ. Most of the world knows nothing of Jesus. Many millions of Christians know of his ministry among the Jews as recorded in the New Testament. Only a few million, the Latter-day Saints, know that Jesus also ministered to the ancient Americans, and also to the ten tribes, showing his resurrected body to them in ways that cannot be misunderstood.

Third Nephi offers greater insight into the activity and scope of Jesus’ work than that found in the New Testament alone. When we get the record of the ten tribes, our understanding will expand further, and we will comprehend even better than we do now that Jesus is not an absentee landlord. He is the Savior of the whole world. He commanded that all of these visits be recorded as multiple testaments for future generations to read (2 Nephi 29:11).

A preliminary scanning of Jesus’ teachings in 3 Nephi reveals at least the following 19 subjects: (1) he died and was resurrected; (2) he is the God of Israel and of the whole earth; (3) he delivered a Sermon at Bountiful similar to the Sermon on the Mount; (4) he emphatically declared that he was sent by the Father, who told him what to teach and what not to teach; (5) he taught baptism by water and reception of the Holy Ghost; (6) he had fulfilled the law of Moses; (7) he said that all the prophecies that have not been fulfilled will be fulfilled; (8) he reaffirmed the covenant made with Abraham and talked of the gathering of Israel in the last days, including the Jews, ten tribes and the Nephites/Lamanites; (9) he said that the Jews will gather

to Jerusalem; (10) the Western Hemisphere is for the descendants of Joseph; (11) a New Jerusalem will be built on this land; (12) he instituted the sacrament and taught that we must endure to the end; (13) he quoted two chapters of Malachi; (14) he quoted numerous passages from Isaiah and commanded the people to search the words of Isaiah; (15) he explained what the name of the Church should be; (16) he commanded that an omission in the record be filled in; (17) he declared that he is the prophet spoken of by Moses; (18) he gave a detailed definition of the “gospel”; (19) and he expounded all scripture “in one,” (that is, he put it all together, the “big picture”) declaring that he is the law, the light, and the life of the world. In addition, he performed many miracles, including raising a man from the dead.

I now want to discuss some important doctrinal topics that Jesus presented to the Nephites that far exceed in plainness and clarity anything that is found in the New Testament on these topics. The first has to do with some particular privileges that are associated with the house of Israel. I mean the literal lineage of Israel—those who are of Israel by blood descent—direct offspring, genealogically, according to the flesh.

We are all familiar with Jesus’ statement to the Jews, recorded in John 10:16, in which he made reference to “other sheep” who were not Jews. These “other sheep” are generally identified today by non-LDS scholars as referring to the Gentiles. Many commentaries produced by Catholic and Protestant writers identify the “other sheep” as Gentiles (Anchor Bible 29:396; Bruce 200; Dummelow 792; Interpreter’s Bible 8:626–27).

The Jews to whom Jesus spoke also thought he was referring to the Gentiles. It seems as though no one, not even his disciples, understood. Jesus gave a detailed explanation of this to the Twelve whom he has chosen in America:

And behold, this is the land of your inheritance; and the Father hath given it unto you.

And not at any time hath the Father given me commandment that I should tell it unto your brethren at Jerusalem.

Neither at any time hath the Father given me commandment that I should tell unto them concerning the other tribes of the house of Israel, whom the Father hath led away out of the land.

This much did the Father command me, that I should tell unto them:

That other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.

And now, because of stiffneckedness and unbelief they understood not my word; therefore I was commanded to say no more of the Father concerning this thing unto them.

But, verily, I say unto you that the Father hath commanded me, and I tell it unto you, that ye were separated from among them because of their iniquity; therefore it is because of their iniquity that they know not of you.

And verily, I say unto you again that the other tribes hath the Father separated from them; and it is because of their iniquity that they know not of them.

And verily I say unto you that ye are they of whom I said: Other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.

And they understood me not for they supposed it had been the Gentiles; for they understood not that the Gentiles should be converted through their preaching.

And they [the Jews] understood me not that I said they shall hear my voice; and they understood me not that the Gentiles should not at any time hear my voice—that I should not manifest myself unto them save it were by the Holy Ghost.

But behold, ye have both heard my voice, and seen me; and ye are my sheep, and ye are numbered among those whom the Father hath given me. (3 Nephi 15:13–24)

In addition to stating that the Nephites were the “other sheep” (v 21), Jesus explains why the “other sheep” could not be Gentiles. He indicates that if the Jews, or anyone else, including those who write commentaries, knew the rules, they would know that the other sheep must of necessity be Israelites, for “the Gentiles should not at any time hear [his] voice” or see the resurrected Christ in person as a group. I take that explanation to mean that an experience such as is recorded in 3 Nephi where the resurrected Savior ministers among multitudes, and

personally teaches them, *will* only, and *can* only occur among those who are Israelites.

This explanation comes directly from the mouth of Jesus and was intended to teach both them and us something we need to know about the importance of Israel. The Savior's explanation also clarifies such statements as Matthew 15:24, wherein Jesus said, "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel," and also 1 Nephi 10:11, which reads that after his resurrection, Jesus would "make himself manifest, by the Holy Ghost, unto the Gentiles." That is, he would visit them through the Holy Ghost only, not personally.

In March 1978, a prominent Lutheran minister participated in a symposium on the Brigham Young University campus. He had accepted the task of comparing the Savior's sermon in 3 Nephi with the Sermon on the Mount found in the book of Matthew. By the tools and procedures of textual criticism, he discovered several interesting differences between these two sermons. He gave an astute and perceptive analysis. He said that compared to the New Testament, 3 Nephi is much clearer, the Savior's teachings are more precise; they are stronger, bolder, and offer considerably more information than can be gained from the New Testament. He found also that the personality of Jesus is more commanding in 3 Nephi than in the New Testament. He noted that in the New Testament Jesus speaks as a teacher, but in 3 Nephi he speaks as a god.

As I listened, I thought it was remarkable that he had recognized these things, and I supposed that he was speaking with favor toward the Nephite account. However, as he continued, he tried to discredit the Book of Mormon by saying that new religions and cults always have an insatiable thirst for answers and for knowledge, whereas spiritual maturity brings a more ascetic view. He preferred the New Testament to 3 Nephi because it was not so definitive and allowed him more choice of interpretation. He acknowledged that the New Testament was less clear, and less dramatic, but felt that was the beauty of it. It did not seem to occur to him that the New Testament had

suffered at the hands of copyists, translators, and textual critics and so was now only a shadow of its former self.

It was a rewarding experience for the minister himself to visit the campus of BYU and to make this careful study of 3 Nephi. It was also a valuable experience for us to listen to him. He brought to our attention some points of comparison that many of us had not noticed in such detail before. My feeling then was the same as it is now: because he approached the study of scripture intellectually, and not by the Spirit, he found the details but missed the message. Some prefer uncertainty and lack of clarity to light, knowledge, and information, but I am thankful for the Spirit, and style, and conviction of the Book of Mormon (see Stendahl 139–54).

The teachings of Jesus in 3 Nephi leave no doubt as to who Jesus is and what he requires of us if we want to be saved. Jesus said plainly that he is the God of Israel and the God of the whole earth. He demonstrated unmistakably that he had been slain and had risen from the dead and that he had the body with the wounds from the nails and the spear to prove it.

At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament, Matthew added the comment that “the people were astonished” because Jesus had spoken “as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Matt 7:28–29). A corresponding sentence is not found in 3 Nephi. However, there is, right at that point, a lengthy statement by Jesus himself about his authority:

Behold, I say unto you that the law is fulfilled that was given unto Moses. Behold I am he that gave the law and I am he who covenanted with my people Israel; therefore, the law in me is fulfilled, for I have come to fulfil the law; therefore it hath an end. Behold, I do not destroy the prophets, for as many as have not been fulfilled in me, verily I say unto you, shall all be fulfilled. And because I said unto you that old things have passed away, I do not destroy that which hath been spoken concerning things which are to come. For behold, the covenant which I have made with my people is not all fulfilled; but the law which was given unto Moses hath an end in me. Behold, I am the law, and the light. Look unto me, and endure to the end, and ye shall live; for unto him that endureth to the end will I give eternal life. Behold, I have given unto you the commandments; therefore

keep my commandments. And this is the law and the prophets, for they truly testified of me. (3 Nephi 15:4–10)

As we read through 3 Nephi, we find many definite statements from Jesus declaring his authority and his godhood. He has authority from the Father to speak, to give commandments, to choose officers in the Church, and to give salvation to whom he will. He speaks of “my” commandments, “my” church, “my” gospel, “my” covenant, and “my” people. Jesus requires that everyone who wants to be saved be baptized in water, by immersion, and he wants no disputes about it (11:22–28). He instituted the sacrament among the Nephites and explained what it represents and who should partake and who should not (3 Nephi 18). He said that he himself is the light and the example that we should look to and which we should hold up unto the world (v 24).

In 3 Nephi Jesus specifically discusses the future of the house of Israel. He commanded that we search and study the words of Isaiah, so as to come to an understanding of the plans and purposes of God in this earth, because Isaiah said a great deal about the house of Israel and the Gentiles. Here is Jesus’ statement:

And now, behold I say unto you, that ye ought to search these things. Yea, a commandment I give unto you that ye search these things diligently; for great are the words of Isaiah. For surely he spake as touching all things concerning my people which are of the house of Israel; therefore it must needs be that he must speak also to the Gentiles. And all things that he spake have been and shall be, even according to the words which he spake. (3 Nephi 23:1–3)

Jesus spent considerable time teaching the Nephites about the importance of the covenants that had been made with Abraham, and with Israel, and the future developments that will come among the house of Israel because of those covenants. He spoke in 3 Nephi about the Jews, the lost tribes, and also about the promises that have been given the Nephites and Lamanites because they are descendants of Joseph. He said that these promises will be fulfilled and come to fruition in the last days.

The teachings of Jesus that focus on the house of Israel are found in 3 Nephi chapters 15–17 and 20–23, about eleven pages of text. We can assume, from the volume of instruction, that Jesus considers this subject a very important one. In these chapters Jesus says things such as: the Nephites “are a remnant of the house of Joseph” (15:12); “and behold, ye are the children of the prophets; and ye are of the house of Israel; and ye are of the covenant which the Father made with your fathers . . . with Abraham” (20:25–27); “I will remember the covenant which I have made with my people” (v 29); and “my people shall know my name” (v 39).

Jesus prophesied that when the Book of Mormon would come forth in the last days, it would be a sign that the covenants to Israel are being literally fulfilled. He said:

And then shall the work of the Father commence at that day, even when this gospel shall be preached among the remnant of this people. Verily I say unto you, at that day shall the work of the Father commence among all the dispersed of my people, yea, even the tribes which have been lost, which the Father hath led away out of Jerusalem. Yea, the work shall commence among all the dispersed of my people, with the Father to prepare the way whereby they may come unto me, that they may call on the Father in my name. Yea, and then shall the work commence, with the Father among all nations in preparing the way whereby this people may be gathered home to the land of their inheritance. (3 Nephi 21:26–28)

The prophet Mormon adds these words of explanation and summary:

And now behold, I say unto you that when the Lord shall see fit, in his wisdom, that these sayings [the Book of Mormon] shall come unto the Gentiles according to his word, then ye may know that the covenant which the Father hath made with the children of Israel, concerning their restoration to the lands of their inheritance, is already beginning to be fulfilled.

And ye may know that the words of the Lord, which have been spoken by the holy prophets, shall all be fulfilled; and ye need not say that the Lord delays his coming unto the children of Israel.

And ye need not imagine in your hearts that the words which have been spoken are vain, for behold, the Lord will remember his covenant which he hath made unto his people of the house of Israel.

Yea, and ye need not any longer hiss, nor spurn, nor make game of the Jews, nor any of the remnant of the house of Israel; for behold, the Lord remembereth his covenant unto them, and he will do unto them according to that which he hath sworn.

Therefore ye need not suppose that ye can turn the right hand of the Lord unto the left, that he may not execute judgment unto the fulfilling of the covenant which he hath made unto the house of Israel. (3 Nephi 29:1–3, 8–9)

I have emphasized these things about the house of Israel for three reasons. First, such emphasis is given to this subject in 3 Nephi. These statements are actually there, spoken by Jesus. And there are more of them than I have quoted here. Second, there seems to be a tendency today to neglect the importance of the covenant of Abraham and the role of the house of Israel. We often teach the gospel without mentioning the covenant of Abraham or the house of Israel, as though these covenants did not even exist. In the Book of Mormon, Jesus teaches us that the ancient covenants are as valid today as they were 4,000 years ago. I believe that they have something to do with the political events occurring in the world and also with our children and grandchildren traveling to various places of the earth, among war and revolution, to tell of the restoration of the gospel and of the Book of Mormon. These events are occurring before our very eyes. According to Jesus' own words, the covenants of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph are still important to the Father and to Jesus and should also be important to us. We cannot ignore eleven pages of 3 Nephi. And the third reason is that I have a conviction of the Spirit that the things which are said in the Book of Mormon about the house of Israel are true.

Isaiah and Nephi say that the Book of Mormon will whisper out of the ground as one "that hath a familiar spirit" (Isa 29:4; 2 Nephi 26:16). Certain Hebraisms and other old-world traces give the Book of Mormon a familiar echo to the Old Testament. But there is more than just language forms. When Jesus declares the restoration of Israel in the last days, and the building of the New Jerusalem, and the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant as he does in 3 Nephi, it carries a familiar spirit and ring of truth

into the hearts of those who are conversant with the promises which God has given to Israel and to the Gentiles and that are found in the Bible.

In closing, we turn again to President Ezra Taft Benson:

It is clear that Third Nephi contains some of the most moving and powerful passages in all scripture. It testifies of Jesus Christ, His prophets, and the doctrines of salvation. . . . What a blessing it would be if every family would read together Third Nephi, discuss its sacred contents, and then determine how they can liken it unto themselves and apply its teachings in their lives. Third Nephi is a book that should be read and read again. (60)

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