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The Mission of Jesus Christ— Ether 3 and 4

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Robert J. Matthews

The nature and purpose of all true scripture is to testify of Jesus Christ, and the Book of Mormon does that most generously and effectively. My topic will center primarily on Ether, chapter 3, which contains an account of a personal visit of the Lord Jesus Christ to the brother of Jared about 2,200 years before he (Christ) was born in the flesh. This event is entirely unknown outside of the Book of Mormon and thus no other people besides the Latter-day Saints have this information in their literature. The record not only tells of a magnificent manifestation, but interwoven in the story are several fundamental doctrines of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Tower of Babel

Christ visits the brother of Jared somewhere in the Near East about 2200 BC, a few years after the scattering and confusion that followed the destruction of the tower of Babel. The Bible gives an account of this tower in Genesis, chapter 11. The book of Ether is a record of one group, consisting of a few families, whose language was not confounded by God. This group, under the leadership of Jared and his brother, was led by the Lord away from the land of the tower and eventually brought to the Western Hemisphere. The brother of Jared was one of the greatest prophets of all time. The Book of Mormon does not disclose his name, but it was made known through a revelation to the Prophet Joseph Smith as Mahonri Moriancumer

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("Questions and Answers" 704–05). The visit of the Lord to the brother of Jared occurs about four years after the tower's destruction, and before his group embarks on the ocean trip to America. I feel that the best approach to discussing the Lord's visit to the brother of Jared is to read each verse and then comment upon it.

Revelation on the Top of the Mountain

I'll begin with Ether 3:1:

And it came to pass that the brother of Jared . . . went forth unto the mount, which they called the mount Shelem, because of its exceeding height, and did molten out of a rock sixteen small stones; and they were white and clear, even as transparent glass; and he did carry them in his hands upon the top of the mount, and cried again unto the Lord.

Interestingly the sixteen stones are described as being "clear, even as transparent glass." Although we do not know the exact date of the tower of Babel, it is commonly placed at about 2200 BC. We may wonder how early the art of glassworking was known. William S. Ellis, in the *National Geographic Magazine* for December 1993, reports that "the most reliable research places the invention of glass sometime in the third millennium before the birth of Christ, in Mesopotamia, or present-day Iraq and Syria" (43–44) and further "the earliest known glassmakers worked in Mesopotamia as far back as 2500 BC, crafting beads and other small objects to imitate precious stones" (44). Mesopotamia is the general area, and the date of 2500 BC indicates that glass may have been made as much as 300 years before the tower of Babel and, thus, substantiates the story of the brother of Jared. We do not need historical proof to confirm the record, yet it is interesting to see a bit of secular confirmation that it could have happened as the record said it did.

That the brother of Jared went to talk with the Lord at the top of mount Shelem, which was of exceeding height, is likewise interesting. High mountain peaks have often been the places where God has communed with his prophets. We have only to think of Mt. Sinai with Moses (Ex 19–20); the Mount of Transfiguration with Peter, James, and John (Matt 17); Enoch upon mount Simeon (Moses 7:2–4); Nephi receiving revelation on a high mountain (1 Nephi 11:1; 18:3); and still another mount known only to Moses (Moses 1:1, 42) to sense there

is a pattern in this thing. Each of these events occurred on separate mountains, but all were sites of unusual spiritual experiences in which the Lord was present. A dedicated temple is the usual house of the Lord—often called the mountain of the Lord’s house—and is the place where he communes with his servants, but in the absence of a temple, mountain peaks have been used. Perhaps God chooses such peaks because they have not been polluted by sinful man. (For a discussion of mountain tops as places where the Lord has appeared to his prophets see Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* 2:232–33.)

The Fall and the Atonement

It was upon the top of mount Shelem that the brother of Jared prayed to the Lord. We shall read from Ether 3:2:

Now behold, O Lord, and do not be angry with thy servant because of his weakness before thee; for we know that thou art holy and dwellest in the heavens, and that we are unworthy before thee; because of the fall our natures have become evil continually; nevertheless, O Lord, thou hast given us a commandment that we must call upon thee, that from thee we may receive according to our desires.

Several important theological concepts are involved in this verse: First is a statement regarding the character of the Lord, that he is holy and dwells in heaven. Second is a declaration that mankind is unworthy before the Lord, and the explanation that “because of the fall our natures have become evil continually.” The brother of Jared plainly declares that the fall of Adam has an effect on all mankind, making all of us mortal. This is the “natural man” concept taught elsewhere in the Book of Mormon, in the Bible, and in the Doctrine and Covenants. It is very evident that this great prophet had a knowledge of the Fall and of its effect on human nature. This concept is projected in Mosiah 3:19, saying that “the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam”; and in 1 Nephi 10:6, declaring that “all mankind were in a lost and in a fallen state, and ever would be save they should rely upon this Redeemer”; and Alma 22:13, 14, saying that because of the fall of man “he could not merit anything of himself” (see also Hel 14:14–16; Alma 42:2–14; D&C 1:18–20). Through Isaiah the Lord spoke of unregenerated man, saying: “For

my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa 55:8–9). Because of the Fall which has come upon every man, woman, and child, a Redeemer is absolutely necessary, and that Redeemer is Jesus Christ. No one can be saved without him.

A third theological tenet found in Ether 3:2 explains that the Lord is approachable through prayer, that he has commanded mankind to pray to him so that we may “receive according to our desires.” That we receive what we desire should be both a joy and a caution. This idea is frequently stated in the Book of Mormon, as in Alma 29:4; 41:5; and Jacob 4:15 wherein men have received both good and bad, “because they desired it.”

In the next two verses the brother of Jared pleads with the Lord to be merciful and have pity on the people:

And I know, O Lord, that thou hast all power, and can do whatsoever thou wilt for the benefit of man; therefore touch these stones, O lord, with thy finger, and prepare them that they may shine forth in darkness; and they shall shine forth unto us in the vessels which we have prepared, that we may have light while we shall cross the sea. Behold, O Lord, thou canst do this. We know that thou art able to show forth great power, which looks small unto the understanding of men. (Ether 3:4–5)

Note the further declaration regarding God’s character and potential, having “all power,” even “great power,” and being able to do whatsoever he wanted to benefit man. However, natural, fallen man is so far beneath the level of God, and understands so infinitesimally little about the works of the Lord, that even when the Lord shows forth great power they often fail to see the significance, and it “looks small” to them. I think Nephi had the same thing in mind when he wrote that what some esteem to be of great worth, both to the soul and body, others trample under their feet (1 Nephi 19:7). He also said:

I am left to mourn because of the unbelief, and the wickedness, and the ignorance, and the stiffneckedness of men; for they will not search knowledge, nor understand great knowledge, when it is given unto them in plainness, even as plain as word can be. (2 Nephi 32:7)

And Jacob said it like this:

O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God,

for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish. (2 Nephi 9:28)

Paul likewise was acquainted with this condition that is so prevalent among mankind, and he correctly stated that the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, neither *can* he know them, for they are discerned only by the Spirit. And being without the Spirit, the natural man sees the wisdom of God as foolishness (1 Cor 2:14). I think these passages convey precisely what the brother of Jared meant when he said that the work of God looks small to the understanding of men.

Absolute Reality of Spirit Matter

The record continues in Ether 3:6–10:

And it came to pass that when the brother of Jared had said these words, behold, the Lord stretched forth his hand and touched the stones one by one with his finger. And the veil was taken from off the eyes of the brother of Jared, and he saw the finger of the Lord; and it was as the finger of a man, like unto flesh and blood; and the brother of Jared fell down before the Lord, for he was struck with fear.

And the Lord saw that the brother of Jared had fallen to the earth; and the Lord said unto him: Arise, why hast thou fallen?

And he saith unto the Lord: I saw the finger of the Lord, and I feared lest he should smite me; for I knew not that the Lord had flesh and blood.

And the Lord said unto him: Because of thy faith thou hast seen that I shall take upon me flesh and blood; and never has man come before me with such exceeding faith as thou hast; for were it not so ye could not have seen my finger. Sawest thou more than this?

And he answered: Nay; Lord, show thyself unto me.

Among the fundamental doctrinal truths contained in the foregoing passage, we find that a spirit has the appearance of flesh and blood even though it is spirit material. We know from Doctrine and Covenants 129 that if the brother of Jared had tried to touch the finger of the Lord he could not have felt it, since mortals cannot physically feel a spirit body. The very fact that section 129 poses the physical handshake as a means of detecting the difference of a spirit from a resurrected body is evidence that a spirit has the appearance, if not the texture of a body, and cannot be differentiated by the eye alone. Secondly, because the brother of Jared had such great faith (exceeding

that of earlier prophets), he was able to see the Lord. Thirdly, this event demonstrates that a person must personally ask and seek to obtain spiritual blessings. At first the brother of Jared saw only the finger of the Lord. The Lord asked him if he saw more than this. Then the brother of Jared asked to see more. There is a principle at work here: the Lord was nurturing and nudging him along to the point where he would ask to see more—priming the pump, so to speak, until he finally says, “Lord, show thyself unto me” (v 10).

The Necessity of Commitment

The account continues in Ether 3:11–14:

And the Lord said unto him: Believest thou the words which I shall speak?

And he answered: Yea, Lord, I know that thou speakest the truth, for thou art a God of truth, and canst not lie.

And when he had said these words, behold, the Lord showed himself unto him, and said: Because thou knowest these things ye are redeemed from the fall; therefore, ye are brought back into my presence; therefore I show myself unto you.

Behold, I am he who was prepared from the foundation of the world to redeem my people. Behold, I am Jesus Christ. I am the Father and the Son. In me shall all mankind have life, and that eternally, even they who shall believe on my name; and they shall become my sons and my daughters.

We notice that the Lord tested the brother of Jared and got a commitment from him *before* he showed him more. This is seen in the words: “Believest thou the words which I shall speak?” This called forth the additional verbal affirmation that God is a God of truth who cannot lie. Having obtained the necessary commitment, the Lord then showed himself to the brother of Jared and told him he was redeemed from the Fall and brought back into the presence of the Lord. The Lord also identified himself as Jesus Christ, who had been prepared and appointed from the very beginning as the Redeemer.

Jesus Gives Eternal Life to Those Who Believe

A significant statement occurs at this juncture which deserves further comment because it has been reworded in our current edition from the way it read in previous editions. The Lord touched the sixteen stones, causing them to shine with visible light. In all editions

of the Book of Mormon from 1830, the Lord said in Ether 3:14, “In me shall all mankind have *light* and that eternally, even they who shall believe on my name; and they shall become my sons and my daughters.” This makes a marvelous metaphor since the topic of light started this whole episode, and having illuminated the stones, the Lord says that he is also the source of light to mankind. However, since 1981 the word *light* has been replaced with the word *life*. The statement now reads: “In me shall all mankind have *life*, and that eternally, even they who shall believe on my name; and they shall become my sons and my daughters.”

The change of wording from *light* to *life* was brought about in the following manner. During the preparation of the 1981 edition, it was brought to the attention of the Brethren that even though all printed editions of the Book of Mormon to this time had read *light*, the printer’s manuscript, from which the type was set for the first edition of the Book of Mormon, clearly said *life*. The Scriptures Publications Committee, consisting of three members of the Twelve, unanimously agreed that *life* was a stronger word than *light*, and since the manuscript read *life*, the correction should be made. An examination of the context also justifies this correction, for they who believe will become the sons and daughters of Christ. They are thus spiritually begotten by him and are given eternal life, which includes having eternal light, but is far, far greater.¹

Many Prophets Have Seen the Premortal Jesus

The narrative continues through Ether 3:15–16:

And never have I showed myself unto man whom I have created, for never has man believed in me as thou hast. Seest thou that ye are created after mine own image? Yea, even all men were created in the beginning after mine own image.

Behold, this body, which ye now behold, is the body of my spirit; and man have I created after the body of my spirit; and even as I appear unto thee to be in the spirit will I appear unto my people in the flesh.

¹ Some editions of the Book of Mormon published by the RLDS Church have used “life” for this passage.

Perhaps verse 15 should be noted with some explanation, since it seems to imply that the Lord had never appeared to man on this earth before that time, when in fact the scriptures record that he had appeared to Adam (D&C 107:54) and to Enoch (Moses 7:2–4, 28, 29) and to many other patriarchs (D&C 107:54), all of whom date earlier than the brother of Jared. This is not as much of a contradiction as may first appear, but it is a statement of degree. In an earlier appearance of the Lord to the brother of Jared recorded in Ether 2:14, the text precisely says that the Lord “stood in a cloud and talked with him.” The *cloud* was undoubtedly a necessary barrier to the clarity of the vision. Evidently what is meant in the statement we are discussing is that the brother of Jared on mount Shelem saw the body of the Lord in greater clarity and fuller detail than in the earlier vision and also more clearly than the earlier patriarchs had. This was apparently because of the greater faith which he possessed (see vv 9 and 15). (For a longer discussion of this subject see Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions* 2:123–26.)

Brother of Jared Sees All Things

We continue our reading with Ether 3:25–27:

And when the Lord had said these words, he showed unto the brother of Jared all the inhabitants of the earth which had been, and also all that would be; and he withheld them not from his sight, even unto the ends of the earth.

For he had said unto him in times before, that if he would believe in him that he could show unto him all things—it should be shown unto him; therefore the Lord could not withhold anything from him, for he knew that the Lord could show him all things.

And the Lord said unto him: Write these things and seal them up; and I will show them in mine own due time unto the children of men.

The striking contribution of these verses is that not only did the Lord manifest himself to the brother of Jared, but he also showed him all things pertaining to this earth: past, present, and future. A record of this was written by the brother of Jared, and was later translated by Mosiah (Mosiah 28:11–19). Moroni also engraved this record on the plates that we now call the *sealed portion* of the gold plates that the Prophet Joseph obtained from the Hill Cumorah. These sealed plates contain a record of the “very things that the brother of Jared saw” (Ether 4:4) and are identified as a revelation of all things from the

“beginning of the world to the ending thereof” (2 Nephi 27:7, 10). Several of the Lord’s prophets have seen similar visions of things from the beginning of the world to the end. This, no doubt, was the case with Adam, and Enoch, and Lehi, Nephi, Isaiah, John the Revelator, and Joseph Smith. Such was also the experience of the brother of Jared. The prophet Moroni said that “there never were greater things made manifest than those which were made manifest to the brother of Jared” (Ether 4:4). Moroni has given us only a very small part of the account in the book of Ether.

The Sealed Record Yet to be Available

The Lord was emphatic that the brother of Jared was to seal up his record of the visions he had received and not tell the people of his day, but he promised that they would be shown to future generations who had faith. In Ether 4:1–7, the prophet Moroni gives us some information on the subject:

And the Lord commanded the brother of Jared to go down out of the mount from the presence of the Lord, and write the things which he had seen; and they were forbidden to come unto the children of men until after that he should be lifted up upon the cross; and for this cause did king Mosiah keep them, that they should not come unto the world until after Christ should show himself unto his people.

And after Christ truly had showed himself unto his people he commanded that they should be made manifest.

And now, after that, they have all dwindled in unbelief; and there is none save it be the Lamanites, and they have rejected the gospel of Christ; therefore I [Moroni] am commanded that I should hide them up again in the earth.

Behold, I have written upon these plates the very things which the brother of Jared saw; and there never were greater things made manifest than those which were made manifest unto the brother of Jared.

Wherefore the Lord hath commanded me to write them; and I have written them. And he commanded me that I should seal them up; and he also hath commanded that I should seal up the interpretation thereof; wherefore I have sealed up the interpreters, according to the commandment of the Lord.

For the Lord said unto me: They shall not go forth unto the Gentiles until the day that they shall repent of their iniquity, and become clean before the Lord.

And in that day that they shall exercise faith in me, saith the Lord, even as the brother of Jared did, that they may become sanctified in me, then will I manifest unto them the things which the brother of Jared saw, even to the

unfolding unto them all my revelations, saith Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of the heavens and of the earth, and all things that in them are.

We see from the foregoing that the record of the brother of Jared was made known to the Nephites during that righteous period after the Savior ministered to them (see Ether 4:2). But when they fell into wickedness after some 200 years, the information was taken away from them and will only be made known again, through the sealed plates, when we are ready, which I suppose will be during the Millennium.

Summary

These few verses from Ether chapter 3 contain significant utterances about the reality of God, his character and power, and his benevolence. They also discuss the nature of man, his fallen status, and his weakness in comparison with God. That the Lord hears and answers prayer and responds to the desires and needs of his children is also illustrated in these passages. Furthermore, these verses put in unmistakable language the mission of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Redeemer of the world, and that mankind, in the beginning, was created in the same image and shape and likeness as Christ. These verses do not simply tell about Christ, but they contain the words of Jesus himself declaring his own identity and saving power. An additional and very important aspect of this chapter is the clear demonstration that a spirit body looks like a flesh and blood body. Finally we learn that the brother of Jared was redeemed from the Fall and granted a personal and very detailed vision of the Lord himself, with whom he conversed, and also he was shown all things pertaining to the past, present, and future of this earth and its inhabitants. We will have this complete record someday if and when we are worthy.

What is the value to us in knowing of these things that happened so long ago? I cannot speak for others, but when I read of the experiences of the brother of Jared there wells up within me a desire to have faith like he had and my testimony and love for the Lord increases. My soul "hungers" and wants to feast upon the same kind of spiritual food that the brother of Jared ate. Reading the brief account of the experiences of the brother of Jared is an appetizer which arouses a desire to someday have such an experience myself.

That promise is given to everyone when the time and conditions are right.

Surely, chapters 3 and 4 of Ether are two of the outstanding chapters of all sacred literature and are true to the scriptural purpose of testifying of Jesus Christ.

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