



BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL  
<http://bookofmormoncentral.org/>



Religious Studies Center  
<https://rsc.byu.edu/>

---

## Jacob: Prophet, Theologian, Historian

Author(s): Robert J. Matthews

Source: *A Book of Mormon Treasury: Gospel Insights from General Authorities and Religious Educators*

Published: Provo, UT; Religious Studies Center, 2003

Page(s): 173-191

---



The Religious Studies Center is collaborating with Book of Mormon Central to preserve and extend access to scholarly research on the Book of Mormon. Items are archived by the permission of the Religious Studies Center.

<https://rsc.byu.edu/>

— 11 —

JACOB: PROPHET,  
THEOLOGIAN, HISTORIAN

*Robert J. Matthews*

Inasmuch as all the doctrines that have been revealed since Adam have been communicated to us through the teachings of one prophet or another, I am honored and eager to present a paper on the life of one of the greatest of these, Jacob, son of Lehi. There have been few people in history who have possessed the combination of spirituality, intellectual capacity, judgment, literary ability, parentage, faith, and seership that Jacob did. He exhibited an inherent desire for righteousness. He was a plain-spoken man but used very descriptive language. With all these natural endowments, what an opportunity and advantage it was for him to have Lehi as a father and Nephi as an older brother to get him started right.

Our sources about Jacob consist of thirty-one pages in the Book of Mormon of Jacob's own words (thirteen in 2 Nephi; eighteen in the book of Jacob), plus eleven brief references to him by Nephi, Lehi, Enos, Alma, and Mormon (see 1 Nephi 18:7; 18:19; 2 Nephi 2:1–4; 5:6; 5:26; 11:1; 11:3; 31:1; Enos 1:1–3; Words of Mormon 1:3; Alma 3:6).

There have been but few writings in the Church giving biographical

---

*Robert J. Matthews, former dean of Religious Education, is an emeritus professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University.*

references to Jacob. In 1891 Elder George Reynolds offered a brief biographical sketch in his *Dictionary of the Book of Mormon*.<sup>1</sup> In 1966 I included a half-page entry on Jacob and a biographical note in my *Who's Who in the Book of Mormon*.<sup>2</sup> In October 1976, the *Ensign* magazine carried a short but informative article by C. Terry Warner.<sup>3</sup> And in 1981, the index to the new edition of the Book of Mormon offered a list of twenty-six well-documented statements about Jacob. I have benefited from each of these publications and have endeavored to include all that these previous works have offered. But beyond their separate contributions, I have tried to make this paper the most complete recitation on Jacob that I could, by basing it on the text of the Book of Mormon itself, and by avoiding unreasonable speculation. I have admired Jacob for more than forty years, and that admiration has increased with this study.

## OVERVIEW OF JACOB'S LIFE

Jacob is first mentioned in 1 Nephi 18:7 when Lehi's group was about to enter the ship on the Arabian coast to sail to the promised land. Nephi introduces Jacob in this manner: "And now, my father had begat two sons in the wilderness; the elder was called Jacob and the younger Joseph."

These two sons were born during the eight years Lehi's family journeyed in the wilderness (see 1 Nephi 17:4). We do not know the exact date of Jacob's birth, but we know it had to be within the first seven years of their journey in the wilderness, since Joseph was born after Jacob and was also born within the eight-year period. Since Lehi left Jerusalem in 600 B.C., Jacob had to have been born between 600 and 593 B.C.

Lehi's group spent an undetermined length of time at Bountiful while the ship was being built. This would likely take a year or two. If the ship set sail at about 590 B.C. and arrived in the promised land about 589 B.C., the boy Jacob could be not less than three nor more than ten years old at that time. There is, however, additional information that has a bearing on the date of Jacob's birth.

Nephi's record of his family's travels in the wilderness and of the

rebellions of Laman, Lemuel, and Ishmael's sons while voyaging at sea tells us that his "parents being stricken in years, and having suffered much grief because of their children . . . were brought down, yea, even upon their sickbeds" (1 Nephi 18:17). Nephi said Lehi and Sariah's sorrow was so great that it almost caused their deaths, and that "Jacob and Joseph also, being young, having need of much nourishment, were grieved because of the afflictions of their mother" (1 Nephi 18:18–19).

Lehi, recalling these trying times, especially those in the wilderness, said to Joseph, "Thou wast born in the wilderness of mine afflictions; yea, in the days of my greatest sorrow did thy mother bear thee" (2 Nephi 3:1). And to Jacob he said: "Thou art my first-born in the days of my tribulation in the wilderness. And behold, in thy childhood thou hast suffered afflictions and much sorrow, because of the rudeness of thy brethren. Nevertheless, Jacob, my first-born in the wilderness, thou knowest the greatness of God; and he shall consecrate thine afflictions for thy gain" (2 Nephi 2:1–2).

The tone of these verses suggests that certainly Jacob and possibly Joseph were old enough to remember their parents' suffering, the rebellion of Laman and Lemuel, and the goodness of Nephi while they were in the wilderness. Hence, they would not have been mere infants at the time all of this was happening. Such evidence argues for Jacob's having been born during the early part of the wilderness journey and therefore being at least seven and possibly as many as ten years old when they arrived in the promised land.

Lehi no doubt named his son Jacob in memory of the patriarch Jacob, father of the twelve tribes of Israel. It may well be that Lehi and Sariah, embarking on a journey toward a new promised land and having recently obtained the plates of brass, a record of the house of Israel, were impressed to name their new son after their great ancestor. In like manner we conclude that Lehi's next son, Joseph, was named in honor of Joseph of Egypt, who was also their direct ancestor and would have been spoken of often in the plates of brass (see 2 Nephi 3:3–4, 22).

All that we know about Jacob's life we have gleaned from the writings on the small plates of Nephi—the religious record. More detailed information would probably be found on the large plates of Nephi and

also in Lehi's record (see 1 Nephi 19:1–2; see also 1 Nephi 1:16–17; 6:1; 9:1–5), which Nephi says contains genealogical information “and the more part of all our proceedings in the wilderness.” I thus presume that the 116 pages of lost manuscript, which were a translation of Mormon's abridgment of the “Book of Lehi” (see heading of D&C 3), would contain considerably more about the boyhood of Jacob than does our present record.

After the death of Father Lehi in the promised land, the Lord warned Nephi to separate himself from the families of his elder brothers and to take those people with him who believed in the revelations of God. Nephi speaks of this event: “Wherefore, it came to pass that I, Nephi, did take my family, and also Zoram and his family, and Sam, mine elder brother and his family, and Jacob and Joseph, my younger brethren, and also my sisters, and all those who would go with me. And all those who would go with me were those who believed in the warnings and the revelations of God” (2 Nephi 5:6).

We know from an earlier passage (see 1 Nephi 16:7) that Laman, Lemuel, Sam, Nephi, and Zoram each married daughters of Ishmael, and it is interesting that now, a decade or so later, each of them is said to have “his family,” but Jacob and Joseph are referred to only in the singular with no mention of a family. We know but little about when Jacob was married, to whom, or the manner of his family. We are informed that he did indeed have a family and that he taught them many times in the “nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Enos 1:1) and often spoke to them of “eternal life, and the joy of the saints” (Enos 1:3). We also know that he had a righteous son named Enos (see Jacob 7:27; Enos 1:1–3). A posterity is also shown in the prophetic instruction to Jacob that the small plates would be handed down through his seed from generation to generation (see Jacob 1:3).

As to how old he got or when he eventually died, we do not have much detail. The only certain date we have in the mature years of Jacob's life is found in Jacob 1:1, where he indicates that fifty-five “years had passed away from the time that Lehi left Jerusalem.” This would be 545 B.C. and is near the time when Jacob became the keeper of the records and the spiritual leader of his people. This seems to be very near

the time of Nephi's death (see Jacob 1:9–12; 2:1). Jacob would have been at least fifty years old at the time. All the events recorded in the book of Jacob happened after that, which as we will see took a number of years. When Jacob died, he was therefore “some years” past fifty (see Jacob 7:1).

## WRITING THE BOOK OF JACOB

Nephi had been both the spiritual and secular leader. But Jacob informs us that when Nephi became old he separated the responsibilities of the Church and the secular government and conferred each upon a different person. To Jacob he gave the sacred records known as the small plates. Although the report does not specifically say it, I assume that Jacob was also appointed at that time to succeed Nephi as the spiritual leader. Nephi conferred the responsibility of the civil government upon a man who became known among the people as second Nephi (see Jacob 1:1–11).

Nephi instructed Jacob that he should write upon the small plates only those things that were “most precious” such as “preaching which was sacred, or revelation which was great, or prophesying,” and that he should touch but lightly on the history of the people (Jacob 1:2–4). That type of commandment required that Jacob wait for a while before writing upon the plates, since it calls for time to make comparisons and gain perspective. We can discern that Jacob waited for some length of time after he was given the records before he began writing, for in his first chapter he speaks of the “reigns of the kings” after Nephi, and also tells us that the successors to Nephi had taken the title of second, and then third Nephi and so forth (see Jacob 1:9–11; see also Jacob 3:13). He would not have been able to make such a glance into the past had he written immediately.

The book of Jacob consists of three main sections. The first is Jacob 1:1 through 3:14, which contains a lengthy sermon by Jacob against the materialistic influence of riches and pride, and words against the grosser crime of immorality. Jacob concludes this portion of the book with these words: “These plates are called the plates of Jacob, and they

were made by the hand of Nephi. And I make an end of speaking these words" (Jacob 3:14).

The second section is Jacob 4–6 and includes the marvelous allegory of Zenos. This section concludes with Jacob's farewell to his people until they meet at the "pleasing bar of God" (Jacob 6:13). It seems that Jacob had intended this "farewell" to be the end of his book.

The third and final section, Jacob 7, was written "some years" (Jacob 7:1) later than the other two parts and tells of a man named Sherem, who was an anti-Christ. Apparently Jacob's encounter with Sherem was so important that he added it to his record, even though it was some years after he had thought it was finished. Jacob concludes with an observation that his writing "has been small" (Jacob 7:27), which probably means small in comparison to the longer books of 1 and 2 Nephi.

The closing words of Jacob are these:

"And it came to pass that I, Jacob, began to be old; and the record of this people being kept on the other plates of Nephi, wherefore, I conclude this record, declaring that I have written according to the best of my knowledge, by saying that the time passed away with us, and also our lives passed away like as it were unto us a dream, we being a lonesome and a solemn people, wanderers, cast out from Jerusalem, born in tribulation, in a wilderness, and hated of our brethren, which caused wars and contentions; wherefore, we did mourn out our days.

"And I, Jacob, saw that I must soon go down to my grave; wherefore, I said unto my son Enos: Take these plates. And I told him the things which my brother Nephi had commanded me, and he promised obedience unto the commands. And I make an end of my writing upon these plates, which writing has been small; and to the reader I bid farewell, hoping that many of my brethren may read my words. Brethren, adieu" (Jacob 7:26–27).

## MULTIPLE WRITINGS AND COPIES

Understanding that Jacob wrote on the small plates over a period of years with great care and selection leads to another important conclusion about his writing pattern and probably that of other Nephite

prophets. A casual reader may think that what was engraved on the plates was all the writing the prophets did. However, Jacob makes an observation about the difficulty of engraving on metal compared to writing on other material:

“Now behold, it came to pass that I, Jacob, having ministered much unto my people in word, (and I cannot write but a little of my words, because of the difficulty of engraving our words upon plates) and we know that the things which we write upon plates must remain;

“But whatsoever things we write upon anything save it be upon plates must perish and vanish away; but we can write a few words upon plates, which will give our children, and also our beloved brethren, a small degree of knowledge concerning us, or concerning their fathers—

“Now in this thing we do rejoice; and we labor diligently to engraven these words upon plates, hoping that our beloved brethren and our children will receive them with thankful hearts” (Jacob 4:1–3).

We see from this explanation that the Nephites did write upon other materials, probably leather or paper. I would conclude therefore that what Jacob finally engraved on metal plates would rarely, if ever, be his first draft of a document.

## JACOB'S MINISTRY

When Jacob became the chief spiritual leader and prophet of the Nephites at about 545 B.C., he had already been tried, tested, and proven worthy, and for twenty to thirty years had been a vigorous preacher of righteousness under Nephi's leadership. At an early age Jacob had a vision of the Savior. In Lehi's blessing to Jacob, recorded in 2 Nephi 2, we read: “Wherefore, thy soul shall be blessed . . . and thy days shall be spent in the service of thy God. Wherefore, I know that thou art redeemed, because of the righteousness of thy Redeemer. . . . And thou hast beheld in thy youth his glory; wherefore, thou art blessed even as they unto whom he shall minister in the flesh” (2 Nephi 2:3–4).

Relatively early in his lifetime, Jacob was consecrated a priest and a teacher “over the land of my people” by his brother Nephi (2 Nephi 5:26; see also 6:2; Jacob 1:18). That he “came in at the gate” (D&C

43:7) and was properly and regularly called to the work in the established order of the kingdom of God is shown by Jacob's own statement about his call to the ministry: "I, Jacob, [have] been called of God, and ordained after the manner of his holy order, and [have] been consecrated by my brother Nephi" (2 Nephi 6:2).

## THE PRIESTHOOD AND THE LAW OF MOSES

It is necessary to say something about Jacob's consecration as "a priest and teacher." The faithful Nephites from Lehi to the time of Christ were diligent in performing the requirements of the law of Moses. It is true that they also had the gospel in its fulness and the Melchizedek Priesthood, yet they understood that it was necessary to obey the ordinances of the law of Moses until that law was fulfilled (see 2 Nephi 25:24–30; Jacob 4:5; Mosiah 13:30).

As originally established in Israel under the law of Moses, the Aaronic Priesthood was a hereditary office, and the priests were selected only from the family of Aaron. The Lord designated that the lesser priesthood was to be conferred on men called from the tribe of Levi, that within the tribe the direct descendants of Aaron should be designated as the priests (the highest office within the Levitical or Aaronic Priesthood), and that the presiding priests (high priest or "bishop") should be called only from the firstborn among the descendants of Aaron (see Exodus 30:30–31; 40:15; D&C 68:16–19; 84:18; 107:13–17). The Prophet Joseph Smith had this to say about the established order: "The Levitical Priesthood is forever hereditary—fixed on the head of Aaron and his sons forever, and was in active operation down to Zacharias the father of John."<sup>4</sup>

There were no descendants of Levi or Aaron among the Nephites because Lehi's family was of Joseph (see 1 Nephi 6:2), rather than Levi. Therefore, the Nephites could not be regularly called to officiate in the ordinances of the law of Moses and Aaronic Priesthood. However, since the Melchizedek Priesthood encompasses all the powers and authority of the Aaronic, worthy men among the Nephites, such as Jacob and Joseph, could be consecrated as priests and teachers and could function in the ordinances of the law of Moses, as well as the gospel, by virtue

of the Melchizedek Priesthood (see D&C 68:18–20). These were not the offices of priest and teacher as we know them today in the Aaronic Priesthood. It should be clear to us that the Nephites did not have an established order of priests and Levites such as that found in ancient Israel, because there were no Levites among them. Yet there is strong evidence that the Nephite leaders held the Melchizedek Priesthood since they performed the ordinances of the law of Moses, which they could not have done unless they had priesthood authority. Since they were not of the lineage to hold the Aaronic Priesthood, they must have held this Melchizedek Priesthood, which has no limitations on tribal lineage.

After the law of Moses was fulfilled by the Atonement of Jesus Christ, the stipulations pertaining to the lineage of Levi and Aaron were no longer in effect. Hence after the coming of Christ, the Nephites could ordain non-Levite men to all of the Aaronic Priesthood offices even as we do today in the Church. However, in the restoration of all things, Aaron's lineage shall yet again be given a special assignment.<sup>5</sup>

## JACOB'S COLORFUL METHODS

We will now return to the account of Jacob's ministry. In 2 Nephi 6 through 10, Nephi included a lengthy sermon that Jacob had delivered to the people. We are not informed what the occasion was, but we can discern that it was a conference or a special gathering, because Nephi appointed Jacob to speak and requested that his topic include those parts of Isaiah we call chapters 49 through 52. Although the written account of this sermon occupies thirteen pages in 2 Nephi, it is only a portion of what Jacob said at the time. The discourse was so long that it took Jacob two days to deliver it. Nephi was so pleased with the discourse that he recorded part of it on the small plates and then commented: "And now, Jacob spake many more things to my people at that time; nevertheless only these things [2 Nephi 6–10] have I caused to be written" (2 Nephi 11:1). The words "at that time" further suggest that this was a particular occasion or conference. And there can be no

missing the fact that Nephi recognized that his younger brother had a special ability to declare the word of the Lord and teach the people.

At the beginning of this sermon, Jacob says a few things that are useful to us in learning about him as a person and as a teacher. First, he states his authority as his having been “called of God, and ordained after the manner of his holy order,” and “consecrated” by Nephi. He then informs his hearers that he has already spoken to them of “exceedingly many things” but wants to speak again, for he is “desirous for the welfare of” their souls and has great anxiety for his people. He has previously exhorted them with “all diligence” and taught “the words of [his] father” and has “spoken unto [them] concerning all things which are written, from the creation of the world” (2 Nephi 6:2–3). He then explains:

“And now, behold, I would speak unto you concerning things which are, and which are to come; wherefore, I will read you the words of Isaiah. And they are the words which my brother has desired that I should speak unto you. And I speak unto you for your sakes, that ye may learn and glorify the name of your God. And now, the words which I shall read are they which Isaiah spake concerning all the house of Israel; wherefore, they may be likened unto you, for ye are of the house of Israel. And there are many things which have been spoken by Isaiah which may be likened unto you, because ye are of the house of Israel” (2 Nephi 6:4–5).

It is clear that Jacob was lively and energetic in his ministry, a preacher of the gospel, a student of the holy scriptures, and an exhorter to righteousness. Nephi respected him and approved of his preaching and his doctrine. Nephi even tells us that one of the reasons he likes Jacob so much is that Jacob is a personal eyewitness of the Redeemer and therefore has something important to say. Nephi places Jacob alongside Isaiah and himself: “And now I, Nephi, write more of the words of Isaiah, for my soul delighteth in his words. For I will liken his words unto my people, and I will send them forth unto all my children, for he verily saw my Redeemer, even as I have seen him. And my brother, Jacob, also has seen him as I have seen him; wherefore, I will send their words forth unto my children to prove unto them that my

words are true. Wherefore, by the words of three, God hath said, I will establish my word” (2 Nephi 11:2–3).

The records show that early in life Jacob had exhibited those traits of stability, spiritual capacity, and doctrinal clarity that make him one of the outstanding Book of Mormon prophets.

Jacob not only covered a multitude of subjects, “all things which are written, from the creation of the world” (2 Nephi 6:3), but he demonstrated his sincerity and illustrated his seriousness in a number of ways. He was descriptive in his language, using a large number of adjectives and metaphors. In addition, he was blunt and forceful in his message. He expressed great love for the people but was not of the opinion that he must always maintain a positive image or say only nice things. Without being crude, he was nevertheless devastatingly direct in reminding the people of their sins.

He must have been animated as a speaker, for on at least one occasion as he stood before the people he shook their sins from his garments. His words are so graphic that we need to read them to feel the impact: “O, my beloved brethren, remember my words. Behold, I take off my garments, and I shake them before you; I pray the God of my salvation that he view me with his all-searching eye; wherefore, ye shall know at the last day, when all men shall be judged of their works, that the God of Israel did witness that I shook your iniquities from my soul, and that I stand with brightness before him, and am rid of your blood” (2 Nephi 9:44).

There is no way Jacob could have shaken his clothing in that manner without attracting considerable attention. It is significant that he did this while he was a relatively young man serving under the leadership of Nephi. He was not the prophet at that time, but he was a prophet in the making. From the record, we learn that Jacob was taught by the Spirit and was a bold, charismatic expounder of the gospel of Jesus Christ. By reading his words, I developed a mental image of him illustrated by terms such as *stalwart*, *strong*, *courageous*, *compassionate*, *deliberate*, *forthright*, *mEEK*, *dignified*, *appropriate*, *reflective*, *poetic*, *sensitive*, and *kind*.

It is noteworthy that in the thirty-one pages of the Book of

Mormon containing firsthand material given us from Jacob's mouth and pen, he says little about himself. When he does, he usually focuses on his ministry, his call, his preaching, his visits from an angel, and so forth. His interest is in the sacred word and the doctrine. Although that leaves us without personal details, it nevertheless tells us something about him.

## SUBJECT MATTER OF JACOB'S TEACHINGS

We have already mentioned that Jacob taught the words of his father and that he taught "all things . . . from the creation" (2 Nephi 6:3) from the scriptures. We have also noted that he enjoyed using the words of Isaiah. Following is a discussion about some of Jacob's prominent teachings, specifically noting what we owe to him, or learn specifically from him, in the Book of Mormon. These are doctrines that we would not have in such clarity were it not for his teachings. In making this selection, I chose topics on which I turn to Jacob for help in teaching. That is, I chose things for which Jacob is sometimes the only source, or in some instances the best source, and always a very good source.

*The scattering and gathering of Israel.* Although Jacob is only one of several Book of Mormon writers who discusses the scattering and gathering of Israel, he is probably the most prolific on the subject. I don't think anyone has revealed more about this subject than he has, unless possibly Nephi. Jacob informs us that he knows whereof he speaks because it was told him by an angel (see 2 Nephi 6:9, 11), or he read of it from the writings of Isaiah or Zenos, or he was taught it by the Spirit (see Jacob 4:15). He speaks in detail of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and also of a second destruction and scattering of the Jews after the time of Christ (see 2 Nephi 6:8–15; 9:1–2; 10:1–22). His great interest in the worldwide scattering and gathering of Israel and their eventual acceptance of the Lord Jesus Christ led him to quote the lengthy allegory of Zenos found in Jacob 5. We are ever grateful to Jacob for including this marvelous excerpt from the plates of brass, which is the most comprehensive statement we have on the scattering and gathering anywhere in scripture.

*What if there were no Atonement?* In 2 Nephi 9 Jacob presents a most informative explanation of the Fall of Adam and the Savior's Atonement. In this chapter Jacob explains that the great Creator Himself is the Holy One of Israel, who will come and die for all mankind and provide an infinite Atonement (see 2 Nephi 9:5–7). This statement by Jacob is the first use of the phrase “infinite atonement” in the Book of Mormon. What would have been the consequences if there had been no Atonement by Jesus Christ? Do you know the answer? Jacob knew.

He declares that because of the Fall of Adam, which has passed upon all mankind, if there were not an infinite Atonement the fleshly bodies of all mankind would return to the earth never to receive a resurrection, and the spirits of mankind would all become devils, forever miserable, and forever subject to the devil. “And our spirits must have become like unto him, and we become devils, angels to a devil . . . in misery, like unto himself” (2 Nephi 9:9). This declaration about what would have been the fate of mankind, especially of man's spirit, if there were no Savior, is plainer than is found in any other passage of scripture and is one of the greatest testimonies of the benefit mankind receives from the Atonement of our Redeemer. If you want to see how little this is known and thus how important this information is, test it on your family or friends. Ask them what the condition of our spirits would be if there had been no Atonement. Few will understand this without the help of Jacob. We find ourselves turning to 2 Nephi 9:7–9 again and again in teaching the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

*Jacob's vivid use of language.* Jacob continues his discourse by speaking of death, hell, the grave, paradise, resurrection, judgment, spiritual death, redemption, happiness, misery, obedience, disobedience, and other topics that belong to the plan of salvation. But Jacob doesn't call it simply the plan of salvation, he labels it the “merciful plan of the great Creator” (2 Nephi 9:6), the “great plan of our God” (2 Nephi 9:13), or the “way of deliverance of our God” (2 Nephi 9:11). Likewise, the work of the devil is “that cunning plan of the evil one” (2 Nephi 9:28).

Furthermore, Jacob does not simply speak of “death,” but of “the

slumber of death” (Jacob 3:11), and three times he speaks of death as an “awful monster” (2 Nephi 9:10, 19, 26). If a person neglects to keep the commandments, he is not merely disobedient; he “wasteth the days of his probation, [and] awful is his state” (2 Nephi 9:27). He doesn’t say that mankind is under the eye of God, but that man is under the “all-searching eye” of God (2 Nephi 9:44). In one breath Jacob speaks of “awful fear,” “awful guilt,” “awful misery,” and “awful reality” awaiting the ungodly (2 Nephi 9:46–47).

In describing the futility of mortal man’s rebellion against God, Jacob mentions “the piercing eye of Almighty God” (Jacob 2:10) and exclaims, “O that he would show you that he can pierce you, and with one glance of his eye he can smite you to the dust” (Jacob 2:15). To illustrate the scope of the Lord’s knowledge, he proclaims, “How unsearchable are the depths of the mysteries of him; . . . it is impossible that man should find out all his ways” (Jacob 4:8), and “he knoweth all things, and there is not anything save he knows it” (2 Nephi 9:20). Jacob likes adjectives to accompany his nouns, so he speaks of the “great Creator” (2 Nephi 9:5), the “merciful plan” (2 Nephi 9:6), the “infinite atonement” (2 Nephi 9:7), “captive bodies” in the grave, and “captive spirits” in hell (2 Nephi 9:12). He speaks of uncleanness, nakedness, guilt, and perfect knowledge (see 2 Nephi 9:14). Jacob glories in the majesty of God, and when he speaks of Him he exults with phrases such as, “O the greatness and the justice of our God” (2 Nephi 9:17), “O the greatness of the mercy of our God” (2 Nephi 9:19), “O how great the holiness of our God” (2 Nephi 9:20). We do not have anything else equal to Jacob’s preaching. The Book of Mormon mentions “the gift of preaching” (Alma 9:21), and Jacob had such a gift.

*Riches, pride, and unchastity.* One of Jacob’s strongest discourses is centered on the curse of trusting in material riches, the problem of harboring pride, and the damning effects of immorality. His teachings on these subjects are among the best we have in the scriptures, not only for their content but also for the directness of his message and the beauty and power of his language. In speaking of these subjects, Jacob talks of “the pleasing word of God” (Jacob 2:8) and says that “the hand of providence hath smiled upon [the people] most pleasingly” so that they have

become rich in material things (Jacob 2:13), but as a consequence they have also become proud. He rebukes the men who have been untrue to their marriage vows, saying they have “broken the hearts of [their] tender wives, and lost the confidence of [their] children, because of [their] bad examples before them,” and therefore “many hearts died, pierced with deep wounds” (Jacob 2:35). Jacob says this situation is like “daggers placed to pierce their souls and wound their delicate minds” (Jacob 2:9).

*The name “Christ.”* Although the Book of Mormon speaks of the Savior a great many times, beginning in the very first chapter, it does not introduce the words *Jesus* or *Christ* until seventy-eight pages into the book. For example, the book of 1 Nephi makes 150 references to the Savior, using twenty-three different names, but it never uses the name *Jesus* or *Christ*. The first use of the name *Christ* in the Book of Mormon is in 2 Nephi 10:3, in Jacob’s lengthy two-day sermon. It appears, from the way Jacob says it, that this is a new term among them: “Wherefore, as I said unto you, it must needs be expedient that Christ—for in the last night the angel spake unto me that this should be his name—should come among the Jews.”

It is significant that Jacob emphasized his words by declaring that an angel had given him this new name just the night before. I am not surprised that this specific information was made known through this unusual and excellent prophet Jacob. The Nephites already knew of the Atonement and they had many different names for the Savior, but Jacob seems to have given them the very word and pronunciation of the name *Christ*.

*The power of faith.* Jacob’s entire life is a reflection of his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. He explains that when Sherem the anti-Christ sought him out it was in the “hope to shake me from the faith,” because Sherem knew that “I, Jacob, had faith in Christ who should come” (Jacob 7:3–5). However, Jacob had had “many revelations,” had “truly . . . seen angels,” and had “heard the voice of the Lord speaking unto [him] in very word, from time to time; wherefore [he] could not be shaken” (Jacob 7:5).

In Jacob 4:6 he relates some of the miraculous things which accompany the kind of faith that he and the other prophets possessed:

“Wherefore, we search the prophets, and we have many revelations and the spirit of prophecy; and having all these witnesses we obtain a hope, and our faith becometh unshaken, insomuch that we truly can command in the name of Jesus and the very trees obey us, or the mountains, or the waves of the sea” (Jacob 4:6).

We do not have an account of Jacob’s commanding the mountains, the waves, or the trees to obey, but he seems to be familiar with such miracles. He reasons with the reader that it should not be surprising that God can give a man power to command the elements and that the elements will obey, since God created the world in the first place by the “power of his word.” So why would God not be able to command the earth, “according to his will and pleasure” (Jacob 4:7–9)?

*Obtaining a hope in Christ.* Closely associated with having faith is what Jacob calls “obtaining a hope in Christ” (see Jacob 2:19; 4:6). All the prophets speak of “hope,” but Jacob is unique in the way he uses the word. His phrase of “obtaining a hope” is more than just having “hope” and seems to be the assurance or testimony that one has reached a particular state or spiritual condition and a special relationship with the Lord. Here are some of Jacob’s words on the subject: “Before ye seek for riches, seek ye for the kingdom of God. And after ye have obtained a hope in Christ ye shall obtain riches, if ye seek them; and ye will seek them for the intent to do good” (Jacob 2:18–19). And also, “We knew of Christ, and we had a hope of his glory many hundred years before his coming” (Jacob 4:4). And again, “We search the prophets, and we have many revelations and the spirit of prophecy; and having all these witnesses we obtain a hope, and our faith becometh unshaken” (Jacob 4:6). Jacob urges his hearers to have faith and to be reconciled to God through the Atonement of Christ, having “obtained a good hope of glory . . . before he manifesteth himself in the flesh” (Jacob 4:11).

The phrase “a hope” is used two other times in the Book of Mormon by Alma the Younger (see Alma 13:29; 25:16), but the context of each shows that it is used differently than Jacob uses it. In all, the word *hope* appears fifty times in the Book of Mormon and is used by eight different prophets. Jacob, however, is unique in using it in the

sense of obtaining “a hope,” which is an achievement of something beyond simply “hoping.”

*All the prophets knew of Christ.* That all the prophets knew of and testified of the coming of Christ is a fundamental gospel concept. The Old Testament in its present condition is not at all clear on this matter, so we look to latter-day revelation for evidence. There are numerous passages in the Book of Mormon that can be used to teach this concept, but none better than two passages in the book of Jacob. When I want a scripture that is clear and to the point on this subject I cite the following from Jacob: “We knew of Christ, and we had a hope of his glory many hundred years before his coming; and not only we ourselves had a hope of his glory, but also all the holy prophets which were before us. Behold, they believed in Christ and worshiped the Father in his name, and also we worship the Father in his name” (Jacob 4:4–5). And further, “Behold, I say unto you that none of the prophets have written, nor prophesied, save they have spoken concerning this Christ” (Jacob 7:11). Language cannot be plainer than that.

*A definition of truth.* Formulating a definition of “truth” has taxed the mental and philosophical resources of the world’s thinkers. Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?” (John 18:38), as if he were saying, “Who knows what truth is?” Furthermore, we ask in one of our hymns, “O Say, What Is Truth?”<sup>6</sup> Jacob helps to provide an answer to these queries by defining what truth is and telling how we can learn it. These are his words: “The Spirit speaketh the truth and lieth not. Wherefore, it speaketh of things as they really are, and things as they really will be” (Jacob 4:13). In other words, Jacob says that truth is reality as learned through the Spirit.

The Lord further defined truth as “knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come” (D&C 93:24). The hymn “Oh Say, What Is Truth?” identifies truth as “the sum of existence,” and in Doctrine and Covenants 91:4 the Lord says that “the Spirit manifesteth truth.” Jacob’s definition is in harmony with that in the Doctrine and Covenants and in the hymn and is especially meaningful to us because it indicates that ultimate truth is known through the voice of the Spirit. As we know, some truths are available to mortals in no other way but by the ministration of the Holy Spirit.

*“To be learned is good.”* An oft-quoted verse from the Book of Mormon, at least in a university setting, comes from Jacob as recorded in 2 Nephi 9:29. But as recorded in verse 28, Jacob had just spoken of the cunning plan of the devil to deceive mankind and to cause men to trust vainly and foolishly in their own learning and “set . . . aside” the “counsel of God,” “supposing they know of themselves.” Jacob does not say there is any particular blessedness in being ignorant. He knows that it is not the learning but the pride and vanity men place in their learning that is a problem, so to set the matter straight he says: “But to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God” (2 Nephi 9:29). However, we should take note from Jacob’s caution that many who are learned struggle with their faith.

*A perfect knowledge of Christ.* We have mentioned twice that Jacob was an eyewitness of Jesus Christ and that even in his youth he had seen the Redeemer. Jacob himself tells us that he had seen angels, had received ministrations from them, and “had heard the voice of the Lord speaking [to him] in very word” (Jacob 7:5). He also speaks of what he calls “a perfect knowledge” of Christ (Jacob 4:12). He does not define exactly what a perfect knowledge is, but the context suggests to me that he is saying there is more to the gospel than merely learning doctrines and principles. Important as these are, we have the opportunity to go even further and receive a perfect knowledge of Christ. Here is the passage: “And now, beloved, marvel not that I tell you these things: for why not speak of the atonement of Christ, and attain to a perfect knowledge of him, as to attain to the knowledge of a resurrection and the world to come?” (Jacob 4:12).

What is a perfect knowledge over and beyond knowing the written concepts and the principles and having a testimony? I think it is being an eyewitness to the Redeemer. Who would know this better than Jacob?

## CONCLUSION

Jacob is one of the greatest doctrinal teachers and theologians of the Book of Mormon, and thus of all scripture. He demonstrates a philosophical grasp of the gospel and offers unique and valuable insights into important doctrinal matters. Father Lehi was of a similar

disposition. It is no coincidence that among all of Lehi's blessings to his sons, the blessing he gave to Jacob is the most doctrinal (see 2 Nephi 2). The content of that blessing has captured the attention of most Book of Mormon students because of its statements about the Creation, the Fall, Adam's condition before and after the Fall, man's agency, and the idea of opposition in all things. While the blessing is in the words of Lehi, I find it significant that it was to the youthful Jacob that he said these things. The blessing fits his mind and spirituality.

I have not included every detail about Jacob but have brought together enough to demonstrate the nature of the man. There is a tone in his teachings and writings that reveals the heart of a "just and holy" man (Alma 3:6) who was close to the Lord. He was a special witness of the Lord Jesus Christ, a man with a perfect knowledge of Christ, a man who knew Christ. He was a diligent advocate and teacher, a prophet, theologian, historian, father, and man of God.

---

## NOTES

1. George A. Reynolds, *A Dictionary of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Parry, 1891), 156–57.
2. Robert J. Matthews, *Who's Who in the Book of Mormon*, 3d ed. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1969), 25, 82.
3. C. Terry Warner, "Jacob," *Ensign*, October 1976, 24–30.
4. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 319.
5. See Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1956), 3:91–94; Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 1st ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 598–99.
6. "Oh Say, What Is Truth?" *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 272.