

Because there was No Darkness

The Birth of Christ:
a Book of Mormon Perspective



A KnowWhy Christmas Compilation
by Book of Mormon Central 2016



Each year during Christmastime, neighborhoods are illuminated by hundreds of little lights, filling all with a sense of wonder. These decorations awaken within us a sense of joy and hope as we remember the lights—a new star and glorious angels (Matthew 2:2; Luke 2:9–14)—which illuminated the night that first Christmas in Judea some 2000 years ago.

But we should not forget the lights that shone upon the Nephites that first Christmas. They also saw the new star (3 Nephi 1:21) as well as an entire night without any darkness (3 Nephi 1:15, 19). For the believing Nephites, that light was lifesaving—because there was no darkness, their lives were spared. Since that night, vast numbers of disciples of Christ have been filled with the Savior’s light.

However, the Book of Mormon’s testimony of the birth of Christ does not begin on that night. Samuel the Lamanite prophesied of those signs five years earlier (Helaman 14:2–8), and various Book of Mormon prophets going back to Lehi had spoken in great anticipation of coming birth of Christ.

*At Book of Mormon Central, we have discussed several of these prophecies in our KnoWhys over the past year. As a special thank you to our readers, viewers, and friends, we have collected those KnoWhys here, and present them together under the heading: *Because there was No Darkness: The Birth of Christ, a Book of Mormon Perspective.**

May there be no darkness for you this Christmas season, and may the light and life of Christ fill your hearts this Christmas season, and always.

**Merry Christmas,
Book of Mormon Central**

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*“Therefore, the Lord himself
shall give you a sign—
Behold, a virgin shall
conceive, and shall bear
a son, and shall call his
name Immanuel.”*

~
2 Nephi 17:14 and Isaiah 7:14



How Did Nephi Read Isaiah as a Witness of Christ's Coming?



The Know

The framework of Nephi's prophetic vision (1 Nephi 11–14) informs his selection and interpretation of the Isaiah passages he quotes. In 1998 John W. Welch articulated a four-stage pattern in Nephi's vision, which Welch dubbed "the Nephite prophetic view."¹ The first stage in the pattern "begins with the prophet foretelling how and when Jesus would come down in the flesh," and how he would perform miracles, and be crucified.²

Nephi's vision of the Savior in 1 Nephi 11 is the clearest prophecy of the coming of the Savior on record. Perhaps no other prophet before Christ knew the Savior so well. Yet, Nephi says that Isaiah "verily saw my Redeemer, even as I have seen him" (2 Nephi 11:2). What in Isaiah's writings might make Nephi feel that Isaiah had seen the Savior as clearly as he had?

One answer is in Isaiah's prophetic call. The Book of Mormon opens with Lehi's vision of "God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels" with a Messianic figure "descending out of the midst of heaven" (1 Nephi 1:8–9). Nephi's vision of the Savior, at the top of a high mountain, also appears to have been before the throne of God and his divine assembly.³

Isaiah too had his vision of God on his throne (2 Nephi 16; Isaiah 6), which is quite comparable to Lehi's, and which Nephi quotes.⁴ In Isaiah's call, one of the seraphim cleanses Isaiah to make him worthy to stand in the midst of the divine council (2 Nephi 16:6–7; Isaiah 6:6–7). Latter-day Saint biblical scholar David Bokovoy explained, "Though the literal identity of this fiery angelic being is ambiguous in the text, one possible LDS reading would interpret the seraph who cleanses Isaiah as an allusion to Christ."⁵ Bokovoy further commented:

Interpreting the Lord seated upon the throne as God the Father and the seraph who heals Isaiah as an allusion to Christ would allow the chapter to serve as an illustration of Isaiah's role as an eyewitness of Jesus who, as Nephi observed in his commentary, had been sent to testify of the Redeemer.⁶

This reading suggests that, like Lehi and Nephi, Isaiah's witness of the Redeemer came as part of a divine council vision. This, however, does not offer the same kinds of details found in Nephi's vision.

In his vision, Nephi saw a "virgin, most beautiful and fair above all other virgins ... bearing a child

in her arms" (1 Nephi 11:15, 20). Isaiah, too, saw that "a virgin shall conceive, and shall bear a son" (2 Nephi 17:14; Isaiah 7:14).

Isaiah also rejoiced, "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder; and his name shall be called, Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace" (2 Nephi 19:6; Isaiah 9:6). Among the titles of the Messianic child are "Everlasting Father" and "Mighty God." In the original text of the Book of Mormon, Nephi's guide says that the virgin's child is "the Lamb of God, yea, even the Eternal Father" (1 Nephi 11:21), and the "everlasting God" (1 Nephi 11:32).⁷

Nephi "beheld that he went forth ministering unto the people, in power and great glory" and yet, "They cast him out from among them" (1 Nephi 11:28). He was "taken by the people" and "judged of the world" (1 Nephi 11:32). Isaiah also spoke of the people rejecting the Lord, saying "this people refuseth the waters of Shiloah" (2 Nephi 18:6; Isaiah 8:6). For those who reject him, Isaiah said, the Lord is "a stone of stumbling, and for a rock of offense to both the houses of Israel, for a gin and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem"

(2 Nephi 18:14; Isaiah 8:14). In his subsequent explanation or midrash in 2 Nephi 25, Nephi tied several of these points together, about the coming of Christ (25:11–12), the importance of his names (25:19), and the pain of his being rejected (25:13–14).

The Why

The prophet Isaiah saw and knew the Lord. The most important role of any prophet is to testify of Jesus Christ and his atoning mission. Noting that the name “Isaiah” means “the Lord is salvation,” Elder Jeffrey R. Holland has testified: “Isaiah was prepared from birth—and of course we would say from before birth—to testify of the Messiah and bear such witness of the divinity of Christ’s coming.”⁸

Nephi saw the Lord as well. Connecting Messianic passages in the opening chapters of Isaiah with the key elements in Nephi’s vision of the Savior draws these two testimonies together. Nephi saw in Isaiah a kindred spirit—another who, like him, had received profound advanced knowledge of the Redeemer. Thanks to his detailed vision of the Savior’s birth, life, ministry, and rejection, Nephi was able to see allusions to Christ in Isaiah’s writings clearly.

Reading Isaiah using Nephi’s prophetic framework illuminates Isaiah’s witness of the Savior. By using this pattern in his vision to select and interpret Isaiah, Nephi helps readers to see how and why Nephi read Isaiah Messianically, all of which brings clarity to readers today.



Further Reading

Book of Mormon Central, “What Vision Guides

Nephi’s Choice of Isaiah Chapters?” *KnoWhy* 38 (February 22, 2016)

David E. Bokovoy, “On Christ and Covenants: An LDS Reading of Isaiah’s Prophetic Call,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 3 (2011): 29–49.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, “‘More Fully Persuaded’: Isaiah’s Witness of Christ’s Ministry,” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 1–18.

John W. Welch, “Getting Through Isaiah with the Help of the Nephite Prophetic View,” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 19–45.

Notes

1. Book of Mormon Central, “What Vision Guides Nephi’s Choice of Isaiah Chapters? (2 Nephi 11:2)” *KnoWhy* 38 (February 22, 2016); John W. Welch, “Getting Through Isaiah with the Help of the Nephite Prophetic View,” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 19–45.

2. Welch, “Getting Through Isaiah,” 20.

3. Book of Mormon Central, “How Did God Call His Prophets in Ancient Times? (1 Nephi 15:8)” *KnoWhy* 17 (January 22, 2016); David E. Bokovoy, “‘Thou Knowest That I Believe’: Invoking The Spirit of the Lord as Council Witness in 1 Nephi 11,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 1 (2012): 1–23.

4. See Stephen D. Ricks, “Heavenly Visions and Prophetic Calls in Isaiah 6 (2 Nephi 16), the Book of Mormon, and the Revelation of John,” in *Isaiah*

in the Book of Mormon, 171–190.

5. David E. Bokovoy, “On Christ and Covenants: An LDS Reading of Isaiah’s Prophetic Call,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 3 (2011): 45.

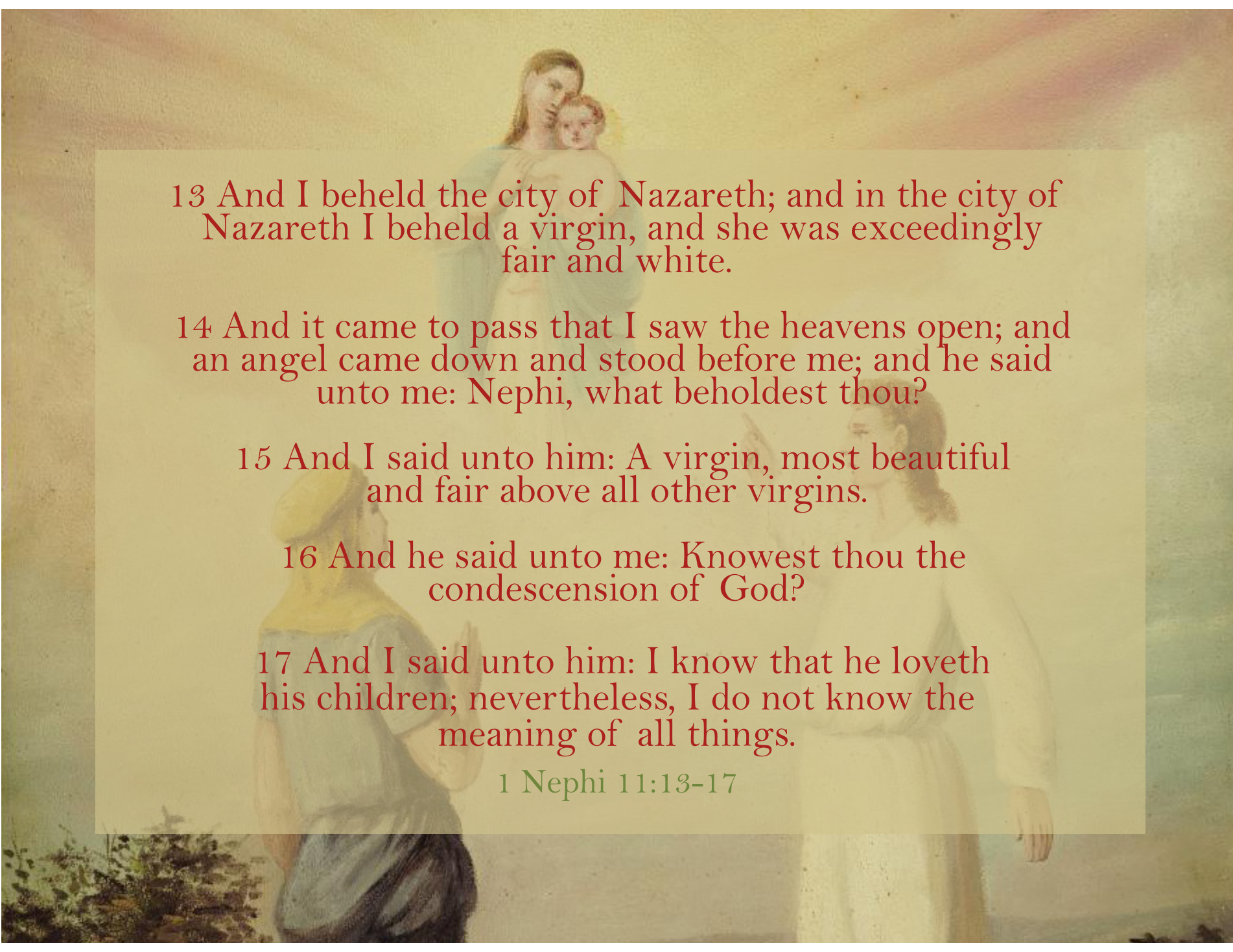
6. Bokovoy, “On Christ and Covenants,” 45. Bokovoy also notes, “this proposal strengthens the tie between Isaiah’s and Lehi’s call narratives for ... Lehi’s throne theophany specifically included a vision of God the Father seated upon the throne, followed by a personal interaction with Christ, one of the angelic host in the heavenly assembly.”

7. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 29–30.

8. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, “‘More Fully Persuaded’: Isaiah’s Witness of Christ’s Ministry,” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, 4.

The true spirit of
Christmas... is found in
the life of the Savior,
in the principles
He taught, in His atoning
sacrifice—which become
our great heritage.

~
President Howard W. Hunter
The Real Christmas?



13 And I beheld the city of Nazareth; and in the city of Nazareth I beheld a virgin, and she was exceedingly fair and white.

14 And it came to pass that I saw the heavens open; and an angel came down and stood before me; and he said unto me: Nephi, what beholdest thou?

15 And I said unto him: A virgin, most beautiful and fair above all other virgins.

16 And he said unto me: Knowest thou the condescension of God?

17 And I said unto him: I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things.

1 Nephi 11:13-17



Why Did Samuel Make Such Chronologically Precise Prophecies?

“Behold, I give unto you a sign; for five years more cometh, and behold, then cometh the Son of God to redeem all those who shall believe on his name.”

~
Helaman 14:2



The Know

During his extended address to the Nephites in Zarahemla, Samuel the Lamanite made two remarkably specific prophetic utterances. First, he declared, “four hundred years pass not away save the sword of justice falleth upon this people” (Helaman 13:5; cf. v. 9; Alma 45:10). Later, he said, “Behold, I give unto you a sign; for five years more cometh, and behold, then cometh the Son of God to redeem all those who shall believe on his name” (Helaman 14:2).

Such precise prophetic predictions are rare in scripture.¹ Even within Samuel’s own discourse, there is another prophecy—the sign of Christ’s death—where the exact timing is not mentioned (see Helaman 14:14, 20–27).² It seems likely that when the exact timing is included in the record, the timing itself was somehow significant.

All ancient societies had important calendar units or time periods that were carefully marked.³ LDS Mesoamericanist John E. Clark noted, “The major cycle of Maya time was a four-hundred-year period called a *baktun*.”⁴

Each *baktun* was broken down into 20 units called a *katun*, a 20-year cycle, and the *katun* was subdivided into units called a *hotun*, which was a five-year cycle.⁵ According to John L. Sorenson, “Omens and prophecies ... among the Maya were commonly phrased in terms of the beginning or ending of whole calendar units.”⁶

In this light, it is significant that both of Samuel the Lamanite’s time-specific prophecies correlate to the specific units of measurement within the Mesoamerican calendrical system.⁷ As Clark put

it, “Samuel the Lamanite warned the Nephites that one *baktun* ‘shall not pass away before ... they [would] be smitten’ (Helaman 13:9).”⁸

Another LDS Mesoamericanist, Mark Wright, suggested, “Samuel the Lamanite may have been making a *hotun* prophecy when he stated that in ‘five years’ signs would be given concerning the birth of Christ (Helaman 14:2).”⁹

Interestingly, according to Sorenson, “In Yucatan at the time of the Spanish conquest, the ruler or his spokesman ... had the duty to prophesy five years in advance what fate the next twenty-year *katun* would bring.”¹⁰ In similar fashion, Samuel the Lamanite prophesied the fate of the next *baktun* (Helaman 13:5, 9), and apparently did so five years in advance (Helaman 14:2).¹¹

The Why

Mesoamerican anthropologist Prudence M. Rice explained, “Time is a cultural construct. Its units of measurement, meaning, and so on are unique in terms of legitimizing power and authority.”¹²

It is therefore highly significant that Samuel the Lamanite’s chronologically precise prophecies each used time periods that were likely important within the broader cultural context of the Nephites. The use of these culturally important time periods likely served to legitimize Samuel’s prophetic authority and credibility.

As Sorenson observed, “In Mesoamerican thinking, Alma’s and Samuel’s prophecies for an entire *baktun* would have been exceedingly profound statements.”¹³

Another Latter-day Saint Mesoamerican expert agreed: “Samuel’s prophecy included such a powerfully evocative number that the people would doubtless have considered the entire prophecy highly symbolic.”¹⁴

According to Wright,¹⁵ part of that symbolism would have made the prophetic utterance relevant for Samuel’s contemporary Nephite audience. Mesoamerican views of time were cyclical—meaning they expected certain events to repeat themselves over the course of each *katun* or *baktun*.¹⁶

Thus, a prophecy of destruction in 400 years—in one *baktun*—could also be considered a warn-

ing of destruction in the here and now.¹⁷ Indeed, Samuel warned that at that very moment, “the sword of justice hangeth over this people,” that “the anger of the Lord is already kindled against you,” and that the only way out was repentance followed by continuing faith in Jesus Christ (Helaman 13:5–6, 30).¹⁸

Meanwhile, the *hotun* was a period commonly celebrated and commemorated, as was the *katun*.¹⁹ Samuel’s prophecy warned the people in advanced that the next *hotun* would truly be a cause to celebrate—it would mark the birth of the Lord and Savior into the world. Mormon recorded that the coming of the sign did indeed bring “glad tidings unto the people” (3 Nephi 1:26).

The occasion was no doubt honored and celebrated for *hotuns* and *katuns* to come, not only as marking the birth of Christ but also in commemoration of the miraculous timing of the sign—coming, as it did, just in time to spare the believers from being executed (3 Nephi 1:8–16).

This background also potentially explains why a specific time frame for the sign of Christ’s death goes unmentioned in Samuel’s prophecy. It did not come at the completion of an important unit of time, as did the birth of Christ (a *hotun*) and the ultimate fall of the Nephites (a *baktun*). Mormon, it seems, mentioned the specific time frame of these events when it coincided with time cycles deemed important within the surrounding culture.

The prophetic use of highly symbolic time periods in Book of Mormon prophecy appears to be an example of the Lord speaking “unto men according to their language, unto their understanding” (2 Nephi 31:3; cf. Doctrine and Covenants 1:24).²⁰



Further Reading

Mark Alan Wright, “Nephite Daykeepers: Ritual Specialists in Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon,” in *Ancient Temple Worship: Proceedings of the Expound Symposium, 14 May 2011*, ed. Matthew B. Brown, Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, Stephen D. Ricks, and John S. Thompson (Salt Lake City and Orem, UT: Eborn Books and Interpreter Foundation, 2014), 252–253.

John L. Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2013), 192–195, 434–442.

John E. Clark, “Archaeology, Relics, and Book of Mormon Belief,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005): 46–47.

Notes

1. The only other example in the Book of Mormon, also involving the timing of Christ’s birth, is Lehi’s and Nephi’s 600-year prophecy (see 1 Nephi 10:3; 19:8; 2 Nephi 25:19). Samuel’s five-year prophecy was particularly unique. Brant A.

Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 5:190: “The specificity of this prophecy is unique in the scriptural canon. Other time-specific prophecies (e.g., that the Messiah would be born six hundred years from Lehi’s departure from Jerusalem, and that the Nephites would be destroyed in four hundred years) were uttered about a future so distant that no listener would still be alive. Because six hundred and four hundred are round numbers, they also might be understood by the listeners as generic rather than specific figures. . . . The five-year prophecy, however, is absolute, finite, and testable within the lifetime of virtually all of Samuel’s listeners.”

2. While Samuel’s prophecy in Helaman 14 never mentions the timing of the sign of Christ’s death, it is evident from 3 Nephi 8:1–4 that the timing had been revealed to the Nephites at some point. Whether it was Samuel who revealed the timing or someone else is not clear, as it only says that the people “began to look with great earnestness for the sign which had been given by the prophet Samuel” (v. 3). Only the sign, not the timing, is connected to Samuel. Perhaps the timing was revealed by the “just man” who kept the record and “did many miracles in the name of Jesus” (v. 1). It could also have been revealed in some of the “much preaching and prophesying which was sent among them” in the wake of the first sign (3 Nephi 2:10). If it was Samuel, it would appear that Mormon omitted that detail when he copied over Samuel’s prophecies, perhaps for the reasons suggested here: the timing did not coincide with a number full of symbolic significance.

3. For general reference and background on the

Mesoamerican calendrical systems, including the long count (*tun*) system, see Mary Miller and Karl Taube, *An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya* (London, UK: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 48–54; Kaylee Spencer-Ahrens and Linnea H. Wren, “Arithmetic, Astronomy, and the Calendar,” in Lynn V. Foster, *Handbook to Life in the Ancient Maya World* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 250–260; Joel W. Palka, *The A to Z of Ancient Mesoamerica* (Lanham, MA: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 22–23.

4. John E. Clark, “Archaeological Trends and Book of Mormon Origins,” in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 2005), 90.

5. Mark Alan Wright, “Nephite Daykeepers: Ritual Specialists in Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon,” in *Ancient Temple Worship: Proceedings of the Expound Symposium, 14 May 2011*, ed. Matthew B. Brown, Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, Stephen D. Ricks, and John S. Thompson (Salt Lake City and Orem, UT: Eborn Books and Interpreter Foundation, 2014), 253: “The twenty-year *katun* was subdivided into five-year periods called *hotuns*, which were often celebrated by royalty and commemorated in monumental inscriptions.” Also see Prudence M. Rice, “Time, Memory, and Resilience among the Maya,” in *Millenary Maya Societies: Past Crises and Resilience*, ed. M. Charlotte Arnauld and Alain Breton (Mesoweb Press, 2013), 13: “The completion of full twenty-year *k’atun* or their five-year quarters were regularly celebrated by rulers in what Mayanists call

‘Period-Ending’ (hereafter PE) ceremonies.”

6. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 274.

7. It is important to note that the Nephites need not be using the Mayan calendar to nonetheless recognize the sacred importance of these numbers in the calendaring of their neighbors, and to even be influenced in such a way to also give weight and import to time cycles of 5, 20, and 400 years themselves. Though commonly referred to as the “Maya” calendar system, it was known throughout Mesoamerica and likely had its origins among the Olmec between 500–400 BC. The earliest long count date attested is 36 BC, on Stela 2 in Chiapa de Corzo, confirming its use in Samuel’s time. See Gardner, *Second Witness*, 5:177; Foster, *Handbook to Life*, 36–37. Interestingly, Chiapa de Corzo is in Chiapas, Mexico in the Grijalva River valley, believed by some scholars to be the land of Zarahemla. Chiapa de Corzo is even identified by some scholars as the Nephite city of Sidom. See John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 5–38, 148–167, 197, 204–206; Joseph L. Allen and Blake L. Allen, *Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon*, revised edition (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2011), 748–749, 770–772; John L. Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious

Scholarship, 2013), 128, 581–585, 592, 597–598.

8. John E. Clark, “Archaeology, Relics, and Book of Mormon Belief,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005): 47. Also, Clark, “Archaeological Trends,” 90: “The Book of Mormon records several references to a significant four-hundred-year prophecy, consistent with this idiosyncratic Mesoamerican calendar practice.” In addition to Helaman 13:5, 9, see Alma 45:10; Mormon 8:6; Moroni 10:1.

9. Wright, “Nephite Daykeepers,” 253.

10. John L. Sorenson, “The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 409; Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex*, 193, 440–441.

11. The 400-year prophecy appears to have been understood and interpreted as 400 years from the birth of Christ (Mormon 8:6–7). Alma 45:10 says “the Nephites . . . in four hundred years from the time that Jesus Christ shall manifest himself unto them, shall dwindle in unbelief.”

12. Rice, “Time, Memory, and Resilience,” 16.

13. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 274.

14. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 5:177.

15. Personal communication to Book of Mormon Central staff.

16. Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex*, 439; Rice, “Time, Memory, and Resilience,” 13, 16: “For the Maya, time was simultaneously linear and cyclical, an endless—‘timeless’—rotation of k’atun, b’ak’tun, and multiple eras of creation (as in the Popol Vuh).” Spencer-Ahrens and Wren, “Arithmetic, Astronomy, and the Calendar,” 247: “The cycles dominated Maya thought and resulted in a deterministic view in which history repeated itself. If a given day or period resulted in dreadful consequences once, it would do so again when the day returned or when the cycle repeated itself.” Just as with the important numbers themselves (5, 20, and 400 year cycles), the Nephites need not be using the Maya calendar itself in order to have enculturated views of time as cyclical.

17. Spencer-Ahrens and Wren, “Arithmetic, Astronomy, and the Calendar,” 257, noted, “each k’atun expressed a prophecy of the future while at the same time embodying the historical past.” Samuel seems to be expressing the same concept, only using a *baktun* rather than a *katun*.

18. Evidence for these notions of cyclical time may be evident in the Book of Mormon. For instance, notice that 20 years (one *katun*) after Samuel said “the sword of justice hangeth over this people” (Helaman 13:5), Mormon reported that “the sword of destruction did hang over” the

Nephites once again (3 Nephi 2:19).

19. Wright, “Nephite Daykeepers,” 253; Rice, “Time, Memory, and Resilience,” 13. Again, for Nephites influenced by the surrounding culture, 5, 20, or 400 year periods can be deemed important, celebratory occasions without necessarily adopting the Maya calendar.

20. See Mark Alan Wright, “According to Their Language, unto Their Understanding’: The Cultural Context Hierophanies and Theophanies in Latter-day Saint Canon,” *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 3 (2011): 51–65.



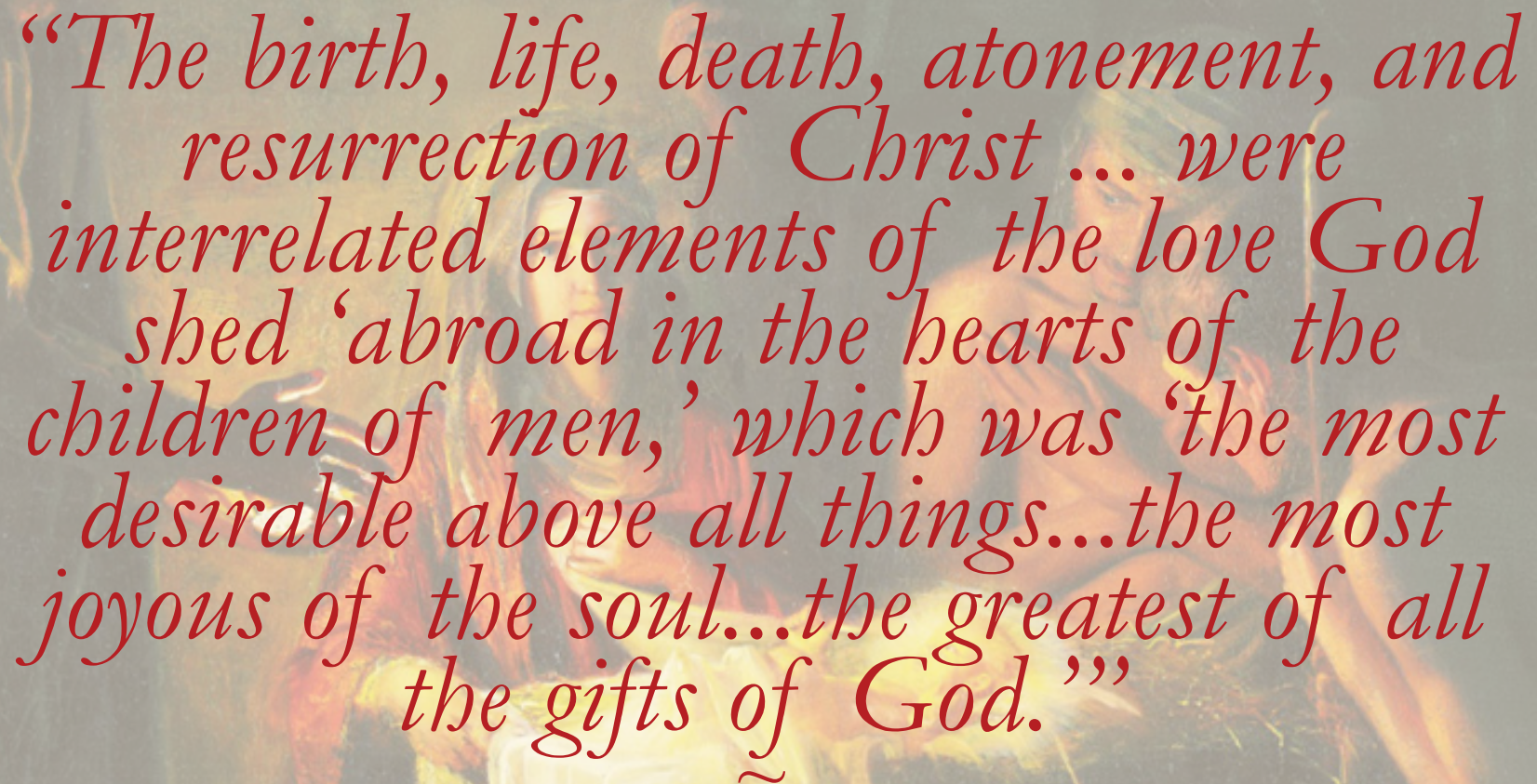
“Behold your God!
Behold your God, born as a little child in
Bethlehem and wrapped in swaddling clothes.

Behold your God, born in poverty and
simplicity that He might walk among com-
mon people as a common man.

Behold your God, even the infinite and eternal
Redeemer, the Messiah, veiled in flesh
and come to live upon the very earth
that He created.”

~
Bruce D. Porter
A Child is Born





“The birth, life, death, atonement, and resurrection of Christ ... were interrelated elements of the love God shed ‘abroad in the hearts of the children of men,’ which was ‘the most desirable above all things...the most joyous of the soul...the greatest of all the gifts of God.’”

Elder Jeffry R. Holland
Christ and the New Covenant



What Does the Virgin Mary Have to Do with the Tree of Life?

“Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh.”

1 Nephi 11:18



The Know

When Nephi asked the Spirit of Lord the meaning of the tree seen in his father’s dream (1 Nephi 11:11), the Spirit seemingly changed the subject, and called Nephi’s attention to “a virgin.” Nephi said that “she was exceedingly fair and white,” and “most beautiful and fair above all other virgins” (1 Nephi 11:13, 15).

As the vision proceeds, Nephi sees her “bearing a child in her arms” (1 Nephi 11:20), and the angel told him that she was “the mother of God, after the manner of the flesh,” as found in the original text.¹ From this vision, Nephi somehow comes to understand the meaning of the tree of life (1 Nephi 11:21–22).

In 1998, Daniel C. Peterson noted a fundamental connection between the tree and virgin. The adjectives describing the virgin (“most beautiful,” “exceedingly fair,” “white”) compared to those describing the tree (“exceeding all beauty,” and “exceed[ing] the whiteness of the driven snow,” 1 Nephi 11:8), are synonymous.

Just as the tree bore fruit, the virgin bore a child (1 Nephi 11:7, 20). “Clearly,” Peterson noted, “the glimpse given to Nephi of the virgin mother with her child is the answer to his question about the meaning of the tree. Indeed, it is evident that in some sense the virgin is the tree.”²

As Peterson went on to explain, scholars have recently accepted that in ancient Israelite religion, there was a belief in a divine mother goddess named Asherah, who was represented by the tree of life. The symbolism is widespread throughout the ancient Near East, and can be seen in association with various goddesses by various cultures.

In 2011, Egyptologist John S. Thompson explored the connections between different Egyptian goddesses and sacred trees. Thompson noticed that while most ancient Near Eastern cultures sexualized the tree goddess, the Egyptians emphasized the motherly role, often depicting tree goddesses nursing a child.³

The Israelite Asherah was likewise more focused on the nursing mother and less sexualized—she was the “mother of the gods” and also regarded as the mother of the Davidic kings.⁴

The Why

The notion of a divine mother goddess strongly resonates with Latter-day Saint belief in a Heavenly Mother.⁵ While Mary is not Heavenly Mother, the ancient Israelite and Egyptian cultural backgrounds shed light on Nephi’s vision and how he was able to make sense of the imagery.

Just as Israelite and Egyptian religions associated a sacred tree with a mother of gods and kings, so did Nephi’s guide tie the idea of the tree of life with the “mother of God, after the manner of the flesh,” whose child was the Messiah, the true Davidic King.

People everywhere can appreciate the beautiful force and effect of Nephi’s revelation. Samuel

Zinner, a non-LDS scholar of Enoch studies, remarked that the symbolism in Nephi's vision, "implies a theological ... continuity between the tree of life, Lady Jerusalem, Lady Nazareth, and the Virgin Mary. These are all ultimately specializations or refractions of Asherah."⁶

Margaret Barker, another non-LDS Old Testament scholar, marveled the Nephi's vision "is the Heavenly Mother, represented by the tree of life, and then Mary and her Son on earth. This revelation to Joseph Smith was the ancient Wisdom symbolism, intact, and almost certainly as it was known in 600 BCE."⁷



Further Reading

Samuel Zinner, "'Zion' and 'Jerusalem' as Lady Wisdom in Moses 7 and Nephi's Tree of Life Vision," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 12 (2014): 281–323.

John S. Thompson, "The Lady at the Horizon: Egyptian Tree Goddess Iconography and Sacred Trees in Israelite Scripture and Temple Theology," in *Ancient Temple Worship: Proceedings of The Expound Symposium, 14 May 2011*, ed. Matthew B. Brown, Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, Stephen D. Ricks, and John S. Thompson (Orem, Utah: Interpreter Foundation and Eborn Books, 2014), 217–241.

Margaret Barker, "Joseph Smith and Preexilic Israelite Religion," in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 69–82.

Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 16–25.

Notes

1. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 29.

2. Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8–23," in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 194.

3. John S. Thompson, "The Lady at the Horizon: Egyptian Tree Goddess Iconography and Sacred Trees in Israelite Scripture and Temple Theology," in *Ancient Temple Worship: Proceedings of The Expound Symposium, 14 May 2011*, ed. Matthew B. Brown, Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, Stephen D. Ricks, and John S. Thompson (Salt Lake City and Orem, UT: Eborn Books and the Interpreter Foundation, 2014), 225–226.

4. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah," 196–198.

5. See David L. Paulsen and Martin Pulido, "A Mother There': A Survey of Historical Teachings

about Mother in Heaven," *BYU Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 70–97; "Mother in Heaven," *Gospel Topics*, online at lds.org.

6. Samuel Zinner, "'Zion' and 'Jerusalem' as Lady Wisdom in Moses 7 and Nephi's Tree of Life Vision," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 12 (2014): 313.

7. Margaret Barker, "Joseph Smith and Preexilic Israelite Religion," in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 2005), 76.

"Christmas invites feelings of tenderness, joy, and love. And as any parent will attest, similar feelings typically attend the birth of each newborn child. Of course, Christ's birth was unlike any other.

Christmas is not only a celebration of how Jesus came into the world but also of knowing who He is—our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ—and of why He came."

~
Elder Craig C. Christensen
The Fulness of the Story of Christmas

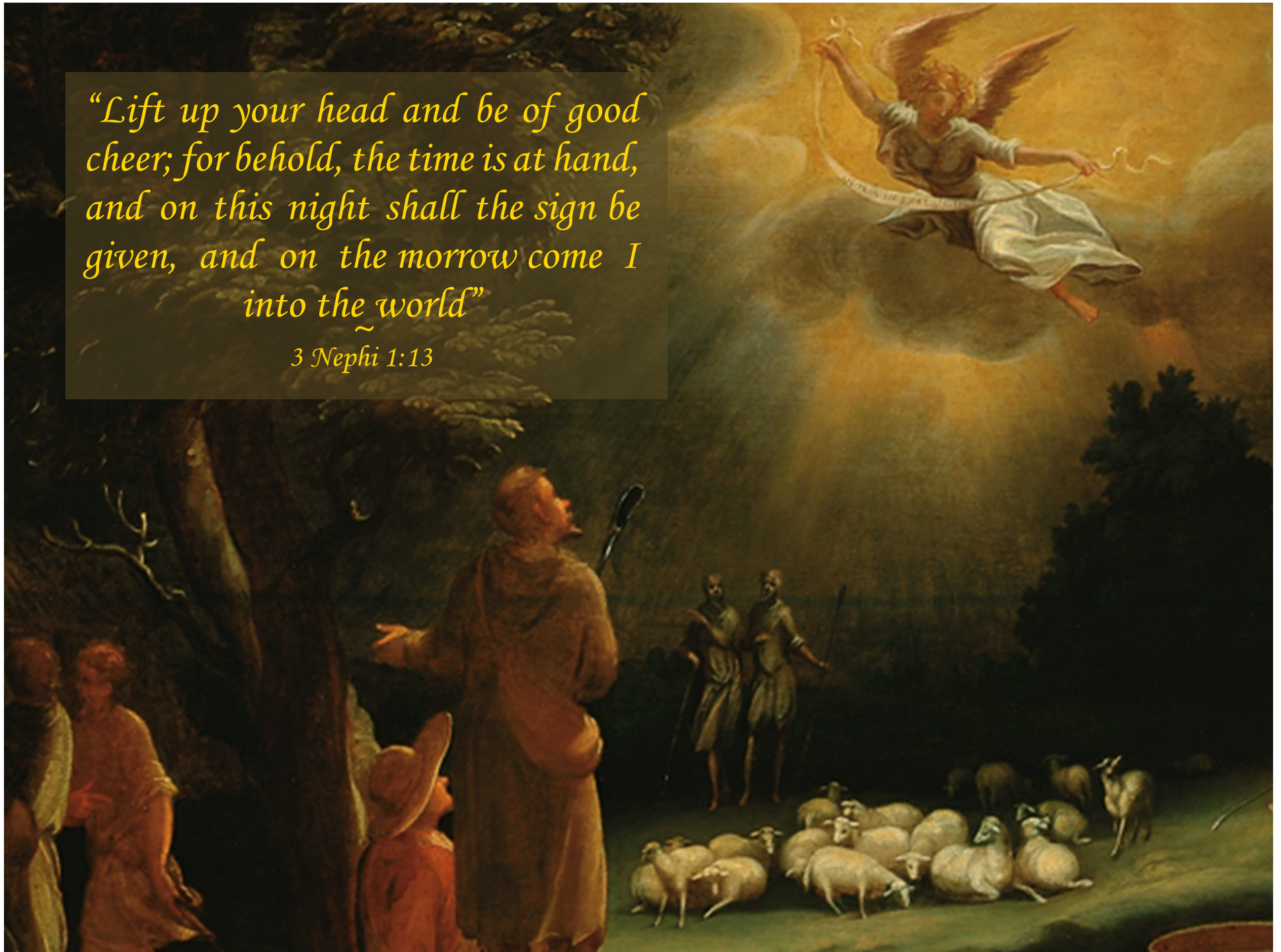
“Clearly, the glimpse given to Nephi of the virgin mother with her child is the answer to his question about the meaning of the tree. Indeed, it is evident that in some sense the virgin is the tree.”

~
Daniel C. Peterson
“Nephi and His Ashera”



“Lift up your head and be of good cheer; for behold, the time is at hand, and on this night shall the sign be given, and on the morrow come I into the world”

3 Nephi 1:13



How Does the Book of Mormon Help Date the First Christmas?



The Know

On December 25, Latter-day Saints join with many other Christians around the world in celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, the Savior and Redeemer of all mankind. Yet most scholars agree that the exact date of Christ's birth is uncertain. Even Latter-day Saints and their General Authorities have expressed different views on the matter.¹

Birthdates were not as important in the ancient world as they are today, and consequently the birthdays of most major figures in ancient history are unknown. It was not until the 2nd century that early Christians began to discuss the timing of Christ's birth, and already by then there was disagreement.²

Such disagreement continued even as the celebration of Christmas on December 25 began to be fixed in the late 3rd century AD,³ and it wasn't

until the 6th century that a calendar was made attempting to calculate time based on the date of Christ's birth.⁴

Given the lack of interest in Christ's birth early on, and the uncertainty in later centuries, it is no wonder the question remains unsettled today. Scholars employ a wide range of sources, including the Gospel accounts, ancient historical works, astronomy, and archaeology, when trying to address this question.

The year 4 BC is considered the latest possible date because Herod the Great died in the spring of that year, meaning the Savior must have been born sometime before then (Matthew 2; Luke 1:5).⁵

An important factor to settling the timing of Christ's birth is determining the timing of His

death in combination with the duration of his life.⁶ While there remains some uncertainty, many scholars have concluded "that the first weekend of April AD 30 is the most likely time of the death of Jesus."⁷

Though scholars have scoured the gospel accounts for clues, nothing in the New Testament provides definitive answers as to the length of the Savior's life.⁸ Latter-day Saints benefit from having another source on the duration of the Savior's life: the Book of Mormon.

Since the Nephites began counting their years from the time the sign of Christ's birth was given (3 Nephi 2:8), and since they recorded the exact day they received the sign of His death in their calendar (3 Nephi 8:5), the Book of Mormon provides a fairly precise duration of the Savior's life.⁹ The sign of Christ's death came "in the thirty and

fourth year, in the first month, on the fourth day” (3 Nephi 8:5), so the Savior lived at least 33 years and 4 days by the Nephites’ count.

Yet there remains some ambiguity. First, it is not certain how the Nephites counted those 33 years. Did they start counting from the very day the sign was given or did they wait for the next new year’s day? Did they count the year in which the sign was given as year one, or begin the year after? There also remain questions about the length of a Nephite “year” at that time, and whether they were solar years (~365 days), lunar years (~354 days), or the *tun* years (360 days) used in Mesoamerica.¹⁰

With these considerations in mind, LDS scholars Lincoln H. Blumell and Thomas A. Wayment have reasoned that the Book of Mormon “indicates Jesus lived between thirty-two and nearly thirty-four years.”¹¹

Combining the Book of Mormon with additional evidence from archaeology, astronomy, history, and ancient Jewish and Mesoamerican calendars, various Latter-day Saint researchers—such as apostle Orson Pratt, researcher Randall Spackman, New Testament scholar Thomas Wayment, and archaeologist Jeffrey Chadwick—have reached different conclusions, ranging between spring in 5 BC to spring in 4 BC.¹²

The Why

While the Book of Mormon does not provide definitive evidence on the dating Jesus Christ’s birth, it does offer important additional informa-

tion, especially to scholars within the Latter-day Saint tradition. Specifically, it provides a limited range for the lifespan of Jesus which, once anchored to a solid death date, limits the possible time span within which the birth of Christ must have occurred. If the proposed date of April AD 30 for the death of Jesus is correct, then possible birthdates for Christ are limited to sometime in 5 BC or in the early months of 4 BC.

No doubt scholars in and out of the Church will continue to investigate and debate the timing of the Savior’s birth. While exploring this question, Latter-day Saint scholars and lay persons alike should appreciate and cherish this added resource on the Savior’s birth, life, death, and teachings. The Book of Mormon truly is another testament of Jesus Christ, bringing clarity and understanding to every aspect of the Savior’s life and teachings.

LDS archaeologist Jeffrey R. Chadwick reflected this attitude when he wrote:

As a Latter-day Saint, I am not only duty-bound but personally grateful to accept and present data from the Book of Mormon, the genuine historical reliability of which I am both spiritually and materially convinced, to corroborate the evidence of the New Testament and the other avenues explored.¹³

In the end, knowing exactly when Jesus Christ was born is not as important as knowing that He lived and that He is the Savior of the world, that he was born as “the light and the life of the world” (3 Nephi 11:11).

The Book of Mormon is absolutely clear on the overriding reality that the Lord Jesus did in fact condescend to come and dwell as a mortal among mankind, and to suffer and die, bringing to pass the resurrection and immortality of all the sons and daughters of God. Just as the sign announcing his birth brought light and deliverance to the Nephites,¹⁴ He will bring light and deliverance to all who come unto Him.



Further Reading

Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “Dating the Birth of Jesus Christ,” *BYU Studies* 49, no. 4 (2010): 5–38.

Lincoln H. Blumell and Thomas A. Wayment, “When Was Jesus Born? A Response to a Recent Proposal,” *BYU Studies* 51, no. 3 (2012): 53–81.

John A. Tvedtnes, “When Was Christ Born?” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 10 (2014): 1–33 (originally drafted in 2002, updated in 2010, and revised before 2014).

Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “Dating the Death of Jesus Christ,” *BYU Studies* 54, no. 4 (2015): 135–191.

Notes

1. See Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “Dating the Birth of Jesus Christ,” *BYU Studies* 49, no. 4 (2010): 6–9. Some Latter-day Saints might be surprised to learn that not everyone, including respected authorities and apostles like Orson Pratt, Hyrum M. Smith, J. Reuben Clark, and Bruce R. McConkie, agrees with the tradition, started 100 years ago by James E. Talmage, that Christ was born on April 6, 1 BC, based

on Doctrine and Covenants 20:1. The best evidence indicates that the Doctrine and Covenants 20:1 was written by John Whitmer as an introduction to the revelation (4 days after the fact), and “X years since the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the flesh” appears to be Whitmer’s fancy way of expressing the date. It is used in the Church Historical record by Whitmer in reference to June 12, 1831, for instance. See Chadwick, “Dating the Birth of Jesus Christ,” 6–9, 28–29 n.12; Lincoln H. Blumell and Thomas A. Wayment, “When Was Jesus Born? A Response to a Recent Proposal,” *BYU Studies* 51, no. 3 (2012): 71–72; Steven C. Harper, “Historical Headnotes and the Index of Contents in the Book of Commandments and Revelations,” *BYU Studies* 48, no. 3 (2009): 57. Also see Randall P. Spackman, “Introduction to Book of Mormon Chronology: The Principal Prophecies, Calendars, and Dates,” (FARMS Preliminary Reports, 1993), 70–74; Tvedtnes, “When Was Christ Born?” 13–14; Thomas A. Wayment, “The Birth and Death Dates of Jesus Christ,” in *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ*, 3 vols., ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and Thomas A. Wayment (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2005), 1:83–85.

2. See Blumell and Wayment, “When Was Jesus Born?” 54–59

3. See John A. Tvedtnes, “When Was Christ Born?” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 10 (2014): 17–24. Some Christians (mainly Eastern Orthodox) celebrate Christmas on January 6. See Taylor Halverson, “The Real 12 Days of Christmas and Why April 6 is a Religiously Significant Date,” *Deseret News*, December 13, 2014.

4. See Tvedtnes, “When Was Christ Born?” 1–2.

5. See Chadwick, “Dating the Birth of Jesus Christ,” 11–14; Wayment, “The Birth and Death Dates of Jesus Christ,” 385–387; Blumell and Wayment, “When Was Jesus Born?” 59–62; Tvedtnes, “When Was Christ Born?” 4; Spackman, “Introduction to Book of Mormon Chronology,” 48–51. On the other hand,

the account in Luke 2 mentioning Cyrenius (Luke 2:2) would require the story to take place sometime around AD 6–7. This is clearly at odds with the death of Herod, and as such most scholars regard this detail as erroneous. See Blumell and Wayment, “When Was Jesus Born?” 61.

6. For discussions on the dating of the Savior’s death, see Chadwick, “Dating the Birth of Jesus Christ,” 15–17; Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “Dating the Death of Jesus Christ,” *BYU Studies* 54, no. 4 (2015): 135–191; Blumell and Wayment, “When Was Jesus Born?” 64–70; Wayment, “The Birth and Death Dates of Jesus Christ,” 391–394; Spackman, “Introduction to Book of Mormon Chronology,” 60–61.

7. Wayment, “The Birth and Death Dates of Jesus Christ,” 394. See also Chadwick, “Dating the Death of Jesus Christ,” 139–142 for a review of scholars who agree with this timing. However, Blumell and Wayment, “When Was Jesus Born?” 64–70 urge caution against being too dogmatic about this date.

8. See Chadwick, “Dating the Birth of Jesus Christ,” 17–18.

9. See Chadwick, “Dating the Birth of Jesus Christ,” 17–18.

10. For discussion of these issues from various perspectives, see Wayment, “The Birth and Death Dates of Jesus Christ,” 393; Chadwick, “Dating the Birth of Jesus Christ,” 18–21, 34–35 nn.48–51; Blumell and Wayment, “When Was Jesus Born?” 62–64, 76–77 nn.39–45; Chadwick, “Dating the Death of Jesus Christ,” 142–149; Spackman, “Introduction to Book of Mormon Chronology”; Randall P. Spackman, “The Jewish/Lunar Calendar,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 (1998): 48–59, 71; Randall P. Spackman, *A Source Book for Book of Mormon Chronology* (2010–215), online at bookofmormon-chronology.net; David Rolph Seely, “Chronology, Book of Mormon,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2003), 196–204; Robert F. Smith, “Book of Mormon

Event Structure: The Ancient Near East,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5, no. 2 (1996): 98–147; John L. Sorenson, “The Nephite Calendar in Mosiah, Alma, and Helaman,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 173–175. Chadwick, “Dating the Death of Jesus Christ,” 145 n.43, 147 n.45, mistakenly asserted that the Mesoamerican *tun* was not considered a “year” by scholars or the Maya. For a response, see Neal Rappleye, “Was the Mayan *Tun* a ‘Year?’” at *Studio et Quoque Fide: A Blog on Latter-day Saint Apologetics, Scholarship, and Commentary*, December 14, 2016.

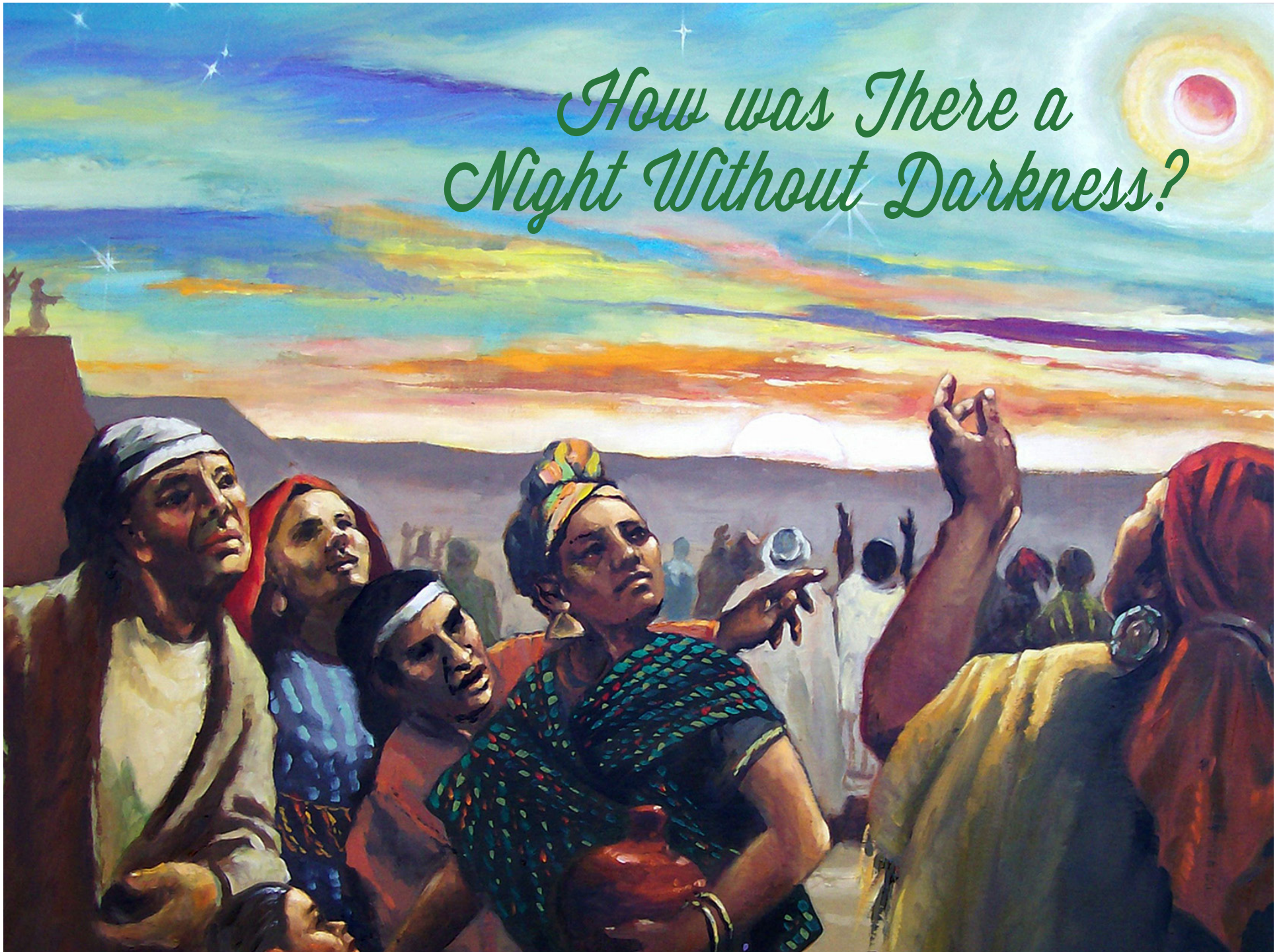
11. Blumell and Wayment, “When Was Jesus Born?” 64.

12. See Orson Pratt, “The Latter-day Kingdom of God—Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon—External Testimony,” *Journal of Discourses* 13, discourse 16, April 10, 1870, online at journalofdiscourses.com. Also see Orson Pratt, “True Christmas and New Year,” *Journal of Discourses* 15, discourse 33, December 29, 1872, online at journalofdiscourses.com; Spackman, “Introduction to Book of Mormon Chronology,” 48, 53; Wayment, “The Birth and Death Dates of Jesus Christ,” 387–388, 393–394; Chadwick, “Dating the Birth of Jesus Christ,” 25. Pratt (April 11, 4 BC), Spackman (March 23, 5 BC), Wayment (spring or winter, 5 BC), and Chadwick (December 5 BC) each make different assumptions about Nephite calendaring and chronology.

13. Chadwick, “Dating the Death of Jesus Christ,” 190.

14. See Book of Mormon Central, “How Was There a Night Without Darkness? (3 Nephi 1:15),” *KnoWhy* 188 (September 15, 2016), pp. 19–22 herein.

*How was There a
Night Without Darkness?*



“For behold, at the going down of the sun there was no darkness; and the people began to be astonished because there was no darkness when the night came.”

~

3 Nephi 1:15



The Know

When a Lamanite came into Zarahemla prophesying that there would be “great lights in heaven,” leading to a night with “no darkness ... as if it was day,” and “many signs and wonders in heaven” (Helaman 14:2–6),¹ some Nephites were skeptical, and even hostile (Helaman 16:2).² In the next five years, both the skepticism and the hostility grew, and a date was set by which “all those who believed in those traditions should be put to death” if the sign failed to appear (3 Nephi 1:7, 9). Yet, as prophesied, “at the going down of the sun there was no darkness” and “it was as light as though it was mid-day” (vv. 15, 19).³

Today, this prophetic sign remains difficult for some to believe. How could there be a night without darkness? Exactly how God produced such a sign is impossible to know for certain, but there are natural astronomical and atmospheric events which may shed some light on this matter.

Hugh Nibley suggested to his students once that this sign could have been caused by a supernova,

comparing it to one in AD 1054 which “could be seen all over the world” and “was almost as bright as the sun.”⁴ Astronomers have documented a supernova in the 11th century which, according to lead researcher Frank Winkler, provided enough light that “people could probably have read manuscripts at midnight by its light.”⁵

Yet Samuel made it sound like the new star in the sky was a separate sign from the night without darkness (Helaman 14:5).⁶ In this regard, John A. Tvedtnes noted some possible similarities to the atmospheric effects caused by an explosion that took place in a remote part of Russia on June 30, 1908.⁷ Known to scholars simply as the “Tunguska event,” scientists are still unsure what exactly caused the explosion.⁸

Its effect on the night sky, however, is well documented. As reported by NASA, “Night skies glowed, and reports came in that people who lived as far away as Asia could read newspapers outdoors as late as midnight.”⁹

In the most comprehensive study on the event to date, Vladimir Rubtsov documented “atmospheric phenomena” in 155 different places,¹⁰ spread across several days, beginning a few days before the explosion.¹¹ Tvedtnes reported, “For months afterward, there were spectacular sunrises and sunsets throughout the world, caused by the vast amount of dust thrown up into the atmosphere.”¹² There were also “daytime anomalies such as intense and prolonged solar halos, mother-of-pearl clouds, and a Bishop’s ring.”¹³

It was the night of June 30, however, which was most spectacular. According to Rubtsov, “throughout a territory of about 12 million km², there was no night separating June 30 and July 1.”¹⁴ That evening, a Soviet astronomer “waited in vain for night to fall,” and in Germany, “The intensity of the nighttime luminosity was considerable. ... At 1.15 [AM] it was as light as daytime.”¹⁵ Despite covering a vast region, “no atmospheric anomalies occurred in the area of Tunguska” itself,¹⁶ and the intensity of nighttime

light “seemed to increase from East to West,” thus indicating that it was brighter the farther away from the Tunguska explosion one went.¹⁷

The Why

A miracle can be defined as “a beneficial event brought about through divine power that mortals do not understand and of themselves cannot duplicate.”¹⁸ God uses miracles so that great benefits may be brought about for mankind “according to their faith” (see Mosiah 8:18; Alma 37:40). At the same time, Elder John A. Widtsoe, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve and himself a scientist, gave assurances that “This is a universe of law and order,” and thus “a miracle simply means a phenomenon not understood, in its cause and effect relations.”¹⁹

The phenomena and anomalies associated with the Tunguska event in 1908, with nightglows in the days before, with total day-like brightness the night after, and also with continuing nightglows and even daytime effects in the days that followed surprisingly demonstrate at least one possible naturalistic understanding of how God could have fulfilled Samuel’s prophecy,²⁰ even if such astronomical and atmospheric observations cannot be fully understood or explained.²¹

Regardless of the actual method the Lord used to accomplish this miracle, the night without darkness was deeply symbolic and meaningful. Kimberly M. Berkey noted, “The excessive light surrounding Christ’s birth acts as a kind of morning,”²² the beginning of a new dawn welcoming the Savior into the world: the Light of the World

had come,²³ introduced into the world by light.

Furthermore, just as with the appearance of the new star, any method for making night bright as day would have required a great deal of advanced planning on the part of the Lord. Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught, “the so-called ‘little star of Bethlehem’ was actually very large in its declaration of divine design! It had to have been placed in its precise orbit long, long before it shone so precisely!”²⁴

Elder Maxwell went on to explain that the Lord puts the same care and attention into the lives of his children. “His overseeing precision pertains not only to astrophysical orbits but to human orbits as well.”²⁵ Just as the new star “was in its precise orbit long before it so shone,” so are individuals “placed in human orbits to illuminate.”²⁶



Further Reading

Kimberly M. Berkey, “Temporality and Fulfillment in 3 Nephi 1,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24 (2015): 53–83.

John A. Tvedtnes, “A Modern Example of Night without Darkness,” *Insights: An Ancient Window* 18, no. 5 (October 1998): 4.

Notes

1. See Book of Mormon Central, “Why Did Samuel

Make Such Chronologically Precise Prophecies? (Helaman 13:5),” *KnoWhy* 184 (September 9, 2016), pp. 5–9 herein.

2. Even though some believed the earth could move at God’s command, “and it appeareth unto man that the sun standeth still” (Helaman 12:15), Samuel was clearly talking about something else entirely, as he said they would be able to clearly discern the setting and rising of the sun, and there would still be no darkness (Helaman 14:4). So the sun would not appear still in this instance. For discussion of Nephite cosmology, see Book of Mormon, “Why Did Mormon Say the Children of Men are Less than the Dust of the Earth? (Helaman 12:7),” *KnoWhy* 183 (September 8, 2016).

3. A similar event is prophesied to take place around the time of the Lord’s second coming: “And it shall come to pass in that day, that the light shall not be clear, nor dark: But it shall be one day which shall be known to the Lord, not day, nor night: but it shall come to pass, that at evening time it shall be light” (Zachariah 14:6–7).

4. Hugh Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon*, 4 vols. (American Fork and Provo, UT: Covenant Communications and FARMS, 2004), 3:291. Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 5:191–192, critiqued this suggestion and proposed, instead, that it was a volcanic eruption, which would have provided light more locally.

5. “Astronomers Peg Brightness of History’s Brightest Star,” *National Optical Astronomy Observatory News*, March 5, 2003, online at noao.edu. This is reporting on a supernova documented in AD 1006, not 1054.

6. Gardner, *Second Witness*, 5:191–192: “If a day, a night, and a day of light had occurred in the Old World,

the evangelists who noted other signs and miracles of Christ's birth would surely have made it part of their record. We must therefore assume that the lighted night was a New World phenomenon, not a worldwide one. ... A bright new star would be a good explanation for the Old World phenomenon, but there is still the issue of the differentially described phenomena for the Old and New Worlds. The descriptions point to different underlying events that are described in a similar context."

7. John A. Tvedtnes, "A Modern Example of Night without Darkness," *Insights: An Ancient Window* 18, no. 5 (October 1998): 4.

8. Nigel Waston, "The Tunguska Event," *History Today* 58, no. 7 (July 2008): 7.

9. Tony Phillips, "The Tunguska Impact—100 Years Later," *NASA Science News*, June 30, 2008, online at science.nasa.gov.

10. Vladimir Rubtsov, *The Tunguska Mystery* (New York, NY: Springer, 2009), 15.

11. Rubtsov, *The Tunguska Mystery*, 13.

12. Tvedtnes, "A Modern Example," 4.

13. Rubtsov, *The Tunguska Mystery*, 21. A Bishop's ring "is a diffuse brown or bluish halo around the Sun" (p. 21), so-called because of its discovery by the Reverend S. Bishop.

14. Rubtsov, *The Tunguska Mystery*, 14.

15. Rubtsov, *The Tunguska Mystery*, 17.

16. Rubtsov, *The Tunguska Mystery*, 17. On p. 18, it is noted that the nearest report to Tunguska is 600 km away.

17. Rubtsov, *The Tunguska Mystery*, 18.

18. Paul C. Hedengren, "Miracles," in *Encyclopedia of*

Mormonism, 4 vols., ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1992), 2:908.

19. John A. Widtsoe, *Joseph Smith as Scientist: A Contribution to Mormon Philosophy* (Salt Lake City, UT: YMMIA, 1908), 35. Also see Book of Mormon Central, "What Kind of Earthquake Caused the Prison Walls to Fall? (Alma 14:29)," *KnoWhy* 121 (June 14, 2016).

20. Interestingly, Aztec sources report a similar phenomenon ca. AD 1500. Waston, "The Tunguska Event," 7 quoted one source as describing the falling object which caused the Tunguska explosion as a "forked tongue of flames," which is strikingly similar to the account of "an omen of evil" in the Florentine Codex. "Ten years before the Spaniards arrived here, an omen of evil first appeared in the heavens. It was like a *tongue of fire, like a flame*, like the light of dawn. ... It was there to the east when it thus came forth at midnight; *it looked as if day had dawned, day had broken*. Later, the sun destroyed it when he rose." Florentine Codex, as cited in Gardner, *Second Witness*, 5:192, 238, emphasis added. Gardner pointed out that this account "is historical evidence that people in [Mesoamerica] saw signs in the heavens which made night as bright as day. This passage is not necessarily evidence of the lights themselves, but it documents that at least some Mesoamericans accepted that such phenomenon was possible and that it had a divine significance ... it is not hard to understand how the Nephites might have likewise believed in and described a similar culturally significant phenomenon" (p. 238).

21. While obviously no explosion was reported in the Book of Mormon, it should be pointed out that (1) the explosion happened in the morning of June 30, 1908, so would not have been seen immediately before nightfall; and (2) the nightlight effect was stronger at greater distances away from the explosion. If a similar, though perhaps smaller scale, phenomena occurred in a remote area somewhere a few hundred miles from Nephite territory, they likely would not have seen, felt, or heard the explosion. In the Tunguska event, the falling object was

seen as "a bright bluish-white light in the sky" from 600 miles away. See Waston, "The Tunguska Event," 7. Such a sight by Nephite astronomers could have been understood as one of the "great lights in heaven" or the "many signs and wonders in heaven" foretold by Samuel. Mormon does assure readers that there were other signs leading up to the night without darkness, which nonetheless failed to persuade detractors (3 Nephi 1:4–5).


22. Kimberly M. Berkey, "Temporality and Fulfillment in 3 Nephi 1," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24 (2015): 74.

23. See John 1:4–5; 3:19; 8:12; 9:5; 12:46; Mosiah 16:9; Alma 38:9; 3 Nephi 9:18; 11:11; Ether 4:12; Doctrine and Covenants 10:70; 11:28; 12:9; 34:2; 39:2; 45:7; 93:2; 103:9.

24. Neal A. Maxwell, "In Him All Things Hold Together," *BYU Speeches*, March 31, 1991.

25. Maxwell, "In Him All Things Hold Together."

26. Neal A. Maxwell, "Encircled in the Arms of His Love," *Ensign*, November 2002, online at lds.org.


"All things testify of
Christ... How appropriate
and typical with the com-
ing of the Light of Life into
the world there would be no
darkness!"

~
McConkie and Millet,
Doctrinal Commentary



*“And angels did appear
unto men, wise men,
and did declare unto
them glad tidings
of great joy.”*

~
Helaman 16:14



Why Does Mormon State that “Angels Did Appear unto Wise Men”?



The Know

In his abridgment of the book of Helaman, Mormon declared that “the scriptures began to be fulfilled” when angels started to appear to the people in the ninetieth year of the reign of the judges (Helaman 16:14).

In making this statement, one of the scriptures that Mormon may have been referring to is Alma 13:26, in which Alma declared that the coming of Christ “shall be made known unto just and holy men, by the mouth of angels,” just as it had been made known unto their fathers.

Mention of the appearance of angels bringing information concerning the coming of the Savior into the world recurs frequently in the Book of Mormon. In 1 Nephi 11–14, an angel interpreted for Nephi the vision of his father, Lehi, and showed him the coming of Christ into the world and the fulfillment of Christ’s mission among mortals.¹

Nephi wrote that an angel had told him (or his father) that “the God of Israel” would come six hundred years from the time that Lehi left Jerusalem (1 Nephi 19:8). An angel told Nephi’s brother, Jacob, that the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, would come in the flesh to the Jews at Jerusalem and that they would scourge and crucify Him (2 Nephi 6:9). 2 Nephi 10:3 records a revelation to Jacob in which an angel told him that the One whose coming he was shown would be called “Christ.”² Similarly, Nephi related that, according to “the angel of God, his name shall be Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (2 Nephi 25:19).

King Benjamin, in his great speech to his people, told of how an angel had come to him and declared the “glad tidings of great joy,” of how “the Lord Omnipotent who reigneth, who was, and is from all eternity to all eternity, shall come down from heaven among the children of men” (Mosiah 3:5), and that He would perform great miracles, including the atoning sacrifice and the Resurrection (vv. 3–11).

When the coming of the expected Savior was finally near, the Book of Mormon record indicates that the scriptures began to be fulfilled, and angels began (again) to appear to “wise men” (Helaman 16:14).³ One of these chosen men was the prophet and high priest Nephi, son of Nephi, grandson of Helaman, of whom the record states that “so great was his faith on the Lord Jesus Christ that angels did minister unto him daily” (3 Nephi 7:18).

The Why

Why did Mormon interrupt his narrative to specify that angels began to appear to wise men? The fact that angels had come to Nephite prophets in the past and were prophesied to come in the future must have been generally known in Nephite societies. For example, when Aaron preached about Christ to the Amlicites (a group of Nephite apostates) in Alma 21, even they immediately supposed that he had received an an-

gelic visit.⁴ Alma 21:5 states that “there arose an Amlicite and began to contend with him, saying: What is that thou hast testified? Hast thou seen an angel?”⁵

On an earlier occasion, Alma had reminded his opponents in Ammonihah of another reason why angels are sent. The Lord sends angels to mortals because of their “faith and repentance and their holy works” (Alma 12:30; cf. Alma 11:31).

Mormon likely had episodes such as one in Helaman 16 in mind at the time when he summarized the several reasons why God sent angels to declare the coming of Christ:

For behold, God ... sent angels to minister unto the children of men, to make manifest concerning the coming of Christ ... Wherefore, by the ministering of angels, and by every word which proceeded forth out of the mouth of God, men began to exercise faith in Christ; ... and thus it was until the coming of Christ (Moroni 7:22, 25).

Mormon knew that our merciful Father in Heaven desired that His children have the ability to recognize the signs of the coming of Christ, whether it was in the time of father Lehi, the prophet Samuel, in Mormon’s own time, or in the days leading up to Christ’s Second Coming. Our unchanging God would always send angels to visit worthy individuals who would have the

faith, strength, and wisdom (hence “wise men”) to declare the “glad tidings” and fortify the faith of those who have not had the same eye-witness manifestation.



Further Reading

Donald W. Parry, *Angels: Agents of Light, Love, and Power* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2013).

Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Ministry of Angels,” *Ensign*, November 2008, 29–31.

Notes

1. Book of Mormon Central, “What Does the Virgin Mary Have to Do with the Tree of Life? (1 Nephi 11:18),” *KnoWhy* 13 (January 18, 2016), pp. 11–13 herein.
2. Book of Mormon Central, “Why Does an Angel Reveal the Name of Christ to Jacob? (2 Nephi 10:3),” *KnoWhy* 36 (February 18, 2016).
3. There is an interesting parallel here with the “wise men” that followed the star to Christ’s birthplace in Matthew 2:1–12. According to some early Christian traditions, the “star” that “went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was” (Matthew 2:9) was actually

an angel (angels are often associated with stars in the literature). See Dale C. Allison, *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 17–41.

4. See Book of Mormon Central, “How Were the Amlicites and Amalekites Related? (Alma 2:11),” *KnoWhy* 109 (May 27, 2016).

5. This is an emended rendering of the verse, as found in Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 356.

Because we need Christmas we had better understand what it is about.

It is about his 33-year ministry... his journey to the garden... the thorns and the cross.

It is about an [empty] tomb promising a new world.

It is about his ascension and subsequent visit to the Nephites and Lamanites.

Christmas is not just about a baby in a manger. It is about all the manifestations of his love since that day.

~

Elder Hugh W. Pinnock
Who Needs Christmas?

“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder; and his name shall be called, Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.”
2 Nephi 19:6 and Isaiah 9:6



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*Wishing you a very Merry Christmas!
from all of us at
Book of Mormon Central*



Back: Kirk Magleby, Taylor Halverson, John W. Welch, Nicole Shepard, David Pack, Matthew Culter
Front: Jasmin Gimenez, Jared Riddick, Jonathan Riley, Neal Rappleye, Ruth Schmidt, Zander Sturgill
Not Pictured: David Larsen and Ryan Dahle