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### Events Surrounding Christ's Death and Resurrection

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*And it came to pass that it did last for the space of three days that there was no light seen; and there was great mourning and howling and weeping among all the people continually; yea, great were the groanings of the people, because of the darkness and the great destruction which had come upon them. (3 Nephi 8:23)*

The story of Jesus' appearance to the Nephites after his resurrection, told in 3 Nephi, has parallels in a Coptic document thought to date to the second or third century A.D.<sup>1</sup> The document is known as the *Pistis Sophia* ("faith/assurance of wisdom"). Though the British Museum acquired a manuscript of the text in 1785, by the time the Book of Mormon appeared, it had not yet been translated. The earliest French translation was in 1856. Several pages were translated into English in 1887, but the full text, translated by G. R. S. Mead, did not appear in English until 1896.

### ***GREAT EARTHQUAKES***

According to the *Pistis Sophia*, there was, at the time of Jesus' ascension into heaven, a great earthquake that lasted for three hours (I.3). An alternate view given in the manuscript is that the quake lasted from the third hour on the fifteenth day of the month

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, Mead's revised translation of 1921 is used as reprinted by John M. Watkins, London, 1955. References are in the format I.2, where the Roman numeral denotes the book and the Arabic numeral the chapter in the *Pistis Sophia*.

## GREAT EARTHQUAKES

Tybi until the ninth hour the following day. This accords with the statement in 3 Nephi 8:19 that “the quakings of the earth . . . did last for about the space of three hours; and it was said by some that the time was greater.”<sup>2</sup>

For three days after the earthquake and other agitations of nature, the Nephites were “howling and weeping” in the darkness and lamenting the destruction of the people in a number of cities (3 Nephi 8:23-25; 10:8).<sup>3</sup> In *Pistis Sophis* I.4, we read that “the disciples sat together in fear and were in exceedingly great agitation and were afraid because of the great earthquake which took place, and they wept together, saying ‘What will then be? Peradventure the Saviour will destroy all regions?’ Thus saying, they wept together.”<sup>4</sup> During this time, the heavenly host “all sang praises . . . so that the whole world heard their voices” (I.3). Among the Nephites, after the quaking had stopped, “all the people of the land” heard the voice of Christ (1 Nephi 9:1-10:8).

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 27:45 reports that the darkness accompanying Christ’s crucifixion lasted for three hours in Jerusalem. According to Exodus 10:22, the darkness at the time of Israel’s exodus from Egypt lasted three days. The Matthew text also speaks of an earthquake, the rending of the rocks, and the resurrection of the dead from opened graves (Matthew 27:51-53)—features also found in 3 Nephi 8:18; 23:9-12.

<sup>3</sup> In Exodus 10:22-23, we read that, during the “thick darkness,” among the Egyptians, “they saw not one another, neither rose any from his place for three days; but all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings.”

<sup>4</sup> In *Book of the Rolls* f.101a, the preexistent Christ declares to a dying Adam that, at the time of his death on the cross, “I will thunder in the height . . . I will darken the sun . . . I will cleave the rocks . . . I will frighten the powers of heaven . . . I will cause heaven to rain on the desert . . . I will open the graves . . . I will cause all creation to tremble . . . I will make a new earth, and after three days, which I have spent in the grave, I will raise up the body which I took from thee.” The same text declares that “when Adam died, the sun was darkened, and the moon for seven days and seven nights, with a gross darkness.” Margaret Dunlop Gibson, *Apocrypha Arabica* (London: C. J. Clay and Sons, 1901), 16-17.

***THE LIGHT-GLORY OF HEAVENLY BEINGS***

On the day following the earthquake, according to the *Pistis Sophia*, as the disciples “wept together . . . the heavens opened, and they saw Jesus descend, shining most exceedingly . . . so that men in the world cannot describe the light which was on him” (I.4).<sup>5</sup> Joseph Smith used similar terminology to describe the brilliant light that surrounded the Father and the Son when they appeared to him in the sacred grove in the spring of 1820 (Joseph Smith-History 1:16-17). We are also reminded of Joseph Smith’s description of Moroni on the night of his first appearance, September 21/22, 1823: “his whole person was glorious beyond description, and his countenance truly like lightning. The room was exceedingly light, but not so very bright as immediately around his person” (Joseph Smith-History 1:32). The gradients of light are features shared by both Jesus and Moroni. Of Moroni’s departure, Joseph Smith wrote, “I saw the light in the room begin to gather immediately around the person of him who had been speaking to me, and it continued to do so until the room was again left dark, except just around him; when, instantly, I saw, as it were, a conduit open right up into heaven, and he ascended until he entirely disappeared, and the room was left as it had been before this heavenly light had made its appearance” (Joseph Smith-History 1:43). In *Pistis Sophia* I.6, the apostles, unable to withstand the brilliant light, asked Jesus, “withdraw thy light-glory into thyself that we may be able to stand . . . Then Jesus drew to himself the glory of his light.” The opening of the heavens and the drawing of the light to the person of the heavenly visitor is a feature shared by both stories.

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<sup>5</sup> According to the text, there were three types of light—also called glories—that surrounded Jesus, each more brilliant than the other (*Pistis Sophia* I.4). These remind us of the three degrees of glory, with the terrestrial being more glorious than the telestial and the celestial being more glorious still (D&C 76:70-71, 78, 81, 89-92, 96-98; see also 1 Corinthians 15:40-44).

## THE LIGHT-GLORY OF HEAVENLY BEINGS

The Book of Mormon does not say that Jesus was surrounded by light when he descended from heaven to visit the Nephites after his resurrection, but it is significant that he introduced himself by saying “I am Jesus Christ . . . I am the *light* and the life of the world” (3 Nephi 11:10-11, emphasis added). The Book of Mormon text notes that Jesus appeared to the Nephites “after his ascension into heaven” (3 Nephi 11:12), while the *Pistis Sophia* (I.3-4) has the reappearance of Christ to his apostles occur the day following his ascension. The apostles were frightened, so Jesus reassured them by saying, “Take courage. It is I, be not afraid” (I.5). To the Nephites, who had fallen “to the earth” (3 Nephi 11:12), he said, “Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet . . . And it came to pass that the multitude went forth, and thrust their hands into his side, and did feel the prints of the nails in his hands and in his feet” (3 Nephi 11:14-15). In *Pistis Sophia* I.6, “all the disciples took courage, stepped forward to Jesus, fell down all together, adored him, rejoicing in great joy.”

### ***TEACHINGS OF CHRIST***

In both stories, Jesus then teaches the people, though the contents of his teachings are not identical. To the Nephites, he delivered the sermon he had previously given to his disciples in the Old World. To his Jewish apostles, who had already heard the sermon, he told of the premortal world from which they had come and of his return to his Father after the resurrection to receive his heavenly garment (*Pistis Sophia* I.6-7).

One passage is of particular importance because it, too, has a parallel in the Book of Mormon. Jesus told the twelve apostles, “when I set out for the world [from premortality], I brought from the beginning with me twelve powers, as I have told you from the beginning, which I have taken from the twelve saviours of the Treasury of the Light, according to the command of the First

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Mystery [i.e., God]. These I then cast into the womb of your mothers, when I came into the world, that is those which are in your bodies today" (*Pistis Sophia* I.7).

This scene is like one from Lehi's vision, in which "he saw the heavens open, and . . . God sitting upon his throne," then "he saw One descending out of the midst of heaven, and he beheld that his luster was above that of the sun at noon-day. And he also saw twelve others following him, and their brightness did exceed that of the stars in the firmament. And they came down and went forth upon the face of the earth" (1 Nephi 1:8-11). The brilliance of Christ and his twelve apostles, as described by Lehi, reminds us that, in the *Pistis Sophia*, they are said to have come forth from "the Treasury of light."

Nephi, having asked to see what his father had seen in vision, was also shown Christ and his twelve apostles (1 Nephi 11:27-29). Like Lehi, he "saw the heavens open" and was shown Jesus' mother, Mary "a virgin, most beautiful and fair above all other virgins" who became "the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh" (1 Nephi 11:14-21). Similarly, in *Pistis Sophia* I.7, Jesus, speaking of his premortal life, says, "I looked down on the world of mankind and found Mary, who is called 'my mother' according to the body of matter," into whom his spirit was then placed when the spirits of the apostles were placed inside their mothers.

## CONCLUSION

The similarities noted above do not suggest a dependent relationship between the Book of Mormon and the *Pistis Sophia*. But it is interesting to see two ancient documents give similar descriptions to post-resurrection appearances of Christ.